

Gender justice and religion: lutheran women in Brazil

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Abstract

Ecclesiastical authority is where the historical religious subordination of women in Christianity arises. Based on this observation, we outlined the intersectionalities, strategies and viability of women in a Lutheran church in Brazil. The objective was to discuss the processes of ecclesiastical participation of women in the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB) and how they carry out the so-called gender justice in these contexts. We carried out a multisited ethnography in the Southeast and South regions of Brazil and a bibliographic review on the participation of Lutheran women in the Church. It was concluded that the feminist ideology, through feminist theology, in the context of the Lutheran confessionality, better attends to the needs of women in this religious world.

Keywords: Lutheranism, evangelical churches, feminism

1. Introduction

This work presents a discussion in the field of Social Sciences and culture that involves historical and social processes, since the second half of the twentieth century, on the ecclesiastical participation of feminist religious in the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB). The scope of the ordination of women, particularly in this Church, had as its starting point the entry of students in the graduation course in Theology linked to the Church in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

When entering the Lutheran experience, a denomination that may go unnoticed due to its numerical expression in Brazil, which in the last statistical analysis carried out by the IECLB in 2021, base year 2020, was 628,557 members, 43,5% of the total formed by adults, between 30 and 59 years old, with 51% of the members being located in the South of Brazil and representing 30% of the communities of the total communities of this Church in the country (IECLB, 2021).

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In the way these women built their paths, the motivations and searches for social and gender justice stand out, in what can be read as a historical process of conquest of rights for women in the Brazilian Lutheran religious context. And, when we refer to the Brazilian Lutheran context, I emphasize that this aspect of Protestantism arrived in Brazil from 1822 onwards, with families of European immigrants bringing their different religious traditions, mainly Germans, Swiss, Dutch, Danes and Pomeranians (Beulke, 1994). And that only at the end of that century, with the end of the Padroado and the greater religious freedom that this generates, these immigrants find the necessary space to organize themselves and invest in their structuring and formation as a Church.

A Church, therefore, of Germanic origin, of Reformed and Protestant tradition that, without disconnecting from its origins and, as far as possible, maintaining some form of link with pastors or European Lutheran Churches, from the southern region of Brazil was establishing and gaining its identity in what can be seen as a particular process of Brazilianization of the Lutheran Church in Brazil, today known as the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that this happened from their communities of European migratory origin in Brazilian territory, with a significant part of the population located in the South region.

Another point that we highlight is the fact that this is a work that deals with women within Christianity. And having said that, we emphasize that the subordination conditions of women is something that is intertwined with the very history of Christianity and its diffusion. As Joyce Salisbury (1993) shows, the vision of women's inferiority was already present in the writings of the so-called Church Fathers, therefore in Patristics, which was formulated between the 2nd and 7th centuries. The current struggle of so many women for spaces and rights in Christian Churches today demonstrates that this view of inferiority has not yet been overcome. Christian Churches, in general, still reproduce dichotomies that produce social differences and economic and social inequalities between men and women. These are questions already raised by the historical movements of women who work in the Christian Churches, but they are still being problematized by different historical and contemporary feminist movements and, more recently, by gender studies (Rohden, 1995; Scavone, 2008; Rosado-Nunes, 2001).

In the current political and religious conjuncture, there is a trend towards the worsening of religious conservatism and the strengthening of the political extreme right, not only in Brazil, but internationally, in addition to the recovery by some sectors of society of the so-called gender ideology as a term that synthesizes disputes over the production of legitimate bodies and the pedagogies for the production of these bodies.

By participating in videos and online meetings, we accessed different paths and relationships through which we approached these women. The methodological resource was, therefore, the ethnographic one, through which we tried to experience together with them the way they question and act on traditions, question notions and practices of men and women in Christianity and how they feed their desires for structural changes in Brazilian society and

society. Church. Another resource used as a complement was the construction of an electronic form, created in Google Forms, in which I gathered some open questions about the individual life trajectory of religious women and their relationship with feminism.

The result of these women's actions is an intellectual production and an institutional recognition that has been increasingly guaranteed to women in the ministry of ordination since 1982, a representative position recognized by the people of the Church. This recognition and achievements come from defining lines of thought that are elaborated in the production of this specific theological field, and that insert issues such as difference, equality, gender justice and ecofeminism, considering the debate in which are also controversial.

Faced with these questions, which also have connections with the new dynamic religious configurations that emerge in the 21st century, other questions about the adaptations and constructions of religious and feminist conceptions that Christian women are carrying out in academia and in the Churches need to be asked. It becomes relevant to understand how they create possibilities for new sociability, new spaces and if they are transforming existing spaces or if they are abandoning traditional spaces and gender relations. Or, if they are using the existing spaces and disseminating new agency positions of feminisms and women, as a possibility of expressions of freedom, care, empowerment, sociability and, simultaneously, maintaining and reflecting on their bonds based on submission, obedience and conformity.

This trend in Brazil, about women's issues in the Church, is aligned with the strongest expressions of militancy and social articulation against gender violence. Therefore, it is worth mentioning the importance they give to their commitment to the practice of care, with the historical re-signification of Protestantism and the empowerment of women through a Lutheran, socially progressive evangelization. These Christian feminists frame and posit their religious practices as women who are critical of naturalized gender social relations and produce a biblical hermeneutic called "of suspicion". These agency elements justify, for them, the search for gender equality and justice among the people of the Church.

2. Methodological paths

For this purpose, this study was carried out with the proposal of a methodological approach with which it would be possible to elaborate an understanding of the meanings attributed by women who participate in feminist theological production in the Lutheran Protestant-Evangelical tradition in Brazil and of the practices that legitimize a religious authority in broader contexts of the public of believers. Women who participate in the historically recent construction of representation and recognition that emerge through their practices in the Church.

We asked questions in a questionnaire to our interlocutors and obtained written answers. In addition to these methods, we carried out multi-sited ethnography in the South and

Southeast of Brazil. We followed the performance of cults, classes in the discipline of feminist theology, meetings of Lutheran women, and activities developed by the Graduate Program in Gender and Religion at Faculdades EST, located in São Leopoldo in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

In order to offer a perspective for understanding the feminist meanings of the Lutheran leadership group, studies on gender/body enter this work with the proposal to reflect on “[...] the complexities of consciousness even in the face of the most dominant cultural formations” (Ortner, 2007, p. 399) and as a way of “[...] examining the way in which real histories, such as durations and events, are shaped by practices that are situated within and against the existing “structure” [...]” (Ortner, 2006, p. 29).

The theoretical perspective of Sherry Ortner (2007) is also explored in the methods proposed for the research with the aim of problematizing this dynamic that involves individuals and society, agents and institutions, projects and powers. The use of this theoretical perspective proposed by Ortner (2006; 2007) contributed to thinking about how these Lutheran women, located in the conjuncture of new demands and social struggles, relate to and act in relation to the IECLB and the dispositions in the androcentric power system present in the religious context, considering their tensions, negotiations and interests, among other aspects.

3. Women updating Church profile

The “way of being Church” is something that is currently being updated in the IECLB. And, in this updating movement, women, in the processes of evangelization, have been guiding the ideas of justice and equality. Articulated in international associations, in new historical movements in Brazil, mainly in feminism, they form a locus of support for the intellectualization and inclusion of women in the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the deprivatization of religion in Brazil.

According to Jaqueline dos Anjos (2009), there is an insertion in the transit of Lutherans in the processes of training and acting in liberation theology and feminist theology. These theological strands relate secular feminism and feminism elaborated by women in the Church that situate and mark the inscription of the progressive and intellectual tendency of the IECLB (Anjos, 2009). This characteristic has been opposing the traditional and communitarian tendencies of the Pentecostal Churches.

The understanding of Christian women of Lutheran confessionality about the concept of gender justice stems from Luther's transforming reflections and his participation in the Protestant Reformation movement. The so-called autonomy and freedom of the Christian, due to the absence of the need for interference or mediation by men or institutions in understanding the grace of God, is considered by Jean Boisset (1971), as a subjective inner movement of the subject, reflective and evaluative of his actions. According to this author,

Protestantism draws a personality to the Christian agent, and his belief is supported by the historical facts of the religious Reformation, in this case, starting with Luther.

The historical landmarks of the Protestant Reformation are mainly evoked by the pastors during the sermons in the services. The presence of historical facts in the speeches given by the women supports their arguments and corroborates for believers to experience a Church updated in time. An observation exemplifies this notion of the Church in time. During casual conversations, two pastors similarly expressed: “[...] our Church is a Church that is always in reform”.

Confessionality, because of social relations and actions from the evangelical community, introduces politics – in the parameters of decisions and obligations of society, in an agglomerate – through evangelical religiosity. The practice of the so-called Protestant personality discussed by Boisset (1971) is found among Lutherans. It is widespread and reconfigured, including in the process of incidence of feminism on women's subjectivity, and invested by the logic of Protestantism of German origin.

The Church, through the so-called “care” – an emic category of the institution’s affective offer that aims at reproduction in actions between its own and others – is remembered by feminists of the Lutheran confessionality, as the historical action of women acting in “mutirão” in different societies, in Europe and America. Ethical life, built by fidelity to the Gospel as a sacred scripture, is the receptacle of a historical mystique – a movement of historical strength – which implies in feminism, in the second half of the 20th century, the desire for a radical change in social justice.

In the case of feminist theological production in the IECLB, we observe that the women who produce these theologies turn to the search for ethics and spiritualized techniques that can offer some detachment from the notion and weight of guilt, in the search for freer and more resistant Christian lives. Another issue is the list of problems present in women's daily lives, addressed to the State by Brazilian society, through conflicts and which must be resolved by the State in the form of public policies. This has, in the IECLB, a demand that moves Lutherans to change the inferiority of women in the Church and in their communities.

Lutheran theologians Claudete, Aneli and Paula, for example, in addition to studying feminism conceptually, declare themselves feminists and understand feminism as a search for justice and social equality. For Aneli, feminism is “[...] a way of looking at the world supported by the idea of gender justice and the need to pursue equity in all types of relationships (social, economic, gender, ethnic, environmental)”. Feminism is immersed in a new ethical and moral parameter for human life, a new way of understanding and living reality, according to Claudete.

In Claudete's statement, recorded in a written form, the concern with the conservation of life on the planet is explicit. Claudete writes:

[...] Feminism is a radical proposal of life that seeks egalitarian, respectful, caring relationships - which involve action-reflection-action - in changing relationships involving men and women, but also involving hierarchical and unequal relationships in society, at work, in church. Feminism proposes an egalitarian society, respecting differences. Feminism also seeks a just and equal relationship with all earth and all that it contains. Feminism also denounces patriarchy, the machismo that kills women, children, LGBTI+, the Earth. Feminism claims that women and men have the same intelligence and can exercise all professions. Women can be wherever they want. They own your body. They are smart [...]. (Claudete, theologian and academic professor, in written testimony, 2019).

It is relevant to consider that both your theological education institution and the IECLB invest in programs and practices that can contribute to the spirituality of your community.

More recently, the ecofeminist strand has gained prominence with its proposal for new forms of economic production, without the use of synthetic, industrialized pesticides. The term ecofeminism gains visibility in 1974 by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne, in her work entitled "Feminism or Death" to name the conception of some French feminist groups that defend the existence of a close relationship between the increase in the world population, the destruction nature, male dominance and andro-anthropocentrism (D'eaubonne, 1974; Puleo, 2000). However, Ariel Salleh (1992, p. 90-91) argues that the idea of ecofeminism emerged independently in various parts of the world in the 1970s, this stemmed from the understanding that women's sexuality and their work are "used" by men in a similar way as nature is explored, without needing a "canned" theory. In general terms, the movement seeks an anti-capitalist and non-sexist productive alternative, understands the woman's body as a battlefield, criticizes biologicism and scientific objectivity (Puleo, 2019). Also, the women's movements of indigenous peoples in several countries of South America, where artisanal production has more reach, stand out.

About her relationship with feminism, Paula understands feminism as a political necessity, aiming at changes in the field of law, economics, social recognition and not radical.

[...] Feminism, until then, when we are living in a social structure of relations between men and women and in the family, we end up not realizing the issue of feminism. So, we must be open to see and feel this form and see what happens for us to be able to identify with feminism, right. (Paula, theologian and pastor, in recorded testimony, 2021).

In everyday life, feminism does not appear clearly or centrally in Paula's concerns. Social structures, as she herself recognizes, are involved in the routinization of other tasks. Feminism emerges in some situations. Feminist thinking is triggered when social structures

and institutions are not sufficient to enable women's actions. Paula recognizes the strength of feminist thought and identifies with some ways of positioning herself as a feminist.

4. Discussion

The idea of gender justice in the Lutheran context was first disseminated in 2013 by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), which has its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland and materialized in official documents called the Gender Justice Policy, which served as inspiration for the creation, in 2014, of the Gender Justice Policy of the Lutheran Foundation of Diaconia (FLD); for the approval, in 2015, of Faculdades EST's Gender Justice Policy – which adopts it as a theological, pedagogical and ethical principle (PGR-EST, 2015) and more recently, in 2022, inspired the creation and approval of the IECLB's Gender Justice Policy. In addition, ordained women also reveal discomfort with the privileges resulting from a historical male ecclesiastical hierarchy in the Churches, and which is reflected in other spheres of society. The concept elaborated by the FLM and present in the institutional documents linked to it defines that gender justice

[...] implies the protection and promotion of the dignity of women and men. Gender justice is expressed through equality and balanced power relations between women and men and the elimination of institutional, cultural and interpersonal systems of privilege and oppression that sustain discrimination (FLM 2014, p. 38).

The Lutheran Diakonia Foundation (FLD) was inspired by organizations such as the Lutheran World Federation and the ACT Alliance in its process of building the Gender Justice Policy, mobilized from reflections by the women's group in the FLD itself (FLD, 2014). After several meetings, the women of the Executive Board presented the proposal for the elaboration of a gender policy (Portal Luteranos, 2014). It is significant to consider that the actions of the FLD have found dissent among Lutherans from more conservative sectors of the Church.

The document was prepared based on the theological reflection of Pastor Adriana Gastellu, who analyzed data presented in international surveys by other Churches on the condition of women (Portal Luteranos, 2014). According to the publication of the FLD on the Lutherans Portal, the Gender Justice Policy:

[...] is a normative and strategic document that implements gender justice as a cross-cutting criterion for all dimensions of the FLD's work and for all the projects fostered or carried out by it on a daily basis. It aims to promote the

exercise of fair and egalitarian gender relations, recognizing in them a transforming potential of social relations. It envisages providing opportunities for the equal appreciation of women and men and generating access for women and men in a balanced way to the spaces of power and governance of the institution and its partners. The Gender Justice Policy aims, through its implementation, to transform social relations in Brazilian society and to be a stimulus and guide for its strategic partners, supported organizations and even the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB), a church with which shares theological identity and, through this, foster the development of fair gender relations in the Brazilian ecumenical environment [...]. (FLD, 2014).

In the religious sphere, it follows, therefore, through reflection, the turn that Martin Luther (1483-1546) made in the Reform Movement that took place in the sixteenth century, on the autonomy/freedom of the Christian not to need interference or mediation of men or institutions to have the grace of God, because, through this inner movement of the reflective subject, he himself is the evaluator of his actions (Lemos & Alves, 2013).

Protestantism draws a personality to the Christian agent and, in contemporary times, there is also an intersection of feminist concerns of theoretical framework and organized movement with the actions of Lutheran women from the use of the notion of gender justice, discussed by philosopher and feminist Nancy Fraser (2007), with the aim, in relation to Christianity, to bring this perspective of gender, sex and sexuality into ecumenism and promote ethical and religious reforms. According to this author, the turn towards social recognition represents an expansion in the field of human rights and in the scope of sexuality and gender.

The search for social recognition is a new understanding of what gender justice is, no longer limited to distributive issues, but in expanding the demand for representation, identity and difference, according to the theory of recognition. Faculdades EST adopts the concept of gender justice present in the institutional normative documents and in the actions carried out by the different work sectors of the institution, according to the institutional document (PGR-EST 2015), published in the magazine *Suas de Gênero*, discusses the implementation of the policy of community-crafted gender justice. The perspective of the feminist theologian Mary Streufert (2017), influential in the academic theological milieu, would therefore be preserving the original premises of the Christian notion that is reproduction and family: “[...] A global commitment to creating health care reproductive system that would support abundant life for all [...]” (Streufert, 2017, p. 28).

For the pastors and theologians, interlocutors of the research, it is consensual that the Protestant Reformation is always in process in time, and the recognition of women as authorities is inherent to this procedural dynamic. This allows us to consider that the feminist movement for feminist theology enabled a new technology in the field of knowledge that

exerts power in the re-signification of women's subjectivity – with the critique of the patriarchal system – and in the sense of the search for gender social justice.

According to Marlise Matos (2010, p. 88), it is possible to envisage a reconstruction of feminism from the global South in contemporary times “[...] It is for the first time that it is possible and even palpable to glimpse and recognize the idea of flow, movement movement in a critical perspective between feminist thought and praxis at the turn of a “fourth” wave [...]”. Empirical data can support our assertion that there is, in Lutheran feminism, yearnings for more engaged and up-to-date international dialogues, based on the strong alignment with the World Council of Churches (WCC), which allows feminist theologians to carry and update in their advisory work and in theological production, the transnationalist aspects and the broadening of the conception of justice, discrimination and human rights.

It is to be considered a broad agreement of feminist ideas in the Lutheran theological milieu, but women occupying the ministry did not mean, for the general public of the IECLB, the acceptance of feminist ideas or feminist theology. This legitimization has been gaining more strength where women are directors of parishes, pastorals, ministries and in the environment where theologians act. However, when analyzing Paula's statement, it is also possible to verify the way in which feminism is appropriated according to the needs of women. It is not radically political and contestatory but is directly linked to the needs of social justice in favor of women's human rights.

Since colonization, in the Brazilian case, the religion imposed by the Catholic Church, stigmatized native peoples, enslaved black people and structuring a sexist gender coloniality in the territory. There is a dichotomous and hierarchical socialization of gender still in process, and Lugones (2019, p. 362) reminds us that “[...] it is at the intersection of gender/class/race as the central construct of the capitalist world system of power.”. Men and women are historically socialized to respond to different social expectations; to some extent, these representations of masculinity and femininity end up resulting in differences that lead to social inequalities.

The historical process of changes in the moral parameters configured in the actions of evangelical women of the Lutheran confession, from the immigrant communities with their cultures and confrontation to the conservation of their cultural and religious practices, contributes to the understanding of the meanings of survival of the German-speaking communities. Brazilian women and their traditional gender relations.

Feminist theologians study the weight of guilt on women, the meaning of sin and the patriarchal and sexist interpretation of the Bible that falls on its female characters. These theologians also deconstruct certain biblical passages and readings, revealing the essential participation of women in Israel's history and in the development of early Christianity. Gender differences are forged over time and, in general, the role of women is not discussed. “Look, it has always been like this”. This social determination of gender is also the object of deconstruction and (re)construction by the interlocutors. In this sense, in this work of mine, I

also recognize myself in the effort to discuss and question the long-term social and historical processes of Christianity, how it is present in our society and how this results in the most hegemonic views about women and men. social roles that fit them. Something that converges with the most recent actions of the Lutheran women against the sexist and patriarchal hegemony of Brazilian society.

Conclusion

The traces of the patriarchal tradition still present in religion may be mediating the impacts of male domination today, in the context in which, often, women are not in direct relationship with men. The new forms of political and cultural resistance that can be created in these realities is the case of the feminist spiritualist theology produced by Christian women of Lutheran confessionality. The need for the gaúcho expression for recognition in the IECLB would hinder redistribution for gender equality, according to Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice (2022). And that's why we found that Lutheran feminists are not in agreement with Gaúcho cultural practices within religion, since they do not collaborate for the redistribution of equality in the political-religious context of the IECLB. That is, the recognition of the cultural difference and feminine identity in the Gaúcho molds within religion would be disturbing the policy of gender justice and the redistribution of power in the field of representation.

The research highlighted the significant production, incorporation and use of feminist theologies and the alternative to combat, even if partial, due to patriarchy, through a legitimate religious system. It was possible to show the origins and recognition of the bodies of Lutheran women, at different levels of religious authority. Initially, it happened with the arrival of German deaconesses to meet the social and religious needs of immigrant communities in Brazil and, particularly, women's health and children's education. They exerted a certain amount of resistance, at levels of institutional authority, finally managing to conquer spaces in other spheres of the Church.

In this sense, the case treated here of Lutheran pastors and theologians, collaborated to understand one of the forms of incidence of a feminist ideology that gained strength from the 1980s onwards. from positions of power in the secularized theological religious and intellectual sphere. In this sense, I observed the relationship that feminist movements, with their new epistemologies and methodologies, influenced religious women of the Lutheran Protestant-Evangelical strand in the process of building new forms of participation, redistribution of power and empowerment of the feminine in the religious context. A process built on difference, even if seeking equality between genders.

To conclude, we consider that the historical Protestantism of German immigrants and their constitution as an evangelical Church in Brazil have offered some contributions to changes, although still superficial, in the political and religious conjuncture of the Christian religions in the country. The representation of women, present today in ecclesiastical positions,

confirm that they mediated the speeches in the intention of a gender justice in the Church through evangelizing means.

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