

Milda Ališauskienė, Eglė Aleknaitė and Marianne Bjeland Kartzow (editors)

Religion and Gender Equality around the Baltic Sea. Ideologies, Policies, and Private Lives

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This collective volume edited by Milda Ališauskienė, Eglė Aleknaitė, and Marianne Bjeland Kartzow is intriguing not least in its title and its content: the countries of the Baltic Sea region are infinitely diverse in terms of the religious life of their societies, their development, change and present, and the perspective of gender and gender equality is an excellent way to discover, understand, and highlight the relevance of religion and the private and public life of contemporary Europe. The book is also an outstanding example of an international project in which most of the contributors do not study a slice of the social life of interest to them in isolation but work together to analyse what is common and different in gender equality and religion; the interdisciplinary nature of the volume is its strength, illustratively broadening advantages of comprehensive analysis. The volume is a collaborative effort involving 18 researchers, some of whom are highly experienced and internationally renowned scholars who have worked together with young researchers on this project. This collaboration between experienced and young researchers in the study and in the preparation of this collective volume ensures the quality of the chapters and the relevance of the research insights.

The volume's authors share a clear commitment to the liberal democracy and human rights paradigm. In the introductory chapter, the editor write that their focus was on five research themes. Firstly, the change in the concept of gender and gender equality in the Baltic and Nordic countries and how the change has been influenced by the particularities of the socio-historical context, how religious organisations and the women who are actively involved in them respond to the concept of gender equality; secondly, the issues of gender equality within different religious groups, analysing competing gender ideologies, looking at how hierarchies of authority work, and how gender equality is understood from a theological perspective; thirdly, alliances between religious organisations, cooperation between religious groups, with implications for gender equality policies; fourthly, religion and the public discourse of gender equality, showing how gender interactions are shaped through the media, the education system, and how religious groups and their members are involved in this discourse; fifthly, how gender models are defined in religious and moral education textbooks. These themes tend to overlap in the chapters of the book.

The volume is based on an exceptionally data-rich qualitative study. It is rare to see a study of this scale, including 126 qualitative interviews, content analysis of 1,450 media articles, analysis of school curricula, and focus groups with pupils and teachers. The scope and ambition of the research are a promise to readers that the book will provide new and significant insights into gender and religion. The authors of the book fully live up to this expectation.

The first chapter of the volume provides an overview of the socio-cultural context of the Baltic States, which is essential for all the remaining chapters of the book. The chapters of the book offer an approach to gender equality from a wide variety of perspectives: what are the issues related to women's ordination in the dominant religious organisations in the Baltic States and how women in the Baltic States differentiate between gender equality issues in religious institutions and in private life; what are Muslim women's reflections on gender roles and everyday life choices in relation to gender relations and gender equality; what is the uniqueness of the experience of Muslim women in the Baltic States in relation to the aspects analysed in the study; how do they construct their relationship to varieties of Muslim life in other countries; what are the gender roles and gender equality perspectives of Baltic women practising paganism, and how historical contexts and the relationship of pagan communities to the dominant religious communities help us to understand this; the negative political consequences the social environment created by religious organisations has for democratic societies and members of the LGBT+ community in particular; the prevailing public discourse in the Baltic States on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the influence of religious organisations on this discourse and on the attitudes of women practising their faith; how the specificity of the Baltic States helps an understanding of the specificity of cooperation between religious communities on gender and family policy issues, as illustrated by a comparison of Lithuania and Norway; to what extent and how the choice between confessional and secular religious education in state schools reflects the needs of liberal democracies. The monograph's coverage of all these aspects of gender equality and religion is full and thorough. It enables a good understanding of the interaction between gender equality policy and religion at the individual, organisational, and societal levels in the Baltic States. The book is undoubtedly a significant contribution to the study of religion in the Baltic States and internationally.

The book mainly covers the Baltic countries, but it also includes gender equality discourse in Norway. This case complements the Baltic study very well, but talking about the Nordic countries or the Baltic Sea countries might be somewhat misleading – historical and contemporary context differences have to be taken into account when reading the volume.

In summary, the book *Religion and Gender Equality around the Baltic Sea. Ideologies, Policies, and Private Lives* is an important contribution to the study of religions, sociologies of religion and gender, and the study of the societies of Northern Europe and the Baltic countries. It is recommended to scholars, students, and the wider public interested in social change and the intersection of religion and gender within it. The volume is also recommended to policy decision-makers as a source of knowledge for understanding the role religious organisations play in the lives of their believers and the public life of contemporary societies.
