

Feminist Theology, Baptists, and the Bible: an Italian Perspective

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This article explores the reception of ‘feminist theology and the Bible’ amongst Baptists in Italy. The ecumenical context of Italian Baptists and their own marginal location have facilitated its reception, mainly amongst women’s groups in Baptist churches and organisations. Reading strategies used by Baptists, similar to liberation methodologies, have enabled scripture reading by women to become a consciousness raising experience, understood theologically as conversion. Women’s freedom becomes gift and task to women, men, and the church. Although men generally have been reluctant to engage in the fundamental issues raised by feminism, inclusive language has been adopted in Baptist life and worship. The current resurgence of male violence against women has prompted the Italian Baptist Union to encourage men in the churches to investigate their own connivance in patriarchy, eventually undertaking their own journey of conversion through the Bible.

Key Words

Feminism; Bible; Baptist; Italy

Introduction

The churches in Italy, both Protestant and Catholic, have been particularly active over the past year in organising events to remember and honour the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. In May, the Waldensian Theological College in Rome, Italy’s major Protestant academic institution where future Baptist ministers also train, and the Italian Society of Women Theologians (*Coordinamento Teologhe Italiane*), an ecumenical but predominantly Catholic group, held an international conference on ‘The Bible and Women from Reformation Times: Five Hundred Years of Change’. Scholars from England, Germany, Spain, the United States, and Italy gathered to discuss the role of women and their various uses of the Bible in the different movements which went to make up the Protestant Reformation. The conference was part of the European Society for Women in Theological Research’s ongoing Bible and Women project, which produces publications in English, German, Spanish, and Italian and is run in Italy by historian Adriana Valerio. Having heard, amongst many others, Susanna Peyronel on ‘Women and the Bible at the Beginning of the

Reformation' and Donatella Pallotti on 'Prophetesses and Visionaries in Seventeenth Century England' (which actually included a number of Baptists), the conference could hardly conclude without a panel discussion on how various churches — Catholic, Anglican, and Baptist — have related to feminist theology and its own particular reading of the scriptures. What follows is an expanded version of my contribution to that discussion.

The Ecumenical Context of Italian Baptists

The opportunity to discuss feminist theology and the Bible from a Baptist perspective is certainly unusual, welcome, and thought provoking. In fact, although I have always spoken from out of a Baptist context, I have never once thought about doing 'Baptist' theology, but have always tried to think beyond confessional boundaries. As John Colwell has stated, 'My aim has always been to engage in catholic theology and I have never sought to propose any theological idea that is pertinent as solely or exclusively Baptist.'¹ In my case, there are two reasons for this.

The first lies in the phenomenon of the Baptist movement itself. Baptist churches, which go back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, have no central authority of biblical or theological interpretation. Due to their congregational ecclesiology, such authority belongs to the local church. In fact, there is no such thing as the Baptist Church, but rather Baptist churches which organise themselves into Unions or something similar at a national and international level. This means that a notable pluralism exists within the so-called Baptist family, due to the complex interaction between history, theology, and culture, on the one hand, and different social and geographical locations, on the other.

The second reason why I have never thought of developing a denominational reading of scripture is that right from the beginning (in the early 1970s), feminist theology was an ecumenical enterprise; confessional divides were considered a relic of a male-centred past, more *history* than *herstory*, something that concerned men but not women. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, undoubtedly one of the leading and most influential scholars in the field of New Testament feminist interpretation, is herself of German origin and Catholic persuasion. She has, however, almost always worked in the United States in the context of Protestant Universities. As feminism is not interested in replacing male forms of mastery with female ones, but rather in creating mutual and fertile relations between all human beings, women and men, it is hardly surprising that many feminist thinkers have situated

¹ John E. Colwell, 'The Word of His Grace: What's so Distinctive about Scripture?', in *The "Plainly Revealed" Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice*, ed. by Helen Dare and Simon Woodman (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2011), p. 191.

themselves on the margins or at the intersections of multiple forms of social exclusion. Fiorenza claims for herself the ‘sociopolitical location of *resident alien(s)*, as both insider and outsider’ of male-centred institutions such as the churches and the academy.²

As Baptist, then, my starting point can only be the peculiar position of Baptists in Italy, which is marginal to the wider reality of the churches (both Protestant and Catholic) and, consequently, involves quite a lot of border dwelling. Unlike many Baptists elsewhere, Italian Baptists work closely with churches born out of the magisterial Reformation, like the Waldensians, an indigenous group dating from the twelfth century, which early on (1532) became part of the wider Reformation movement. Together with Methodists and Lutherans (as well as more recent churches and groupings like the Salvation Army and the Seventh Day Adventists), Baptists form an extremely small minority over against the Catholic Church which, even in today’s changing scene, continues to enjoy cultural, political, and theological hegemony.³ In Italy, then, Protestant feminist theology is unthinkable without an almost constant dialogue with Catholicism and Italy’s own brand of feminist theory. Indeed, the opportunities for Protestant theologians to explore the relationship between feminist theology and the Bible are, more often than not, supplied by the Catholic church in one of its various expressions: local parishes, socially and politically aware movements within the church, academic institutions, women religious, or basic Christian communities. This, together with the fact that, notwithstanding the gender studies programme of the Waldensian theological college, as yet no continuous and systematic teaching of feminist theology exists in a Protestant (let alone Baptist) context in Italy, means that all our work is extremely contextual, fragmented, and only occasionally exceeds the bounds of local churches or local church related movements. An interesting case,

² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 185, emphasis is author’s. Crossroads and margins feature in the thought of Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 164-72 and bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround, 1991). For a view of feminist theology standing, like Lady Wisdom, ‘at the crossroads’, see Elizabeth E. Green, ‘Al crocicchio delle strade. Teologia femminista all’inizio del XXI secolo’ in *Prospettive teologiche per il XXI secolo* ed. by Rosino Gibellini (Brescia: Queriniana, 2003), pp. 169-82. For a recent definition of feminism by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: ‘I understand feminist/feminism to refer to a social movement and a critical theory that endeavours to make wo/men (the word wo/men includes marginalized men) recognized as responsible citizens with a full set of rights in society and religion’, *Empowering Memory and Movement: Thinking and Working Across Borders* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), p. 384. The Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states, ‘My definition of ‘feminist’ is this: a man or a woman who says, yes, we have a problem with the way gender is defined today and we have to solve it; we have to do better. All of us, women and men, have to do better’, *Dovremmo essere tutti femministi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2015), p. 41.

³ The churches I have mentioned are, together with some free churches, members of the *Federazione delle Chiese Evangeliche* in Italy, which generally represents what is known as ‘historical protestantism’. The *Alleanza Evangelica* brings together evangelical and more conservative churches, while the various faces of Pentecostalism have their own regional and national associations.

then, could probably be made for a correlation between the margins consciously adopted by some feminist theologians, on the one hand, and the marginal reality of Baptists in Italy, on the other.

Baptists, Women, and the Bible

We can say that the Bible and feminist theology were certainly part of the national agenda of Baptist churches in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, when women's admission to pastoral ministry was being debated. The discussion has been partly documented recently by journalist and Baptist pastor, Piera Egidi.⁴ In fact, we can say that from then, right up to the start of the new millennium, feminist theology and the Bible were a part of Baptist life. This was due partly to the social and political climate of the time, burgeoning (as elsewhere) with social change as far as women were concerned, and partly to those women whose training for ministry had coincided with the birth and diffusion of the women's movement. The International Baptist Theological Seminary, then located in Switzerland, was instrumental in this development. In fact, in 1981 the Italian women studying for ministry (under the auspices of a Theology Department led by the foresighted Pastor Paolo Spanu) contributed to the discussion by sending a questionnaire on women's ministry to the churches in Italy which they felt called to serve. In the ensuing debate, all the major texts examined by feminist exegesis were called into play by both proponents and opponents of women's ministry. In 1982, the Baptist General Assembly 'fully accepted' women to the pastoral ministry, actually confirming a role 'as pastoral coadjutor' that had been occupied by the American missionary Marylu Moore in Puglia (Southern Italy) six years earlier. In 1988, the General Assembly gave its blessing to the 'Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women' promulgated by the World Council of Churches and Italian Baptists worked all over Italy to promote its aims, which included removing discriminating ideas and structures from the churches and promoting women's contribution to the churches, including theology.⁵

Such developments were undoubtedly made possible by the close relationship that Baptists enjoyed with the Waldensian and Methodist churches, which had already admitted women to ministry some years before. In fact, as far as the Bible is concerned, Baptist churches share the Reformed position, holding the Bible to be foundational to the doctrine and life of the churches. Is there, however, a specifically Baptist way of reading scripture?

⁴ Piera Egidi Bouchard, *Oltre il mare del tempo: All'ascolto della storia delle donne battiste in Italia* (Torino: Nuova Trauben, 2016), pp. 136-56.

⁵ Elizabeth E. Green, *Il filo tradito: Venti anni di teologia femminista* (Torino: Claudiana, 2011), pp. 149-60.

A few years ago, Baptist scholars met to discuss precisely this question and came to the following conclusion. Over and above a generally accepted christocentrism, a Baptist reading of the Bible is characterised by three features: the role played by the local church, a transformative reading of the text, and the connection between history and imagination. These features have certainly enabled and facilitated the reception of a feminist perspective on the Bible among Italian Baptists.

For Baptists, then, the church is ‘both an acoustic and hermeneutical community: it exists by listening to the Word of God through the Scriptures and seeks to interpret the significance of the Word for the world in which it lives’.⁶ For Baptist ministers Lidia Maggi and Angelo Reginato, authors of several essays on Biblical interpretation, the plurality of the listening experience in the local community is not a mere accessory to biblical interpretation but is actually the basis of church itself. In other words, Baptists agree on the fact that the local church is the locus of biblical interpretation and ‘Early Baptists unashamedly and unabashedly engaged the scriptures from a particular theological and social location.’⁷

Having said that, we must admit that in Italy, biblical interpretation has entwined with feminist theology more in women’s groups *within* the churches than in the local churches themselves. In the 1980s these women’s groups such as the *Movimento Femminile Evangelica Battista* (MFEB) which started out from a traditional view of women’s role in church and society, focusing on children and overseas missions, virtually became separatist, so that, both nationally and locally, they were not unlike the many feminist collectives which existed at the time. In these associations, some of which, like the *Federazione delle Donne Evangeliche in Italia* (FDEI) founded in 1976 were and still are interdenominational; women met together to talk about their lives in what was still very much a ‘man’s world’, as well as to reflect upon the Word of God from the standpoint and insights generated by such conversation. To use what has become a well known phrase in feminist theological circles, we were ‘hearing each other into speech’.⁸

Women’s coming of age was not only linked to personal and group meditation on the Bible, but also focused on a greater participation in church life, both in the local church and in national structures. In fact, from 1994 right up to the present, the MFEB has organised seminars for women

⁶ Ian Birch, ‘Baptists and Biblical Interpretation’, in Dare and Woodman, *The “Plainly Revealed”*, p. 154.

⁷ Mikeal C. Parsons, ‘Early Baptist Identity and the Acts of the Apostles’, in Dare and Woodman, *The “Plainly Revealed”*, p. 27. Compare Lidia Maggi and Angelo Reginato, *Vi affido alla Parola: Il lettore, la chiesa e la Bibbia* (Torino: Claudiana, 2017), p. 19. See also: *Dire, fare e baciare: Il lettore e la Bibbia e Liberté, fraternité, égalité: Il lettore, la storia e la Bibbia* (Torino: Claudiana, 2012 and 2014).

⁸ Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), pp. 11-30.

focusing on women's leadership, many of which were based on a feminist re-reading of scriptures as the following titles show: 'In the Footsteps of Miriam' (1994); 'Upon the Wings of an Eagle: God images and self-esteem' (1995); 'The Glorious Freedom of the Daughters of God' (1996). The Baptist General Assembly had, in fact, expressed itself in favour of a greater participation of women in regional and national church structures, which would mirror their engagement in the local churches. A feminist theological reading of the scriptures was called into play in the formation of women for service both in the church and the world. Conceptually, then, a connection was made between these sorts of groups and the women-church movement, which in the final decades of the twentieth century was gaining ground all over the world.⁹ Again we notice a similarity between Baptist biblical interpretation taking place in the local church and the centrality of the *ekklesia* of women in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's own hermeneutical methodology.¹⁰

Transformation, Imagination, Story, and Worship

Baptists, both women and men, read the Bible convinced that the human words lead – if guided by the Spirit – to an encounter with the incarnate Word. The text, then, becomes 'an invitation to encounter the presence of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit'.¹¹ This means that the hermeneutical enterprise itself 'is a meeting with God' which can only be transformative.¹² We can say that a sort of identification occurs between the reading community and the Bible narrative, so that the local community actually becomes part of the biblical story and is brought into question by it. Long before personal voice criticism was theorised, Baptists, 'read the Bible with a view to imaginatively living its story'.¹³ In the women's groups I have mentioned, meeting with God through the biblical story actually became part of a consciousness raising process. Led both by the text and by a conscious reflection on their life experiences, women became increasingly aware of their exclusion from church and society as well as of the possibility of a new found freedom, understood as both gift and calling. Drawing on the work of

⁹ See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

¹⁰ For a recent statement by Fiorenza, see *Memory and Movement*, p. 402. I present an overview of Schüssler Fiorenza's theology in Elizabeth E. Green, *Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2005).

¹¹ Simon Perry, 'The Bible in the Flesh', in Dare and Woodman, *The "Plainly Revealed"*, p. 122.

¹² Christopher J. Ellis, 'Gathering Round the Word', in Dare and Woodman, *The "Plainly Revealed"*, p. 116.

¹³ Birch, in Dare and Woodman, *The "Plainly Revealed"*, p. 157. Compare James Wm. McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology Volume One* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), pp. 26-34. It is hardly surprising, then, that two of the most widely used hymns in Baptist circles in Italy are 'Tell me the story of Jesus' by Fanny Crosby and 'Tell me the old, old story' by Kate Hankey, the Italian version of which was published in 1922 and is sung to the music of W. H. Doane.

theologians such as Elizabeth Johnson (Catholic) and Letty Russell (Protestant), as well as on the notion of narrative identity developed by Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, I have read such awareness of women's discrimination and the owning of one's freedom in terms of Spirit empowered conversion mediated by the text.¹⁴

At least initially, then, part of my own hermeneutical endeavour centred on female figures in the Bible as in *Dal silenzio alla parola* ('From silence to the word') in which stories of Old Testament women are read from a feminist perspective, or in Lidia Maggi's work on female figures in both the First and Second Testaments.¹⁵ As women taking part in these groups we were able to imaginatively identify with the women in the Bible as their stories were retold, so that they became vehicles of an analogous experience of God's liberating grace. As we listened to each other, new words were born, which we then used to tell our own stories as well as those of the Bible. In this way, Bible stories centring on Miriam, Sarah and Hagar, Ruth and Naomi or on the healing of the bent woman, the woman with the flow of blood, the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter, the anonymous woman's anointing of Jesus — to name but a few — all became sources of women's liberation. What was elaborated in these groups then spiralled back to the churches in sermons or publications designed to become the starting point for further study and discussion in the church as a whole.

Although not unlike 'personal voice criticism',¹⁶ the critical, plural and contextual nature of the voice brought to the text should be noted. I am thus talking about a sort of reading from below which, interestingly, probably owes more to the influence of liberation theology than to any conscious application of Baptist principles or a Baptist Bible reading methodology. In fact, Lieve Troch reports a similar experience within groups connected to the Women and Faith movement in the Netherlands: 'When women work systematically in feminist Bible study, new stories emerge; the reality of women's lives changes and become new.'¹⁷

The point I am making is that the positive outcome of a feminist reading of the Bible amongst Baptist women in Italy, in the context of groups like the MFEB or the FDEI, was at the time undoubtedly due to having

¹⁴ Green, *Il filo*, pp. 179-94. Compare Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1994); Letty Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974); Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti. Filosofia della narrazione* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1997).

¹⁵ Elizabeth E. Green, *Dal silenzio alla parola. Storie di donne nella Bibbia* (Torino: Claudiana, 1992); Lidia Maggi, *Le donne di Dio: Pagine bibliche al femminile e L'evangelo delle donne: Figure femminili nel Nuovo Testamento* (Torino: Claudiana, 2009 and 2010).

¹⁶ *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by Ingrid R. Kitzberger (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁷ Lieve Troch, 'A Method of Conscientization: Feminist Bible Study in the Netherlands', in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, Vol. 1, ed. by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (London: SCM, 1994), p. 352.

adopted a known and shared methodology with which women who were used to reading the Bible in the context of a local Baptist church could identify.

Much of this reflection was undertaken by calling on a ‘hermeneutics of creative imagination’, to use Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s phrase, as Baptist women engaged with the scriptures through dance, mime, painting, writing, and other creative activities producing songs, sermons, stories, prayers, and confessions of faith.¹⁸ Midwifed by many of my colleagues (such as pastors Gabriela Lio, Lidia Giorgi, Lidia Maggi, Anna Maffei, Silvia Rapisarda, and Cristina Arcidiacono), the meeting of the Bible with feminist theology continues to be expressed less in the language of secondary theology and more in that of primary theology. As Christopher Ellis has remarked, ‘The distinction between primary and secondary theology can prompt us to reflect that the most sympathetic vocabulary to aid the exposition of scripture may well be the vocabulary of worship.’¹⁹ On the one hand, then, this has meant that a great deal of feminist interaction with the Bible has been (and indeed still is) tied to a particular time and place and lasts (if counter measures are not taken) for the duration of the worship service. On the other hand, the adoption of inclusive language in worship in most Baptist churches in Italy, as well as in the recently published hymnal by Baptist musician Carlo Lella, has been one of the lasting contributions of feminist theology to Italian Baptist life.²⁰

Not Only But Also...

I have suggested that the way Baptist churches are used to reading the scriptures from below — imaginatively identifying with the Bible story and laying themselves open to the personal and social transformation it conveys — has facilitated the use of that feminist biblical interpretation which understands itself as a ‘critical theology of liberation’ and adopts its reading methods.²¹ However, this is not the only way in which feminist theology and the Bible have come together in my own work as a theologian who also happens to be a Baptist. In my book *Il vangelo di Paolo: Appunti per una lettura femminile (e non solo)*²² (‘The Gospel of Paul: Notes for a Reading (Not Only) in the Feminine’), written with one eye on the Catholic church’s

¹⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), p. 179.

¹⁹ Ellis, in Dare and Woodman, *The “Plainly Revealed”*, p.122.

²⁰ *Celebriamo il Risorto: Inni e canti per l’annuncio dell’evangelo* (Torino: Claudiana, 2013).

²¹ The phrase refers to the title of one of Schüssler Fiorenza’s early essays published in *Theological Studies*, 36 (1975), 606-26, whose contents she has continuously re-proposed.

²² Elizabeth E. Green, *Il vangelo di Paolo: Appunti per una lettura femminile (e non solo)* (Torino: Claudiana, 2009).

celebration of the apostle Paul's two thousandth birthday (2008-2009) and the other on a rehabilitation of Paul's groundbreaking interpretation of the Gospel for the churches, I self-consciously drew on some of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's central ideas.²³ These have to do with the importance of reading exclusive language inclusively and decoding the gendered nature of speech.²⁴

For example, in the first part of the book, I explored, with the help of the work of biblical scholar Antoinette Wire and theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, what Paul's gospel would have meant not only to the men he overtly addressed but also to the women who are subsumed under a supposedly generic male language. Paul, interpreting the gospel from his own high social and religious status in terms of humiliation, is unable to unpack its revolutionary aspects for women which, as I Corinthians shows, tends to go in the opposite direction of exaltation.²⁵ In the second part, I look at how Paul uses gendered language occasionally in striking ways (as he adopts a feminine position, speaking of himself as mother), although more often in ways that confirm the working of the patriarchal social world. A final section looks at the women Paul mentions by name in his letters. By investigating the terms Paul uses to describe them, such as co-workers and apostles, we discover no trace of the negative and limiting views of women Paul expresses elsewhere and for which he has become famous.²⁶

An Appraisal

If the Baptist way of reading the Bible has facilitated the reception of feminist theology in the sort of women's groups I have been describing, what about the churches themselves? How far have they recognised, adopted, and encouraged reading the Bible from a feminist perspective? That question cannot be answered without taking into account the rapid change in the position of women in Italian society in the last fifty years, nor without mentioning the shifts in feminist theory itself. As far as the first is concerned, the patriarchal family was finally laid to rest in 1975, when the new family law gave equal rights and responsibilities to both spouses. In 1981, the law which considered male honour extenuating circumstances in crimes

²³ Although this is an approach 'from above', I should say that the initial study was occasioned by a public lecture organised by the Baptist Church in Naples.

²⁴ Again, for a recent statement, see Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory and Movement*, pp. 388ff.

²⁵ Antoinette Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction Through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). In Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 1983) and *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1992), Ruether differentiates between male and female journeys of transformation.

²⁶ For Schüssler Fiorenza's own detailed reading, first published in 1978, see *Memory and Movement*, pp. 423-46.

committed against women was abolished. However, as is widely recognised, legal status is one thing, cultural norms and views another. While the legal status of women in Italy has advanced rapidly since 1946, putting women on an (almost) equal footing with men and increasingly defending them from different forms of male violence, change in society's (and the church's) view of sex or gender stereotypes not only proceeds at a slower pace, but has in fact actually slowed down as patriarchal backlash takes its toll. As Vittoria Franco affirms: 'There are times, and this is one of them, when it is quite clear that rights have not been acquired once and for all, but can become ineffective and actually lost.'²⁷ Over the past fifty years feminist theory itself has developed along the well known and not necessarily mutually exclusive lines of liberation, sexual difference, or French feminism (enthusiastically received and developed in Italy), gender theory and perhaps even beyond.²⁸ Identity politics have given way to an increasing awareness of how different forms of exclusion and discrimination (based on gender, sexual identity, religious persuasion, economic status, country of provenance) collude and co-operate with each other. Present day analysts agree on the complex and multilayered nature of a patriarchy, which seems both to be at death's door and very much alive and kicking.²⁹

However, if in this complex and fluctuating situation, in which Italian Baptists are completely (if not always willingly) immersed, some sort of an appraisal is to be made, I would say that feminist theology has become part of the churches' hermeneutical baggage to the extent that women themselves have acquired not only a feminist consciousness and adequate hermeneutical tools but also sufficient clout to get their voices heard in the mixed environment of the local church. The question, then is a political one.

In Italy, the interaction between feminist theology and the Bible in Protestant churches generally, and Baptist ones in particular, faces the same problems with which the women's movement on the whole must get to grips. The first is the question of the transmission of knowledge among women, and especially among women of different generations. It is a well known fact that women dealing with feminist issues, theory, and especially theology, have the sensation that each time they are 're-inventing the wheel'. Basic tenets once taken for granted have to be argued for again and again. As Schüssler Fiorenza has stated, these problems touch vital issues of women's continued poor self-esteem and reluctance to recognise each others'

²⁷ Vittoria Franco, *Care ragazze. Un promemoria* (Torino: Donzelli, 2010), p.8. Several works have dealt with the diminished status of women in Berlusconi's Italy, one of the best known being a video produced by Lorella Zanardo, *il corpo delle donne*, <<http://www.lorellazanardo.it/blog/>> [accessed 06 July 2017]

²⁸ Elizabeth E. Green, 'Teologia e genere. Un'introduzione', *Protestantesimo* 68:3-4 (2013), 247-59.

²⁹ For example, Selene Zorzi, *Il genere di Dio: La Chiesa alla prova del Gender* (Molfetta:La Meridiana, 2017), pp. 84-7.

authority, resulting from the simple fact of being women in a world which continues to revolve around men.³⁰

The second issue, of course, is the transition from women's groups to the community of women and men in church and society. The days of separatist feminism are certainly over and gender relations are currently in a state of flux and transformation. On the whole, men have yet to become aware of their own role in systems of oppression and this general lack of awareness continues to affect theological education and the life of the churches. As the construction of male and female (masculine and feminine) are mutually related, any change in the one automatically calls the other into question. Yet men are still slow to make the needed changes. On the one hand, the partial and gendered nature of the subject long since recognised in feminist theory has yet to shift the so-called universal and neutral subject out of pole position. If the marginality of Baptists, at least in Italy, could cogently be argued for, as I suggested at the beginning, then it could be said that Baptist men have so far failed to adopt and make sense out of that peculiar Baptist position. On the other hand, as Protestant and Baptist women, we have yet to reflect upon the predominantly male nature of church organisation. The ecumenical nature of feminist theology, based on an analysis of patriarchy as hierarchy (of which the Catholic church is a supreme example) has not been particularly helpful for laying bare how the exclusion of women is effected in structures which aim to be democratic. This, of course, does not mean that women are not active on all levels of church life and organisation (far from it) but that the male subject is still presumed to be the normative centre of such structure and its theological mainstay.

There is, however, in the somewhat gloomy scenario I am describing, one area in which our brothers are not completely avoiding the interplay between feminist theology and the Bible. I am referring to the *raison d'être* of feminist theology itself, that which continues to work as a deterrent to women's full inclusion in society, male violence against women. In Italy such violence has been on the Baptist churches' agenda from the Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998) onwards. Last year, the Baptist General Assembly affirmed that confronting this issue is mandatory for every believer and urged the men's working group on gender violence instituted two years ago to offer concrete proposals to the churches. This means that the interaction between feminist theology and the Bible is once again becoming of interest to the local churches as concerned men and women speak out against male violence against women. Furthermore, some men, inspired by the sort of consciousness raising that

³⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory and Movement*, pp. 357-66.

sparked off the women's movement as well as by feminist theory in general, have actually begun calling their own privileged position in church and society into question. Pastors such as Massimo Aprile, Carmine Bianchi and Simone Caccamo are all sensitive to these issues and some have started up men's groups within a Baptist context, producing readings of the Bible from below, that is out of the awareness of the partial (and perhaps marginal?) nature of their own gender. Once again, I would say that this is possible, not only due to the long history of feminist issues (including biblical interpretation) in Baptist churches, as well as the continuous struggle against gender related violence undertaken by women's organisations like the MFEB and FDEI, but also to the ecumenical context in which Baptist churches operate. In fact similar men's groups exist both within basic Christian communities and amongst the Waldensians.

Baptist churches share the Reformed view of scripture. In Italy their reading of scripture from below, not unlike the sort of liberation readings practised in basic Christian communities, has allowed a rich and fertile meeting between feminist theology and the Bible, especially in church based women's groups. This hermeneutical reflection, rooted in the thought and practice of the women's movement, shares the ecumenical thrust of feminist theology both at national and international levels. However, I have also suggested that, were Italian Baptists to recognise and own their peculiar position on the margins and borders of other church institutions, both women and men could be inspired by a way of reading the Bible which privileges margins and walks along borders. If the impact feminist theology has begun to make on Baptist churches in Italy is to become lasting and meaningful, going beyond an inclusion of women in male roles and the use of inclusive language in assemblies and worship, it is imperative that both men and women claim the partial nature of their own gender as well as the specific social location from which together we read the Bible.

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