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# *The Future of the “Women Theologians” in Italy: a Sociological Analysis*

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## **Abstract**

The essay on “The future of 'women theologians' in Italy: a sociological analysis” confronts the theme from a theoretical and empirical point of view. It lingers, at the beginning, on the role of the 'observers women' present at the Vatican II Council and on others who, from the outside, influenced the debate on women, church and modernity. The focus of reflection is on the consequences arising in 'feminist/female theology' today through the data of 'survey' which deals with the universe of Italian Christian women theologians. From a methodical point of view the empiric method used in the survey is a quantitative one by means of a questionnaire with multiple closed. When was feminist theology born? What is the rapport between the genders in the Christian churches? What is the future of women in the Roman Catholic Church and the role of women in the Catholic Church in Italy? What do women theologians think about women priests? What is their 'dream'? We try to offer a response to these questions.

Keywords: Women theologians, feminism theology, Vatican II Council.

## **1. The subjectivity of women and the Vatican II Council**

### *1.1 Introduction*

This essay is set in the sociological ambit of cultural studies, in particular in that of the sociology of religion. The essay concentrates only on some of the aspects which have been analysed in a wider area of research which has

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encompassed many other themes which it is not possible to cover in this essay.

In particular, we analyse the role of those women “observers” present, from all over the world, during the last session of the Vatican II Council. We also analyse the role of the other women who, although not participating directly in the conciliar work, gave their contribution in the form of ideas. The theme has been analysed through sociological research data<sup>1</sup>. It is necessary to start from the Council because it is only from 1965, that women have been able to enroll in degree and doctorate courses in theology in the Pontifical Universities. This has happened (and is happening) only in Italy where the courses in theology for women are not available in the State universities but only in the Pontifical ones. Before that date, the Christian women who wished to pursue a course in theology up to an academic level (degree or doctorate) were able to do so only by going abroad to Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, the United States and other countries.

The principal objective of this paper is to reflect on the future of women theologians in Italy. To deal with such a theme it is necessary to start from a theoretical reflection on feminine and/or feminist theology in which the same women theologians find themselves and to which they belong.

Such an objective is made clear in the very structure of the paper – it starts from the report of the Vatican Council II on the social problems the modernization of the nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties. There follows a brief analysis of the requests for change and the difficulties which women experienced inside the Church. We shall linger on the analysis of the presence of women in the Council, whether as ‘observers’ or as others who followed the work of the Council from outside. It will also analyse the consequences which it produced in the years following the Council on the theology of women.

Thus we shall develop a reflection on women and the study of theology, considering the journey of feminist theologians by making particular reference to some women theologians who are better known in an international context.

In conclusion it will be a reflection on the future for women theologians and for female (and/or feminist) theology.

These objectives are designed to indicate those most important, that is to identify what is the future of women in the Roman Catholic Church and the role of women in the Catholic Church in Italy.

The analysis of “Women theologians” will be through the results of survey. From a methodical point of view the empiric method used in the

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<sup>1</sup> I cannot enter into theological questions, which are not within my sociological competence.

survey is a quantitative one (Lazarsfeld 1967; Khun 1969; Frudà 1988; Memoli 2002) by means of a questionnaire with multiple closed replies prevailing but also with some open replies available. An on-line questionnaire was chosen.

### *1.2 The Council and modernity*

The role of women in the Church is analysed, together with a reflection on the social and political situation of women in society. Many signs of a change in society were already present from the end of the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth century but now a different 'formamentis' and efficient instruments to confront these new problems were necessary. The reconstruction following the wars, in particular after the second, had not yet been completed and social fragmentation, subjectivity and individualism were present in society at that time the solution of which had not yet been able to achieve common agreement. On the political plane the totalitarian regimes had fallen – although not all of them – but we were living in the middle of the cold war and we feared the possibility of a third world war. The push towards democracy was weak and confused – men were still searching for democratic and free participation in society (Canta 2006). This was affected Europe in a particular way but similar problems were being experienced throughout the world.

New categories were emerging in society – in particular factory workers and women – and, above all in German speaking countries (Germany, Austria and Switzerland). In Germany during the Weimar Republic these categories assumed a central role in the process of social change (*Idem*).

The female Roman Catholic movement had been very strong (Associations of catholic teachers, League of Catholic Women) both in the 1800s and the 1900s and in the period immediately after the two wars. Female groups were also active in Switzerland even though the vote was granted to women only in 1971, due to the opposition of the Catholic Church in 1959.

In those years Mary Daly, an post-Christian theologian, with catholic roots, who had obtained her doctorate in Switzerland wrote a text for the conciliar fathers (Tomassone, 2012): also E. Fiorenza Schuessler (1983) underlined the role of the female theologian in Christianity and suggested a community of ecumenical studies. Another problem which was discussed in some Christian circles was that of women priests.

For Pope John XXIII the Council was necessary to enable the Church to understand the world and the new problems created by modernity – the modernization during the '50s and '60s. Society had changed and through the Council the Church would have to come to terms with all the aspects of this change (Alberigo, 2005; Lucchetti Bingemer, 2012; Ruggeri 2012; Sandri

2013). He was aware of the profound effect that modernity had in society. The Church had acknowledged this internally but it was called upon to give an adequate response. The intention of Pope John XXIII was that women should be heard in the Council as he welcomed the signs of change in the female world whether it be on an individual or collective level. This decision was taken not only to claim but also to affirm their rights, competence and dignity of people.

After sixty years these problems are still unresolved as Pope Francis affirmed when replying to requests to convoke Vatican III: “Vatican II had as its principal objective that of coming to terms with the modern world. This conciliatory declaration is very important but since then not a single step forward has been achieved. Therefore, there is no need to convoke another Council – instead Vatican II should be put into practice and that is what I intend to do” (Scalfari 2015). “Coming to terms with modernity” gives rise to an enormous problem – western modernity was born in the Enlightenment but today has turned into relativism – nothing is absolute and nothing is any longer demonstrable. This means that this clash gives rise to unresolved problems.

Today, modernity is a complex concept and is defined and used in different ways by various scholars. To ‘modernity’ have been added prefixes and adjectives: ‘postmodernity’ (Lyotard 1979)<sup>2</sup>, ‘after-modernity’ (Donati 2011; 2013a; 2013b)<sup>3</sup>, ‘fluid-modernity’ (Bauman 2003)<sup>4</sup> and ‘secondary

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<sup>2</sup> Lyotard has defined post-modernity as “a more developed knowledge of the condition of society. We have decided to call it ‘postmodern’. The definition is current in American sociological literature and criticism. It describes the state of culture after the transformation which has been imposed upon it by the ‘rules of the game’ in science, literature and the arts since the end of the twentieth century. Such a transformation will be proposed here in relation to the crisis in narration” (Lyotard 1979: 5). From the point of view of knowledge: “But the postmodern condition has nothing to do with disenchantment, just as blind positivity has nothing to do with de-legitimation [...]. Postmodern knowledge is not exclusively an instrument of power. We must refine our sensibility to the difference and reinforce our capacity to tolerate the incommensurable” (*Idem.* 7).

<sup>3</sup> PP. Donati has conducted a long and serious reflection on the crisis of modernity and on the emergence of the theory of the reflectivity, a viaticum for entering in ‘post-modernity’ (Donati 2011). On the bases of his theory it is assumed that ‘society is not a container of relationships but is itself a relationship, it is ‘social relationality’ (Donati 2013a: 25). The social relationship is ‘intrinsically reflexive’, in the sense that “returning is always backwards” on the subjects which are in the relationship. Every new relationship is never the same, it generates another with a different quality because “the social relationship is that reference – symbolic and

modernity' (Beck 2000)<sup>5</sup>. The sociologist A Giddens has associated 'post-modernity' with the "end of history" (Giddens 1994)<sup>6</sup>. In the context of the nineteen sixties, when the Council was held, modernity produced above all the emergence of the need for individual subjectivity and rationality and participation in social life and in the life of the Church in particular.

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intentional – that connects the social subjects in as much as they are actualized or generates a connection between them, that is in as much as their reciprocal actions express" (*Idem*: 86). In the post-modern society, "In respect to the past, the qualitative difference of the social changes today is in this: modernity says 'I' and contrasts it to 'You' - the post-modern says 'We' [...]. The society of the future will be able to escape chaotic changes only if it succeeds in declining the morphogenesis in the terms of a 'We-in relationship', that is a 'We relational' " (*Idem*: 142a).

<sup>4</sup> According to Bauman (2003) in the society of 'fluid modernity' the social bonds have been dissolved, which have become ephemeral and superficial in all areas (work, community, the individual, human relationships and social structures and create disorientation and solitude in the individual.

<sup>5</sup> According to U Beck the new problem of society is the distribution of risk, created by the second post-modernity, understood as a structural way of confronting the insecurities produced by the same modernity. The risk of the 'second modernity' is irreconcilable and ungovernable (Beck 2000).

<sup>6</sup> The concept of modernity disrupts the linear process of development, as affirmed by A Giddens: "What does the concept of post-modernity normally refer to? Beyond the generic sense of living in a period of marked diversity with respect to the past, this term usually presents one or more of the following meanings: the discovery that nothing is given as being known with certainty from the moment that all the preceding 'fundamentals' of the epistemology have been shown to be unreliable, the fact that 'history' is without any form of theology and that as a result no version of 'progress' can plausibly be defended, and finally, the birth of a new social and political programme in which ecological preoccupations assume growing importance - perhaps in the new social movements in general. Hardly anyone today identifies post-modernity with the meaning that everyone once gave to it: the advent of socialism in the place of capitalism. The fact of distancing this transition from the centre of the scene is in reality one of the primary factors that have animated the discussions about the possible dissolution of modernity given the holistic vision which Marx had of history (Giddens 1994:53). The most worrying consequence of this is that in the West, pervaded by the nihilism produced by the Enlightenment, increases anxiety for the future: 'Post-modernity has been associated not only with the end of fundamentalism but also to the 'end of history' " (*idem*: 56).

### *1.3 Women protagonists in the turmoil inside the Church*

Women were asking for that which the same K. Rahner (Siebenrock: 52) had predicted, affirming that: "Women place their trust in women". The solicitations by female believers were taking place inside the Church. It is true that some were reading the first feminist books but many more were reading the Bible and others wanted to study theology at first hand. In 1962 the priesthood for the Waldensians was recognized but already during 1959 Giuseppe Ruotolo, apostolic vicar of San Ramon in Peru, had asked for the re-establishment of female deacons in the Catholic Church. During the preparations for the Council the petition from Gertrude Heinzelmänn<sup>7</sup> and another group of women regarding women priests arrived in Rome.

In Europe, in the 1960s, there was ferment in the life of the associations and, above all in Italy. Catholic Action had nurtured in the lay female the knowledge of the responsibility and the protagonism of the Church. This renewal had involved believers and non-believers (Arendt, 1958; De Beauvoir, 1949; Friedan, 1963; Weil, 1957).

Discussion into the role of the Italian woman also entered into this turmoil. It had a strong influence on the themes discussed in the Council (Valerio, 2001, 2012a, 2012b). Among those involved we must remember: Antonietta Giacomelli, who is in the current of modernism, was convinced that the valuation of the woman should pass from the knowledge of the Holy Scripture and from the patristic<sup>8</sup> Valeria Paola Pignetti (called Sister Maria, founder of the hermitage of Campello), criticized by the Church for her friendships (don Primo Mazzolari e Michele Do) succeeded in creating a network of believers and non-believers, involving them in a movement that anticipated the Council. Also Elisa Salerno, Adelaide Coari and Elena Persico had created a 'catholic feminism' involved on the social and ecclesiastic level. Above all Elisa Salerno had identified in the faulty interpretation of the Holy Scripture the origin of the exclusion of the woman from society and from the catholic church (Vicentini, 1904). In 1962 Adriana Zarri published 'The Church our Daughter' in which she predicted a reform of the Church.

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<sup>7</sup> Gertrude Heinzelmänn (1964), a Swiss jurist sensitive both to the equality of women in the Church and to the voting rights of women in Switzerland. She was Vice-president of the Swiss Association for the voting rights of women.

<sup>8</sup> The books of A. Giacomelli were put on the banned list in 1912. She learned from A.R. the profound sense of the Christian faith which conjugated with the moment of modernity.



Women such as Luigia Tincani<sup>9</sup> and Chiara Lubich<sup>10</sup> are also active and they have had a certain influence on the terms of the formation, of the communion and of peace discussed in the Council.

The turmoil in the female world was so strong that on the evening before the opening of the Council in a press conference given in German a woman – Josefa Theresia Munch<sup>11</sup> – asked provocatively: “Have women been invited too?” This woman was a theologian who had a very new attitude to ecclesiastical life and theological considerations. This could have come only from the German-speaking countries – Germany, Austria and Switzerland – where women were admitted to attend the faculties of theology (which in Germany were run by the state) and could obtain a research doctorate.

In the theological environment the ‘male oriented’ theory of Saint Thomas has been criticized and the women theologians wrote letters in preparation for the Council in which they asked for specific modifications to the liturgy (for example the adoption of the female in certain expressions, the diaconship for men and women, the acceptance of mixed marriages and the revision of the canonic right to abolish the references to discrimination with regard to women).

The Americans had already official opened up the “woman problem” in the Christian world when – in 1895 and 1898 in Seneca Falls – they had published the two volumes of the *Woman’s Bible*. The text, initially published under the title *Declarations of Feelings*, was coordinated by Elisabeth Cady Stanton and by the Quaker pastor Lucrezia Mott. It is necessary to distinguish this phase in the “Women’s Bible” (1989) from the generation of Vatican II and from the feminist theologians after the Council up to today.

#### *1.4 Women at the Council: the “observers” and others from outside*

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1963, once the Council had started, Cardinal J. Suenens expressed in the assembly his disappointment at the absence of women in the Council and asked: “But where is the other half of humanity?” Also Rosemary Goldie (Goldie, 1999) from outside, put forward the request for women to be included among the conciliar fathers, in particular among

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<sup>9</sup> Tincani, interested in the formation of religious teaching, founded in Rome in 1939 the officially recognized Institute of Maria Santissima Assunta.

<sup>10</sup> Chiara Lubich in 1943 had founded the movement of the ‘Fireside’, recognized by Pope John XXIII in 1962.

<sup>11</sup> J. T. Munch (1964), who wrote, a book together with Gertrud Heinzelmann (1964), *Wir schweigen nicht länger! Frauen aussern sich zum II Vatikanischen Konzil, We won’t keep silence any longer! Women speak out to Vatican Council II*”.

those from Africa. Only in September, a week before the opening of the third session, the women were allowed like “observes”<sup>12</sup>. They were not all called to attend en masse but a few at a time until at the end there were 23 of them.

In view of the expectations raised and the richness of the contributions it seems that very little was explicitly included in the official documents about what the Council had said about women. But in play was a vision of the Church and its thinking on the world, on the religious and on women. To think that the changes could come all from one hearing composed only of men was utopian. However, gradually many proposals were included in the official documents and this was the beginning of an irreversible process, as you will see from what follows.

The ‘observers’ were very democratic and were the spokeswomen of the real problems of those who were not present at the Council. For example, the Italian Sister Costantina Baldinucci organized in February 1965 two meetings, one in Milan and the other in Rome, with the superiors of the religious congregations, which took place only after she had sent them a preparatory questionnaire to identify the most urgent themes to be addressed.

As Adriana Valerio (2012a) affirmed, they had to be ‘listeners’ but they were not ‘silent’ and they gave a notable contribution to the debate of the Council. In fact, the women found the means and the time to make their voices heard, both within and without the commissions. A link was immediately formed between the lay and the ordained and they formed a common working group to identify the most urgent questions to be discussed. Sister Mary Luke Tobin had the task of collating the results of this group. They were considered first and foremost as ‘women’ and they wanted to identify together the objectives – both concrete and realizable - to give back a voice to the women of the world and to the church.

Also the women who were active on the outside gave a notable contribution and, in various ways, constituted a resource and support for all the others. Above all, the reviews of the movements and the associations, in particular those of the Pro-Civitate Christians and the Azione Cattolica,

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<sup>12</sup> Those “observes” were 23, of whom 10 were nuns, and different worlds of particular symbolism were so represented: Mary Luke Tobin, Marie de la Croix Khouzam, Marie Henriette Ghanem, Sabine de Valon, Giuliana Thomas, Suzanne Guillemin, Cristina Estrada Carrera-Pesas, Costantina (Laura) Baldinucci, Claudia (Anna) Feddish, Jerome Maria Chimy. Also, the 13 lay figures who attended were significant: Pilar Bellosillo, Rosemary Goldie, Marie-Louise Monnet, Anne-Marie Roeloffzen, Amalia Dematteis, Ida Marengi Marengo, Alda Miceli, Catherine McCarthy, Luz Maria Longoria Gama, Margarita Moyano Llerena, Gladys Parentelli, Gertrude Herle, Hedwig Karoline J.R.E. von Skoda.

offered information on the presence of the women in the Council and on what they were doing. They made particular reference to the first three to be called, Luise Monnet, Rosemary Goldie and Alda Miceli and to the themes which the lay and religious observers were studying together. The 'Community of the Arc', small in size but an expression of a progressive Christianity, participated in a strong and significant manner. Around twenty women of this Community, coming from all the different countries, among whom the Italian PM during the last session called a ten-day strike to send to the Council a message on non-violence, which was read publicly. Probably their contribution was included in the chapter on safeguarding creation in the 'Gaudium et Spes' (Carfora, Tanzarella 2012: 87-98).

Another woman who played a significant role in the debate during those years was Maria Vingiani, who did not participate directly in the Council but who was 'present' in the drafting of the 'Nostra Aetate', from her privileged position of being in contact with many ecumenical personalities (R. Schulz, M. Cullmann, Y. Congar, M. D. Chenu) and she was the first to speak of a dialogue with culture and with other religions. She not only had an influence beforehand and during but later became the initiator of one of the ecumenical experiences which derived directly from the Council and which is still vital today<sup>13</sup>.

## 2. Women and the study of theology

### 2.1. *The feminist theologians*

The feminist theologians after the Council up to today found herself between two dimensions – militant and theoretical – and made a fusion of the two their point of strength. It originated from the daily life of women and was intended to change the rapport between women and the Church. It not intended to shut up in an academic ghetto and once they were at university it was to act as a discipline which was open to experience (Mattiello, 2013).

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<sup>13</sup> We refer to the Ecumenical Activity Secretariat (SAE) whose first meeting was held in 1964. For more information see TJ 'The inter-confessional dialogue of the SAE in its opening to inter-religious dialogue and to the world, Pontificia Università Salesiana, Rome academic year 1994 – 1995; Vingiani Maria, *Un'esperienza di ecumenismo laicale. Memoria storica* [An experience of lay ecumenism. Historical Memoire], in [www.saenotizie.it/sae/attachments/article/525/memoria\\_storica.pdf.3](http://www.saenotizie.it/sae/attachments/article/525/memoria_storica.pdf.3).

From that moment “feminist” theologians multiplied: M. Daly<sup>14</sup>, R. Radford Ruether (1975, 1976), the Baptist pastor Elisabeth Green (1998, 2011), and the Christian feminist Elisabeth Johnson (1983, 1995, 2012) Elisabeth Shussler Fiorenza and others.

The confessional barriers fell in feminist theology. This is by its nature transversal and therefore ecumenical and anticipates some inter-cultural themes. We thus talk of feminist theologians in the plural. The feminist theologians is still in the minority in the Christian world but throughout the years has shown itself to be relevant, even if in an indirect way. The re-reading of the sacred texts, which take up again and render more profound the work already undertaken by the Women’s Bible at the end of the 1800s. This creates a theoretical basis for feminist theology, to be declined in the plural, which the scholars (groups and movements) have conjugated in many ways<sup>15</sup>. The innovations proposed by the feminist theologian have favoured the process of emancipation of the believers from below, even if it has lacked an explicit adhesion. In some cases, even without the explicit agreement of the hierarchy, the ideas of these theologians have entered into the debate inside the church, provoking sensitive distancing from the official positions.

In Italy, the first original contribution, in 1979, was that of F. Long and R. Pierro (1979) in which the authors raised the question of being feminist and Christian.

Among the most important contributions to the research on the biblical exegesis “à la feminine”, we should note that of E. Shüssler Fiorenza (1992)<sup>16</sup>, who obtained her Certificate in Theology at the University of Wuerzburg in 1963 and her Doctorate in Theology at the University of Muenster. Her “feminist re-reading” of the New Testament has upset many people by showing above all a closeness between Christ and women and undertaking a radical re-examination of the figure of Mary. She is no longer condemned to be, above all in the Catholic ambit, an icon of submission, subordination and repression of female sexuality. All the texts of feminist theology have no option but start by re-examining the central figure of Mary (Militello, 1991; Valerio, 1995).

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Daly who, as it was not possible to attend an American faculty of theology, went to Freiburg in Switzerland to study theology and was the first American woman to receive a diploma in 1964 (Daly, 1968, 1973, 1979; Tomassone, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> For a bibliographical synthesis see C. Mattiello, “Se Dio è maschio, il maschio è Dio” [If God is male, the male is God], in *Acoma*, 14 (1998: 24-32).

<sup>16</sup> For the biblical exegesis “à la feminine” the bibliography is immense. One can at least quote the text of F. Schussler Fiorenza (1992) and E. Green (1995).

Also Ursula King (1995, 2008, 2008b), from Bristol University in Great Britain, is a feminist theologian who, in the early 60s, concentrated on the marginalisation of the women who study theology.<sup>17</sup> According to her, 'feminist theology' is "a young discipline, quite new, but old enough to already have its 'matriarchs'. It has developed its own history, given that there are now women theologians of the third generation" (King in Mazzolini, Perroni 2010: 187). However, in her opinion, the term 'feminist theologian' is too restrictive to describe what is happening globally among Christian women. There should be a confrontation with women of other religious traditions so that an inter-religious dialogue can be realised. Feminist theology should be made to signify also the exchange of experiences, sharing resistance, oppression, dreams and hopes – that is, realize empowerment.

In the same context, the figure of Kari Elisabeth Børresen (1993a; 2012) is very important. She defines herself as a "catholic feminist, an expert in the history of ideas, with a privileged background – that of the Norwegian welfare state in which women have reached bio-socio-political equality with men. In 1962 I started to study the interaction between the language of God and anthropology to be able to highlight the strong basis of man-centredness which is ingrained in the traditional Catholic theology" (Mazzolini, Perroni 2008: 45). According to Børresen, bio-socio-political autonomy is the result of the 'feminist epistemology' which defines all human beings as having equal rights and status. The rights of women have always been marginalized in all the global religious systems. In a different way, the asymmetry between the sexes exists in Buddhism and Hinduism but it also exists in the monotheistic religions originating in the Middle East. However, new paradigms of interculturalisation are being established whether it be in Christianity or in Islam (Børresen 2004). Human being are equal before God/Allah in that they are resurrected men and women. According to Børresen "The Mediterranean paradigms of the asymmetric polarisation of the sexes, euphemistically defined in Vatican documents as 'complementary', prescribe specific gender functions in distinct ambits for men and for women. They are thus contrary to the feminist vision of collaboration between the sexes" (Børresen in Mazzolini, Perroni 2010: 50). Consistent with the image of God, Børresen maintains that both men and women can be called to the Presbytery (Børresen 1993b).

Starting from many fundamental common points an experience can be developed which in time will be intense and transversal for all the Christian churches and for the Catholic church. This is the ferment which was

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<sup>17</sup> After studying theology in Paris, she continued her activities as a scholar, theologian and teacher in many parts of the world (England, France, Germany, India, the United States, China, Australia etc).

experienced in the post-council season of liberation, as confirmed by the American theologian<sup>18</sup> Mary Dale (1973). In this context a meeting with eco-feminism – which was born in the same period – can be realized. Eco-theology, like all the feminist theologies in the Christian ambit, while being organically connected to the affiliated movements which developed in the lay ambit, maintain their specific field of analysis. This derives also from the objective of really impacting on the life of the churches and of liberating women from the condition of subordination which has historically been assigned to them in this context.

Theoretical points of Ecologie-feminism has been identified by Rosemary Radford Ruether, who is a Catholic and a fundamental personality both in feminist theology and in eco-feminism. Already in 1972 she had talked clearly about a “theology of the liberation of the woman, of the body and of nature’ and of ‘a new woman – a new earth”. Ruether, starting from a philosophical, theological and psychological premise, identified the roots of a vision of the world which results in devastating social consequences on a level of the rapport man/woman. She maintains that “The exclusively male God who was created from nothing, who transcended nature and has dominated history (..) creates a tendency of the spirit to ‘infinite’”. He “has, as a counterpart, a scornful spirituality of the world which projects disgust, aversion and fear of the physical forces of the female” (Ruether 1972: 28, 147-8; 1975).

A debate which is taking place between the feminist theologians is that about women priests in the Catholic church. As Cettina Militello says, “the cardinal sin of the Christian community on the female question is to recognize the perfect equality between man and woman in terms of grace but at the same time to align itself with social inequality, with the inequality in the roles of men and women from the historical point of view” (Militello 1996:55). This is confronted in a different way in the other Christian churches<sup>19</sup>. However, reticence and prohibition is also missing in this context. In the Catholic church the theme was confronted in the 1970s when, in the Anglican church, there were signs of relaxation on the question of women priests. In the following years Paolo VI took a negative position in a letter sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury Coggan (1975). Also the ‘cautious’ hopes of

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<sup>18</sup> In the text reference is made to certain European women theologians. At the same time we must also quote Elisabeth Jhonson, a sister catholic, who teaches theology at Fordham University and is President of the Catholic Theological Society of America and of the Ecumenical Theological Society (Jhonson 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. E. Green (1965), C. Heiward (1998); L. Muraro (1999); L. Sandri (2007: 57-58).

*Mulieris Dignitatem* (1998), in which John Paulus II recognized that "The dignity of the woman and her vocation have assumed a very particular profile in recent years" and exalted "female genius".

## 2.2. *After the Council: women and the study of theology.*

The women of those years were far-sighted also on the problems that would be created post-Council and they were obviously prophets. In fact, in the post-Council period it was not easy to solve society's problems. It was a period of heated debates on the alliance between Christians and socialists: on ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue on divorce, abortion and euthanasia. One undisputable aspect is that in the Council the female was present as a category and could no longer be ignored. Not by chance, Pope Luciani in the Angelus of 10<sup>th</sup> September 1978 said: "God is father, even more He is mother"<sup>20</sup>. In different tones the concept was rejected by John Paulus II in his Audience of Wednesday, 20<sup>th</sup> January 1999<sup>21</sup>.

The Church of Vatican II started to be less masculine, assuming feminine characteristics in welcoming and tolerant tones. However, after the Council the changes affecting women were pertinent. This showed itself in particular in a vision of the church as "God's People" together with its understanding of women's liberation of a "sign of the times"<sup>22</sup>. It is a church faithful to the Gospels which now makes decisions in a collegiate manner and no longer in a pyramidal manner. This encourages faith in the layman who values the talents of all the "people of God" entrusting women with full responsibility. All those who have been baptized are 'people of God' and thus this includes women. (Militello, 1995, 2012: 219-233)<sup>23</sup>.

Pope Francis<sup>24</sup> referred to women at the beginning of his Pontificate by confirming that the Church has need of women, thus giving rise to new hopes and expectations (Canta, 2013a, 2013b).

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<sup>20</sup>This sentence is a quotation from the passage in Old Testament, being a simple interpretation of some passages of the Gospels: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKIMNm42JLA>.

<sup>21</sup> "The divine attachment towards Israel shows itself also in maternal ways in that they express the tenderness and the indulgence (CCC, 239)", while, in reality, in the speech to the Audience he did not speak of God as Mother but of God who shows maternal traits. See Messori V., " 'God is also Mother' Wojtyla as Luciani", *Corriere della Sera*, 21.01.1999.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 10-12.

<sup>24</sup> We quote in particular what Pope Francis said in his interview with Father Antonio Spadaro for *La Civiltà Cattolica*: "We must work harder for theology for

Today the existing rapport between women and theology can be considered as indicating how women have reacted to the Council and, in particular, feminist theologians. Even if the post-Council debate could not speak of a development in women's theology it was already present in the Council. The problem in the following years – and even today – is put in very different terms.

### **3. “Women theologians” in Italy: the results of survey**

#### *3.1. The field of the survey*

The analysis of the situation of women theologians in Italy has been complex. This could be because of its fragmentation, either the particularity of their experiences and for the didactic journeys made by women who have attended theology courses, or the difficulty of finding data on those who, having finally obtained a degree and/or a doctorate, have also been able to obtain academic teaching qualifications in theology. Nevertheless, today we are able to work on some data<sup>25</sup>, which has allowed us to speak with a certain degree of authority on this unknown world<sup>26</sup>.

The choice of the field to be analysed has fallen upon Italy, because of the specificity of our Country. In Italy, in fact, theological studies are taught only in the Pontifical Universities, in particular in the Vatican City in Rome. They award titles of study which are recognized only in the Vatican State<sup>27</sup>. This choice, from a methodological point of view has been relevant and pioneering, whilst not being literature and datum of reference from a methodological point of view in other countries. This could be because of its fragmentation, either the particularity of their experiences and for the didactic

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women to be deepened. [...] The particular genius in women is necessary in the places where important decisions are taken. The challenge today is exactly that: to reflect on the specific role of women where the authority of the various spheres of the Church is exercised” (Spadaro, 2013: 466-467).

<sup>25</sup> The results of our research were published in Italy in May 2014 under the title: Canta C.C. (2014c), *Le pietre scartate: indagine sulle teologhe in Italia* [The Discarded Stones: An investigation into women theologians in Italy]. Milano: Franco Angeli 2014.

<sup>26</sup> In this essay the data has been presented which will help to understand the reality behind women theologians. There doesn't appear to be similar research undertaken in other countries against which we can made a comparison.

<sup>27</sup>It is different in other European countries and in the United State where the teaching of Christian theology (Catholic, Protestant and Anglican) are taught in the state universities.



journeys made by women who have attended theology courses, or the difficulty of finding data on those who, having finally obtained a degree and/or a doctorate, have also been able to obtain academic teaching qualifications in theology

Who are these women "theologians"? We have defined them as being those who have obtained, as a minimum, a degree and/or a doctorate in theology and who have published writings on theological themes. They were asked to complete an on-line questionnaire, with both closed and open replies (single or multiple), which has enabled us to outline their socio-cultural profile – existential, formative, professional, scientific, didactic and the "*weltanschauung*" and their attitude with regard to the Church, the Vatican II Council, the future of women theologians and the theology of women, in the female priesthood and other<sup>28</sup>.

In this essay we have only analysed some of the aspects of the fundamental problems which are connected to those which we have previously analysed and are connected to the problems of the Council.

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<sup>28</sup> In order to see the questionnaire go to website: [www.carmelinachiaracanta.it](http://www.carmelinachiaracanta.it). The results of all the replies to the questionnaire are included in the text. The data which has been analysed relate to the period from May 2012 to May 2013 during which time women theologians replied to the questions posed. The results of all the replies to the questionnaire have been recorded in *riportati in C.C. Canta, Le pietre scartate. Indagine sulle teologhe in Italia* [The Scattered Stones: An Investigation into women theologians in Italy], FrancoAngeli, Milano 2014. The questionnaire was sent to women theologians in May 2012 and, following various requests, they were given the possibility of sending in their answers by May 2013. In effect, the data which has been analysed by us regards the period from May 2012 to May 2013. The questionnaire included 59 questions, some single which were articulated in sequential questions, many required multiple replies and some were open: all together they included 535 variables. It was sub-divided into six sections: personal and structural data with indications of age, civil status, residence, family, profession, religious belief; formative path of the women theologians with University degrees and post-degree qualifications, certificates, doctorates, ambit of study; scientific and didactic activities; membership of associations and communities with an indication of the role played, associations, professional relationships, theological 'status', responsibilities, life in the community to which they belong; prospects of change, the future of the women theologian with relative indications as to their views on modernity, politics, the future; the rapport with Vatican II Council with indications of didactics and research on the Council, prospects and dreams.

3.2. *The methods used in the survey*

Our research has concerned the “universe” of Italian women theologians. Nobody knows exactly how many they number but, in our estimate<sup>29</sup>, there are 335<sup>30</sup>.

The modality on-line has been chosen in order to optimize the times of the feedback and to reduce the costs of the research to zero as funds are not available (economic resources). If the modality on-line has given an economic advantage, it has perhaps also proven to be a disadvantage in that it has discouraged some women theologians in the compilation as they are little used to the use of informatic instruments even though a helpdesk or help from some researchers has been available in the compilation.

From the very beginning, it was understood that the majority would be of a Roman Catholic confession and this has been confirmed. The 335 Christian women theologians which constitute the entire ‘universe’ have thus been differentiated:

Tab. 1- *Confession of belonging of theologians*

<b>Confession</b>	<b>a. v.</b>
Confessions of the Latin rite	293
Old Catholics	2
Orthodox	2
Baptist, Methodist and Waldesian	36
Anglican	2
<b>Total</b>	335

We have undertaken this research with a sociological methodology<sup>31</sup> believing it better to examine some replies as being relative to the questions consistent with some of the hypotheses of the research (Canta, 2014: 40-41):

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<sup>29</sup> They were identified through a list of theological associations, through teachers as Pontifical Universities, the lists of graduates and doctors in the Pontifical universities, members of theological Associations and through other “informal” channels.

<sup>30</sup> The 58% of the women theologians contacted completed the questionnaire, a reliable number in relation to the life span of the on-line questionnaire, which is quite high (Bertolazzi, Strizzolo 2013).

<sup>31</sup> A quantitative collation has been made of the data: multi-varied analysis, cross referencing, graphs etc. Cf. chapter II (Canta 2014).

- after the Council, notwithstanding the favourable conclusions reached on its educations, very few women signed up to courses or had access to the academic world;
- the educative journeys of the first women theologians are tortuous as they originate in other degree courses, above all the humanistic courses (but not only);
- the presence of women theologians as teachers in the Pontifical universities has been – and is – marginal and they are in the minority when compared to men (presbyteries);
- their scientific curriculum is at a good level and many have the requisites for them to accede to academic teaching;
- they are optimistic when it comes to the future of women theologians and feminist theology;
- they realised, differently, dreams, wishes and needs of the expressed by women protagonists in the years of the Concilio.

*Feminine/feminist theology*<sup>32</sup>

Now it is opportune to focus our attention on the future of Christian women theologians in Italy. It is already obvious that the role of women in the Church is a “hot” subject, which has been hotly debated in the decades following the Vatican II Council<sup>33</sup> and continues to be so debated even today. In particular, there have recently been some “pronouncements” by Pope Francis<sup>34</sup> on women and theology which has given rise to certain expectations for the future.

The rise of the latter in Europe and in Italy can be placed at the beginning of the 1970s when the number of requests for women’s rights exploded on European society and on the western world in general. With no continuing solution in sight, the demands for recognition of women by the Church are not new: as we have said they were already present and numerous in the Christian associations over various continents. Already by the end of

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<sup>32</sup> In the scientific debate on the subject, the women theologians have often talked of “female theology” (Militello 2008) and even more often of “feminist theology” and even more often of “feminist theology” (Børresen 2012; Daly 1968, 1973, 1979; Green 1965, 1998, 2011; King 1995, 2008a, 2008b; Noceti 2012; Perroni 2003, 2012; Radford Ruether 1975, 1976; Schüssler 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Recently many other studies have been undertaken on this theme. Among them: Faggioli (*apud* Perroni, Melloni, Noceti, 2012); Militello (2012a); Valerio (2012a, 2012b); Canta (2013a, 2014b).

<sup>34</sup>See Cf Canta (2013 a, 2013b).

the 1800s, arguments and problems with regard to the rights of women – with respect to freedom, equality and the diverse nature of women which, even if they seemed to be concentrated in the ambit of Christian denominations, was felt in a wider social context and this, in its turn, had an influence on the growing awareness of all women.

In the analysis which follows, explicit reference has been made to data relative to the questions in the fifth section of the questionnaire.<sup>35</sup> Here we wanted to put the emphasis on the choices that the future will give to women as “women” and “theologians”. We also wanted to emphasise the fundamental problems which affect the decisions of the Christian churches and, given their relevance to Italy and to this survey, to the Roman Catholic Church. All the questions, even those which seem to arise directly from explicit questions, have been asked on the basis of the future.

### *3.3 The development of feminist theology*

The question: “In your opinion, is there a future for women theologians and for female theology?” was put in an explicit and direct manner. The replies from those interviewed show a decisive and optimistic vision of the future in view of the fact that 91% of the replies were affirmative.

With respect to the ambits in which this optimism was shown, women theologians believe firmly that they can contribute positively to theological formulation and to its development (57%), to research (39%), to teaching (36%), to the growth of the laity (21%), to its education (19%), to greater collaboration with male theologians (13%) and to the governing of the Church (7%)<sup>36</sup> (Graph. 1). From the comparison of this data with other variables, it can be seen that it is above all the youngest among them who identify the positive aspects of theological formulation and its development (25%), in research (17%), together with those who have obtained a doctorate or a degree during the last decade.

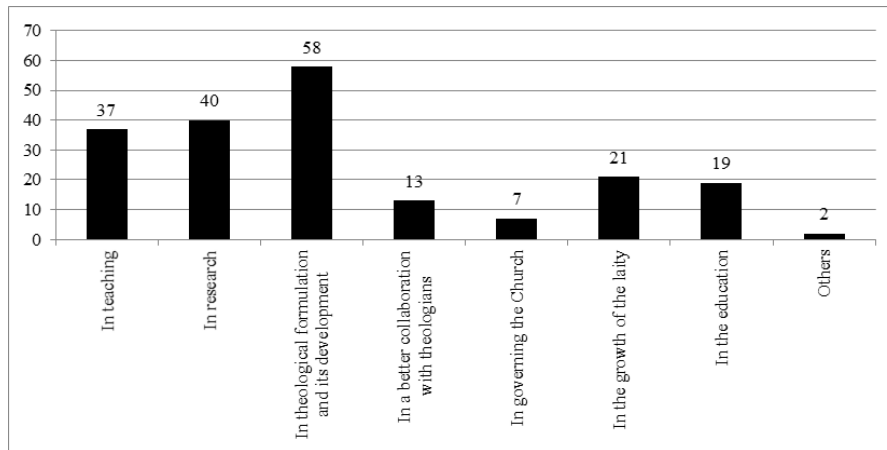
These answers show that present problems are regarded as auspicious for the future and this is a certain indication of the firmness and coherence in the convictions of women theologians.

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<sup>35</sup> To see this questionnaire go to: [www.carmelinachiaracanta.it](http://www.carmelinachiaracanta.it). The replies to the questionnaire are shown in the text of C. C. Canta (2014a, 2014b, 2014c).

<sup>36</sup> The question allows possible 3 replies which motivates the % above 100.

*Graph. 1- Ambit of future development for women theologians and for feminine theology*



When it comes to the specifics, we asked the explicit question on “What prospects do you think women theologians and female theology have?”. Women theologians replied (Tab. 1) that they can make a “contribution to theological reflections which, in view of the present position, can have an effect in changing the Church” (71%) and “have a real potential for development” (60%). Those who felt discouraged were in the minority, replying “it is not possible to imagine a future” (8%) and that “the present obstacles are insuperable” (5%). In conclusion, women theologians show a strong sense of self-confidence and have faith in the possibility of being able to contribute to the renewal of their Church. They express with great clarity the idea, which is above all a desire, to be able to and to want to contribute to a change in the Church. The future for women theologians is not utopian but is a reality which it is possible to bring about.

This confirms an obvious situation, but one that is perhaps not sufficiently recognized both within religion and outside it. In fact, many women are already active in the Church, on all levels; some are founders and others leaders of great lay associations and movements. It would perhaps be well to mention, within the Italian Catholic ambit, Armida Barelli, who in 1917 founded “Catholic Female Youth Movement of Milan” of which she was the first national President and remained in that role until 1946 when she became Vice-President of “National Catholic Action”. At the present time the Catholic Action foresees either a man or a woman in the top position of

President<sup>37</sup>. Another significant woman, on an international level, was Chiara Lubich who, in the 1960s, not only founded the movement “By the Fireside” but later led it and was recognized throughout the world during her entire lifetime. Maria Voce, who succeeded her, has been the President of the movement since 2008. There are also very many other women and nuns who are well known for their institutional roles and are active today in many sectors of society, even if few of them are well known<sup>38</sup>.

*Tab. 2 - Prospects for women theologians and for female theology*

Prospects	a.v.	% of cases
It is not possible to imagine a future	9	8.1
The present obstacles are insuperable	5	4.5
Contributions to theological reflections which, in view of the present position, can have influence on changing the Church	79	71.2
Other	4	3.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>146.8</b>

The difference in the replies from women theologians show that the debate is still underway, not only in a nominalistic way – on “feminine” and “feminist” but in reference to different threads of thought. Perhaps at this point it is worth making a brief reference to reflections on “feminist theology” and “feminine theology”<sup>39</sup>.

In the scientific debate, the question of “feminist theology” has shown itself to be complex in that it implies a relationship between “theology” and “feminism” (Letty Russell, 1987, 1995). Feminism sees itself as a “social movement” aimed at improving the condition of women in all spheres of life. In the Christian context “emancipation, born in the last century, has tried and is still trying to remove every obstacle to equal citizenship for women in the modern society” (Green, 1998: 6). Within the movement there have always

<sup>37</sup> As a matter of fact, the only National President of Catholic Action has been Paola Bignardi.

<sup>38</sup> One must also remember, among the many other women active today, Sister Eugenia Bonetti, a missionary of the Consulate who, after spending 25 years in Kenya, is today promoting the presence of women: Sister Rita Giaretta, founder of the ‘House of Ruth’ a network of nuns against prostitution; Sister Chiara Laura, Abbess of the Monastery of Santa Chiara. And, of course, one cannot forget MT of Calcutta, originally Albanian, who worked among the excluded in India. The Sisters of Madre Teresa is today diffused throughout the world.

<sup>39</sup> During the drawing-up of the questionnaire, there were many discussions between the female theologians who had been asked to help in the research as to which term should be used – ‘feminine’ and/or ‘feminist’.

been two distinct currents, that of "equality" and that of "difference". Today research is still being carried out and it has gone beyond denominational confines into a rich and lively dialogue with women of all religions and with those who do not believe. In the Catholic ambit, in the years of John Paul II's Pontificate, people spoke of a "Wojtylian feminism" (Johnson, 2002), of "new catholic feminism" (Beattie, 2006: 19). This was in opposition to "theological feminism" (Schumacher, 2004) as an aspect of the distinction between "female theology" and "feminist theology". It revealed itself as more critical with regard to conciliar teaching "as a product of a Church of men for men". (Noceti 2007: 103).

In Italy, reflection and confrontation on the theme are more recent and are still being carried on. An important step was taken in 1993 when Marinella Perroni, in the ambit of biblical theology, proposed the distinction, on a methodological level, between: a reading of scripture "regarding the feminine", which could be done either by women or by men. A further reading was proposed "from the point of view of the feminine", that is "on the part of women". This accentuated "the pretext of recognizing women in their subjectivity through the recovery of an historical memory which renders justice to the entire history of the faith and not only to the masculine needs" (Perroni, 1993: 321-322). These is also a "feminist" reading, which requires the "construction of a particular interpretative framework" (*Ibidem*, 324) through the perspective of "women's studies"<sup>40</sup>. She has subsequently been underlined "[...] feminism with its pretext of putting in discussion the male occupation of the center of the universe has brought with it a feminism with is more than a renewal but which aims to explain from a theoretical perspective of togetherness which is totally new" (Perroni, 2003: 23-24).

On the side of theology ("à la feminine"), which also takes into account the "feminist" contribution, the female theologian Cettina Militello was asked what had motivated her position:

I have been asked, can you image, what the references are for Italian female theologians and what their place is in the feminist galaxy. I would say that Italian women converge in their journey with European feminism. The distinctions in use between radical or militant feminism, the "other feminism" [...], and moderate feminism are valid also for Italy. The latter have made the expression "theology à la feminine" their own in order to avoid useless and unpleasant conflicts. Rome is in the heart of Italy and Rome, being the headquarters of the papacy and the curia, has made taking a position a more immediate necessity but not always an enthusiastic one for

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<sup>40</sup> M. Perroni has proposed that the distinction in biblical hermeneutics can be applied in defining the 'feminine', 'à la feminine' and 'feminist' theologians.

women. Italian researchers have been obliged give themselves their own statute, one which is softer in comparison to those in Europe or North America. We have no other way to be heard and not rebuffed *a priori* but, on the other hand, what really counts is the possibility to think, write and teach. (Militello, 2008: 202-203).

After some years, the term “feminism” have come to be used in a different way and with the addition of prefixes (new, neo, post, etc.) which shows the complexity of the reality it claims to signify (Connell 2002). In Italy there is a new generations of Women theologians who played a key role in reconfiguring women’s lives (Manes, Guida, Virgili, Nicolaci 2015; Nicolaci 2014; Noceti 2012; Noceti, Toschi 2011).

### *3.4 The relationship between the genders in the Catholic Church*

For all these reasons, the relationship of the genders in the Church, and in particular in the Catholic Church, has not always been harmonious and balanced. This becomes even more significant when it comes to the roles covered in the Church institutions. The structure of the Church is still pyramidal notwithstanding the concept of the people of God affirmed in the Council. So, the first distinction which comes out is that of the roles: being Presbyterian, Bishop, Cardinal, theologian, lay, consecrated or believer or anything else which highlights the ‘distance’ which separates the believers within the same Church. When, to the difference in the roles, you add those of gender, relationships become more complex. Equal relationships are those established between people who are on the same level. However, those people with more distant roles are even rarer – or inexistent – above all if the genders are different. This has offered another hypothesis for research.

We have, therefore, asked the female theologians we have interviewed to express their own valuation, from 1 (very unbalanced) to 10 (very balanced).

The analysis of the opinions and the values attributed show that the majority of the replies concentrate on the high disagreement between “female lay believers – bishops” (2), female theologians – presbyters (13); female lay believers – presbyters (11). Significantly, the opinion, which gets the most agreement regards “female lay believers – male lay believers” (24); female theologians – male theologians (13); “consecrated women – male lay believers (14).



*Tab. 3- Opinion about relationships between the Church and the genders*

Church and gender	Disagree / Agree										Weighted mean <sup>41</sup>
	1 MAX Disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10 MAX Agree	
Female lay believers – male lay believers	2	3	0	10	17	17	23	24	9	5	6.5
Female lay believers – presbyters	11	13	13	20	20	15	8	10	1	0	4.4
Female lay believers – bishops	20	13	19	15	17	12	7	5	3	0	3.9
Consecrated women – male lay believers	2	7	6	12	21	27	15	14	5	2	5.7
Consecrated women – presbyters	6	8	12	16	20	19	14	10	5	1	5.1
Consecrated women – bishops	8	9	14	15	14	19	15	9	6	2	5.1
Female theologians – male lay believers	3	5	9	10	21	20	12	21	8	2	5.8
Female theologians – presbyters	13	9	10	16	20	21	8	9	4	1	4.7
Female theologians – male theologians	4	5	6	14	12	21	14	19	13	3	6.0
Female theologians – bishops	10	14	11	17	24	8	13	5	6	3	4.7

Put another way, these data express the distance between the two categories, which, instead of collaborating, either exclude or ignore each other. Those data confirm that when the roles are “strong” and connected to “power”, the less relevance they have in female theologians and even more so in women in general. Therefore, positive relationships are attributed to those between male and female theologians and to those between consecrated women and male lay believers who appear as equals. Scarce and/or weak relationships are those between bishops and presbyters for female theologians and not. In that sense, it confirms the hypothesis of a hierarchical Church, which expresses itself in this way also in its internal relationships.

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<sup>41</sup> “Medium weight” is that ‘opinion’ (or marks or value) which are obtained by adding together all the ‘opinions’, each multiplied by the number of people involved and divided by the total number of people who have expressed an opinion.

### *3.5 The contribution of female theologians: present and future.*

With a battery of specific questions we wanted to analyse if the real commitment which the female theologians bring inside their community. We wanted to know if be their expectations in the same ambit, already shown as being very problematic, or whether the female theologians meet the most obstacles as intellectuals, believers or as people who belong to the same church.

The first question we put to them was to ask in a direct way “what is the principal contribution which women theologians can offer to the Church today?”<sup>42</sup> The priority given to teaching and research (67%), confirms the specific ambit but, all in all, is self-referential in its commitment. Also “education and catechesis” (32%) result in a certain consensus which rises to 38% if we add the “preparation for the sacrament” (6%). In third place is the fact that women theologians “do not have a specific role – they do a bit of everything” (26%). This seems to indicate, on the one hand, that they are not recognized in any specific respect as to their competence so that they “can do everything”. On the other hand, they themselves do not have the awareness to enable them to carry out important tasks. It also implies: a certain consensus in “collaborating with the community” (14%); “free and creative initiative” (12%); a generic form of “collaboration in the perspective of theology *tout court*” (10%); the *lectio divina* (4%). Only a women pastor has indicated the “running of a church”; low is “collaboration with the presbyters (or pastors – male and female)” (5%) which, given its pastoral specificity, should be one of the duties given priority by women theologians.

The replies to the question “What other contribution could women offer the Church today?” (maximum three replies) illustrated their expectations and allowed us to reason on the “desired” future. “Teaching and research”, even in this case, resulted in the most consensus (45%). “Collaboration in the perspective of theology *tout court*” (39%) shows itself to be a very strong desire. Collaboration with the presbyters is one of the prevalent desires (30%) and follows collaboration with the community (25%) and the ruling of a church (24%). Also relevant are the roles involving education and catechesis (23%), which, taken together with the other pastoral and catechistic activities – such as *lectio divina* (11%), preparation of the homily (5%) and preparation for the sacrament (3%), coagulates into a consistent group (42%). Finally comes “free and creative initiative” (19%). In all, we have been able to put into perspective a situation, which puts in first place specifically research and

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<sup>42</sup> To the question you can give a maximum of three replies.

teaching and, on an equal footing, the pastoral and catechistic aspects which are those which make up the life of every woman theologian. It is relevant that the role of “running a church” emerges as a prospect shared by 27 women theologians, not only Evangelical pastors but prevalently Catholic women theologians. This shows that there is emerging in Italy – and not only in the desires of women theologians - a different way of running the ecclesiastic community.

When it comes to prospects and desires, the convergence with other variables show that the women theologians who are in the middle band are hoping for a bigger commitment in the ambit of teaching and research (45%), in “collaboration in the perspective *tout court*” (39%), in “collaboration with the presbyters/pastors” (19%), in the “ruling of a church” (24%) and in the *lectio divina* (11%), while the youngest are mostly interested, in the future, above all in “collaboration with the community (25%) and in “Free & creative initiative” (11%).

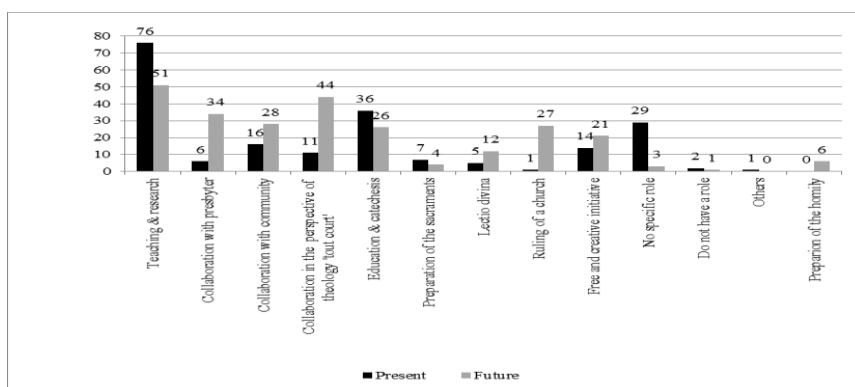
*Tab. 4- The contribution of women theologians to the Church: present and future*

Contribution	Present		Future	
	N	% of cases	N	% of cases
Research and teaching	76	67,3	51	45,1
Collaboration with the presbyters(or pastors)	6	5.3	34	30.1
Collaboration with the community	16	14.2	28	24.8
Collaboration in the perspective of theology ' <i>tout court</i> '	11	9.7	44	38.9
Education and catechesis	36	31.9	26	23.0
Preparation of the sacrament	7	6.2	4	3.5
<i>lectio divina</i>	5	4.4	12	10.6
Ruling of a church	1	0.9	27	23.9
Free & creative initiative	14	12.4	21	18.6
No specific role – do a little of everything	29	25.7	3	2.7
None	2	1.8	1	0.9
other	1	0.9	0	0.0
Preparation of the homily	0	0.0	6	5.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>180.5</b>	<b>267</b>	<b>236.3</b>
<i>(missing)</i>		68		68

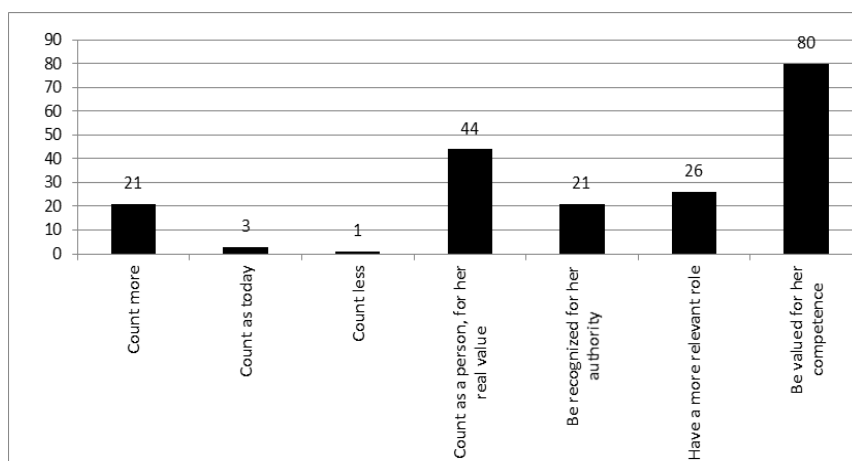
Even more significant when it comes to future projects the next question to be asked which was what role women should have in the denomination to which they belonged. The replies demonstrated a certain maturity as about two thirds 71% replied “to be valued for their competence” and 39% wanted “to count as a person, for what I am”, “have a more relevant role” (23%); be recognized for their authoritativeness (19%), should definitely count for more

19%<sup>43</sup>. This expressed clearly the wish that women should not enjoy certain privileges as women but should be valued for their competence, authoritativeness and because they are people. Taken all together, the replies give a clear signal that a certain époque based “only” on what has been claimed is finished. Now women want to be recognised for what they really are and they are making explicit and motivated demands.

Graph 2 – Contribution of the women theologians to the Church: present & future



Graph 3 – Role of women in their own denomination.



<sup>43</sup> It was possible to give 2 replies which explains why the percentage exceeded 100.

### 3.6 Women priests

The problem of the admission of women to the priesthood, which regards Catholic women theologians, has also been confronted from different points of view in previous sociological investigations into Italian religion and Sicilian religion<sup>44</sup>.

Therefore we cannot tackle this thorny subject, even if it is not the "focus" of this survey. Obviously only Catholics have answered our questionnaire, as we have explicitly required. The majority (41%) declared themselves as being perplexed and 23% replied that they were "definitely in disagreement". 23% agree and 13% are "very much in agreement", which is, in total, 36%. The replies show, contrary to what it is generally imagined, that the question of women priests is not the main problem of women theologians and probably not even of all Catholic women. However, the problematic area is in the general "perplexity", which is the predominant one, and shows that the theme will be also be a subject for discussion in the future to the extent in which a majority opinion matures.

In the convergence of these indicators, with variables in the age ranges, it has been shown that the majority of those "perplexed" 26% are to be found in the 46 – 65 age range while rather more than half of those who are "in agreement" 23% is made of those who are younger 12%. This is consistent with research carried out during the last decade 51%. These opinions are diffuse in a homogeneous manner in all the geographic areas of the country.

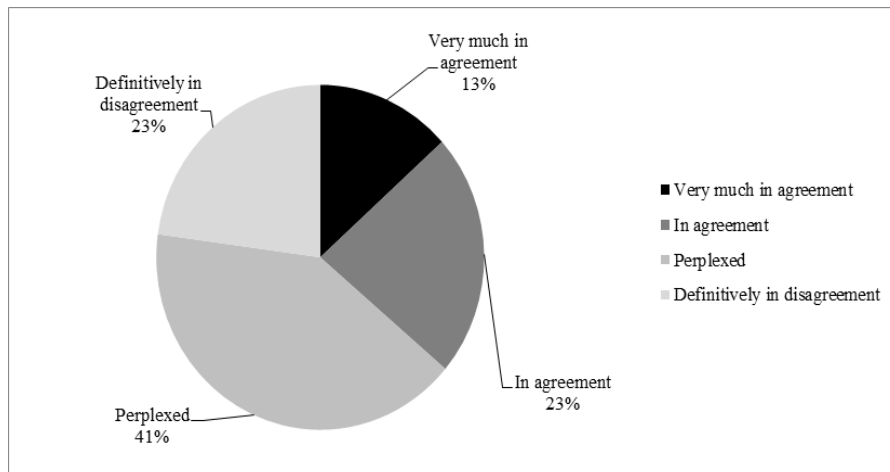
Comparing these data with others shown in a previous survey Cesareo *et al.*, 1995; Canta, 1995)<sup>45</sup>. It has been shown that the attitude of those who are perplexed concerning women priests has grown notably (12 points) and those who are "decided" has diminished, whether it be in favourable or unfavourable terms.

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<sup>44</sup> See Cesareo *et al.* (1995); Canta (1995).

<sup>45</sup> It has only been possible to make this comparison between the two research programmes, carried out almost 20 years ago, because both have the same indicators. In 2014 the data were published in an opinion poll carried out by Bendixen & Amandi which had been commissioned by *Univision News*, an important TV company in Spain and America, the results of which were published in the *Washington Post*, *El Pais* and *La Repubblica*. To the question "do you think that women should be allowed to become priests?" it produced these results: in Italy 59% were in agreement, 35% did not agree and 4% did not reply. However, the results of the opinion poll (which was not a survey) had diverse 'indicators' which were not comparable (Ansaldo 2014).

Graph 4 – Opinions on women priests.

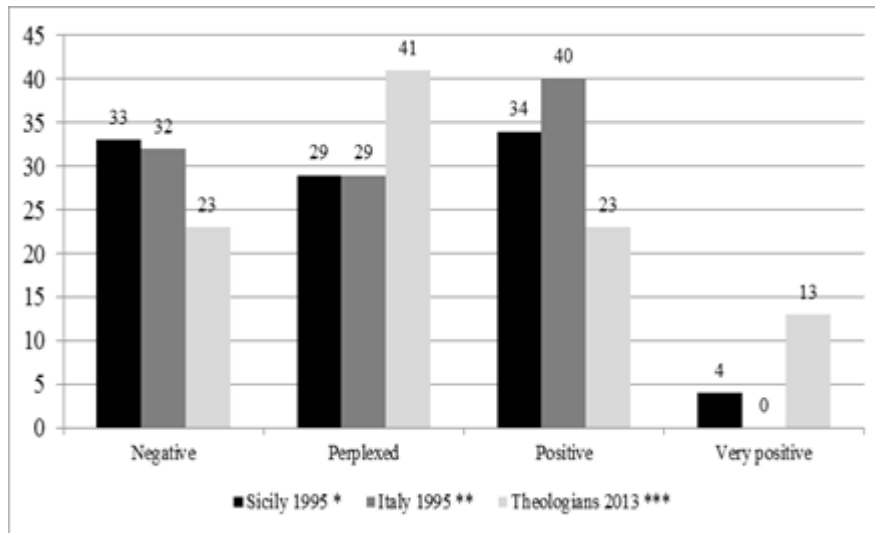


The problematic area is definitely very wide among women theologians. This shows how an awareness on what the crucial problems for women in the Church are have matured and that the problems are not restricted to any single aspect. The “women theologians” are also deeply aware of the question and recognise the situation objectively – they have responded with great realism, considering everything into account<sup>46</sup>. The desires previously expressed by women for “a more significant recognition of their role” does not identify itself “*tout court*” with an explicit request for women priests. Furthermore, «on this thematic material, which is the subject of debate throughout the Catholic world, there is no difference in attitude based on gender. The replies of the women confirm those of the men which show a substantial equivalence of position» (Canta, 1995: 228).

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<sup>46</sup> We should note that Pope Francis has intervened on the question of women priests and in his speech on his return from Rio de Janeiro and more explicitly in his exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (Francesco 2013: 104), he closed the question in this way: “The priesthood reserved to men, [...], is a question not open to discussion”.

Graph 5 – Comparative opinions on women priest held by women in the Church<sup>47</sup>.



### 3.7 Imagining the future for women theologians.

How do we imagine the future, as women theologians? A certain number of those interviewed (36%) declared themselves as being “I’m satisfied with what I am & I’ll continue on that path”. Another group of approximately the same number hoped “to be valued more highly as theologians” (34%). There were those who hoped that “my feminist reflections can be useful in the transformation of the Church” (18%); those who hope to have a more definitive role “if things change inside the ecclesiastical structure” (19%) and those who imagine having a more organic role “if things change inside theology” (17%). There was, however, a group, which, while not consistent was “visible”, and responded in a way, which showed all its pessimism and discouragement. In fact, 10% said “I no longer think about change” and even expressed their intention to change course: “notwithstanding all the years spent in studying theology, I think I’ll look for a less difficult road to follow” (6%). Taken all together, an attitude emerges which expresses positivity and faith in their future and give us hope for the future of women in the churches.

The group, which expressed pessimism was constituted of those over 66 who live in the Centre of Italy and who obtained a doctorate during the last

<sup>47</sup> See Cesareo *et al.* (1995); Canta (1995).

decade, 2000 - 2011, and a degree in the 1980s and 1990s. They were the “pioneers”, the first to follow a course in theology, meeting many great difficulties and much resistance, and who now no longer have enough energy to think that there can be a change in the future.

*Tab.5 - How women theologians imagine the future.*

<b>Formality</b>	<b>a.v.</b>	<b>% of cases</b>
No longer think about a change	11	9.9
Notwithstanding the years spent studying theology, I think I'll follow a less difficult path.	7	6.3
If things change inside theologian, I hope to have a more structured role.	19	17.1
If things change inside inside the ecclesiastical structure, I hope to have a more definite role.	21	18.9
I'm satisfied with what I am & I'll continue on that path.	40	36.0
I hope to be more valued as a woman theologian	38	34.2
My feminist reflections can be useful for the transformation of the Church	20	18.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>140.5</b>

#### **4. To conclude: the “dream” of women theologians**

The last question in the questionnaire, asked explicitly: “As a woman theologian, what is your dream”? There were numerous replies (92%), also considering the fact that the last question was open. A “dream” expressed with great force regarding the valuation and recognition of the role and competence of the woman, conjugated variably as cultural recognition – not only for feminine specificity in relationships but in its valuation carried forward to the point where the term “gender” can disappear.

Another “dream” shared by many of those interviewed regarded, in a broad sense, the ambit of academic teaching and research. In this context all the fundamental problems connected to the provisional nature of teaching theology emerged – the fragmentation of research, the economic precariousness of those who teach in theological faculties - not to mention the need for a climate of serenity in the context of scientific work. It is the problem, only Italian, of the absence of theological courses in State universities.

However, the future has just started and it will not be possible turn back. That is what was expressed by those interviewed who find themselves in an irreversible process, which has started in Europe (Mazzolini, Perroni, 2008) and in the whole world.



From a complete analysis of the research data it emerges that feminist thought present in society has been accepted by women in all their respective churches. In fact, they have often anticipated it and feminist theology is an object of privilege in theological thought. As regards the rapport between the genders in the Church, light and shade alternative in the vision of the hierarchical and dichotomous Church: and the knot being undone today will have repercussions in the future. In this ambit, the proposal of an innovated scenario will be decisive and will originate from the responsibility and commitment of women.

The Council was the most important event in the nineteen hundreds in the history of the Catholic Church above all for our women theologians in that, independently from how they had lived and the knowledge they had acquired, only after the Council did the Catholic Church officially open the doors of the pontifical university to the women who wanted to study theology.

If today, at a distance of fifty years, we are able to talk of women theologians in the fullest sense, the credit goes certainly to the Council which, in fact, allowed women to have the possibility of theological education and legitimized them as women theologians. However, as we have already seen, the Council did not fully recognise the women's movement in society, whose objective had been the study of theology whereby women acquired knowledge of themselves and of their own role. Thus was confirmed the hypothesis that the women theologians have realized, even if in different measures and ways, the desires and needs expressed by the women during the years of the Council. They are today the protagonists of a cultural change – both social and theological – and such a role is theirs - recognised also by intellectuals and observers outside the Church. Today in the church there are many women of value who expect to be valued as such by the institutional bodies. At the end of the research many replies had been given but many questions remain open: in particular the birth of a new Catholic female who must face up to the distinction between theology à la feminine and feminist theology – this last being more critical vis à vis the masculine institutions. Notwithstanding the fact that problems remain, we express ourselves with optimism in as regards the future. What is our dream as theologians? That there should be a direct link between the Italian women theologians with the observers of the Council. And this is the dream which involves the very future of the Church – we imagine a Church which, internally, lives the Gospel, realizes the collegiality and, externally, has a difference place in history and a more serene rapport with modernity and with the problems of the world, as expected by the Vatican II Council. An explicit dream of women theologians is that women should participate visibly in the decision making of the Church on various

levels: this is the most important thing for the future. Without any presumption, it seems to us that we can say that probably the Church needs to rediscover its role through the woman.

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