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**RETURNING WOMEN TO THEIR PLACE?  
RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM, GENDER BIAS AND VIOLENCE  
AGAINST WOMEN**

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**Abstract:** Religious fundamentalism drawing from biblical texts and/or natural law has had a considerable impact on Eastern European politics, notably on issues concerning women. This paper addresses the misuse of biblical texts that perpetuate gender stereotypes and negative views on women, as well as religiously tinted discourse inspired by essentialist understandings of human nature, endorsing women's subordination and legitimising domestic violence. Conservative Eastern European ecclesiastic leaders and civic groups use this discourse to defend traditional gender roles and the "traditional family", even at the cost of accepting violence against women, out of fear of the so-called "gender-ideology". This fear determined ecclesiastic circles and civic groups, like the Polish Bishops' Conference and the Romanian Coalition for Family, respectively, to oppose the ratification of the Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and gender violence.

**Key words:** fundamentalism, pornoprophetics, household codes, "gender-ideology", Istanbul-Convention, Eastern Europe, violence against women.

In a challenging 2017-article, Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz (Valley Beit Midrash, Phoenix) pointed to the potential for intolerance and violence inherent to all religious traditions and their sacred writings, questioning apologetic perspectives which claim that fundamentalism does not belong to the true essence of religions. Instead of dismissing such potential, believers have the crucial moral responsibility to refine these traditions and approach these texts “with an intellectually critical lens and not a morally submissive one”. Whenever religious texts (are used to) sustain fundamentalism and unethical behaviour, extremism, hatred towards refugees, the oppression of women and the neglect of the poor, they should be actively addressed and corrected. Such texts, laws, and teachings require an explicit revision. Ultimately, “a critical and reflective hermeneutic does not cancel our piety but enhances it” (Yanklowitz, 2017).

This perspective counters the major assumptions and concerns of religious fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism is understood here as a hostile reaction to modernity, feared to threaten religious beliefs and moral values, inspired by a literalist interpretation of sacred texts, defending decontextualized religious tenets and laws vested with absolute validity, aiming at a selective retrieval of an idealized past, of purportedly timeless traditions (Barr, 1981; D’Arcy May, 2001, 114; Strozier, 2010; Beinert, 1991; Vorster, 2008; S. Frunză, 2015). Fear of the disintegration of (individual and communal) identity leads to hostility against those perceived as enemies of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, appearing to support the forces of evil: other denominations, other religions or political powers. Fear explains the reactive, militant and combative nature of fundamentalism, its potential for and approval of violence (Jones, 1991; Marty, Appleby, 1991; Vorster, 2008; S. Frunză, 2015).

This paper is concerned with one particular aspect of religious fundamentalism, the use of uncritical or patently fundamentalist readings of biblical texts corroborated with arguments from ‘natural law’ to defend traditional gender roles, even at the cost of minimising serious problems, like violence against women. Over the last decade traditionalist circles of Eastern European Churches and affiliated civic groups have fought an embittered campaign against women’s social emancipation, demonising feminism and a blurry “gender-ideology”. The crusade meant to defend the “traditional family” against an alleged global gender-conspiracy involves returning women to traditional roles established by the Bible and natural law. The anti-‘gender’ acrimony originating in Gabriele Kuby’s one-sided but all the more influential writings has penetrated Catholic ecclesial discourse both in Rome and in Eastern Europe (Anić, 2015; Anić, Brnčić, 2015; Balogh, 2014; Perintfalvi, 2015). The critique of a misunderstood definition of gender-perspectives has also found its way into Romania through the propaganda carried out by the Coalition for Family, leading to extremely conservative positions on women’s roles. The

phenomenon is alarming due to the impact of ultra-conservative perspectives on politics. The campaign against the ratification of the *Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women* is a telling example.

Women's emancipation was traditionally countered with decontextualized biblical texts. Yet, recently conservative discourse refers in addition to secular notions of natural law and essentialist-Aristotelian definitions of human nature (Anić, 2017). This paper addresses the ways biblical texts and secular ideologies incorporating decontextualized biblical echoes are used to curb women's rights, even at the cost of minimising issues like domestic violence. The first part tackles uncritical readings of biblical passages that perpetuate gender stereotypes and negative views on women, endorsing subordination and even domestic violence. Debates within the guild of biblical scholars may seem to have little social relevance, but such texts continue to challenge readers who accept their authority in social matters. The second part of the essay turns to the use of religiously tinted anti-gender discourse and its political implications in Eastern Europe, focusing on the way this discourse defends traditional gender roles and the so-called traditional family, even at the price of tacitly admitting violence against women as the lesser evil.

## **1. Sustaining women's submission and gender violence with biblical texts**

The use of religion (and Scriptures) in public discourse is a particular matter of concern (Moller Okin, 1998; Schüssler Fiorenza, 2009; Anić, Brnčić. 2015; Perintfalvi, 2015). Feminist and intersectional studies have advocated therefore critical ways of reading and teaching biblical texts. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza advised that biblical education be turned "into a radical democratic space of critical inquiry, sociopolitical ethical exploration, and creative religious re-visioning", to promote an emancipatory ethos, capable of confronting the "dehumanizing power of oppression" (2009, 6, 10, 13). Feminist exegesis counters decontextualized, oppressive interpretations of the Bible and promotes readings endorsing the full liberation of women (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1983; 2009). Additionally, intersectionality studies have shown that oppression is not unifactorial, but commonly involves interlocking markers like gender, race/ethnicity, social class or status, combined with other conditions (sexual orientation, disabilities, health issues, migration background) (Lutz *et al.* 2011). Intersectional approaches show how Scriptures have mediated discourses of subordination, shaping socio-political structures of domination (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2009, 112, 118). These perspectives point to the social problems that may arise from some biblical texts.

### **1.1. Representing stereotypes about women and endorsing abuse**

In some metaphorical texts of the Bible, negative characters and attitudes are embodied by deeply immoral female figures who eventually suffer harsh punishment. Known passages from prophetic literature (Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) describe the history of Israel and its relationship with YHWH with the metaphor of a troubled marriage. The story is one of love, unfaithfulness, punishment and reconciliation. The unfaithfulness of the wife (Israel) to her divine husband and her consequent chastisement is an allegory for Israel's political alliances and religious contacts with her neighbours and the fall of Israel and Judah. Feminist exegetes have proposed a critical examination of these passages, paying attention to the stereotyped representations of gender and the depiction of the female character (Israel) as immoral, unfaithful, promiscuous and shameless. The 'affairs' of the adulterous wife and her subsequent punishment are described with images charged with eroticism and violence: she is stripped naked, exposed to public (male) gaze and delivered to the aggression of her former lovers. Humiliation goes along with the objectification of female sexuality. Some scholars speak therefore of prophetic pornography: the eroticising description of the punishment is apt to induce sexual arousal, and sexual abuse is used to reinforce male superiority (Setel 1985; van Dijk-Hemmes, 1995; Brenner 1996, 2017). More significantly, perhaps, YHWH is depicted as a jealous and abusive husband, who brutally chastises his unfaithful wife. The rhetoric of these passages not only promotes a stereotyped-negative image of women, as promiscuous and impudent, but also endorses the violent reaction of the husband.

The impact of these texts on the life of women is a matter of debate. Doubtlessly, these passages use metaphoric language, and do not portray real cases of sexual violence. Yet, metaphors are hardly inoffensive. The narratives reflect ancient laws and mentalities about husbands' right to inflict punishment on adulterous wives. More importantly, they express stereotypes about women and female sexuality and even present marital abuse as appropriate and legitimate.

The Book of Revelation personifies hated empires and dissenting Christian groups through female characters. The most conspicuous is the great harlot, Babylon, a codename for Rome. Rome is the embodiment of evil, the representative and instrument of Satan (Rev 13). This demonization of Rome goes along with her feminization. Babylon-Rome is a lavish, ostentatious harlot; her economic power and commercial relationships are described in sexual terms. Revelation 17–18 advances thus similar gender-stereotypes about powerful women as promiscuous, and imagines female sexuality as dangerous and destructive. The drastic images describing the punishment of Rome draw much from the prophetic marital metaphor and are equally problematic (Pippin, 2005; Vander Stichele, 2009; Hladiuc, 2016). Immoral female character also embody

dissenting groups within the community. Such is the prophetess Jezebel (evoking hated Queen Jezebel of 1–2 Kings and her brutal punishment as an act of divine retaliation). Prophetess Jezebel will also suffer severe punishment from the Lord, just as her followers (Rev 2,20-23).

What holds together these texts is the underlying perception that women are by nature prone to sexual immorality and should be checked by male authority, even when this involves inflicting humiliation and violent chastisement. The passages are all the more dangerous, as in all cases punishment receives divine legitimation.

### **1.2. The household codes and their ideological use**

The New Testament household codes (Colossians 3–4; Ephesians 5–6, 1 Peter 2–3) regulate the behaviour of the members of the Christian household. Husband and wife, father and children, master and slaves have reciprocal obligations. The socially inferior (women, children and slaves) are demanded to submit to the corresponding (male) authority. Submission may be endorsed with theological arguments. Thus, Ephesians exhorts the spouses to take as model the relationship between Christ and the Church, where the loving but superior husband stands for Christ. 1 Peter advocates enduring unjust suffering following the example of Christ.

Household codes were inspired by Hellenistic moral philosophies and by the ancient literature on household management (Thraede, 1980; Malherbe, 1992; Crouch, 1972; Balch, 1981, 1988; Gielen, 1990). They reflect thus mentalities common in ancient Greco-Roman societies regarding the hierarchic order of the household and the submission of women and slaves.

Remarkably, most biblical scholars attempt to justify the adoption of secular social norms by these texts, postulating external or internal circumstances. According to a dominant view accommodation to contemporary social conventions has had an apologetic function. Thus, strengthening women's submission and traditional roles would have responded to external criticism and defended the Christian community from charges of social disruption targeting foreign and new religions (Balch, 1981, Crouch, 1972, Donelson, 1996; MacDonald, 1998; Standhartinger 2000; Sumney, 2008). Household codes re-established respectable behaviour, returning women to their traditional roles and slaves to their place.

Others have focused on hypothesised internal conditions that would have imposed conservative norms: the emergence of enthusiastic, early Gnostic tendencies or the misunderstanding of the liberating sayings of Jesus. These would have fuelled emancipatory drives among women and egalitarian movements among slaves (Crouch, 1972; Donelson, 1996; Standhartinger, 2000). A few authors at least treat with sympathy these emancipatory tendencies and the more egalitarian practice of early communities (Gielen 1990; Schüssler Fiorenza 1983).

Strikingly, even scholars aware of the difficulties of these texts, of the unbalance and injustice of relationships based on subordination eventually attempt to rescue them as relevant to ancient or even contemporary readers (Donelson, 1996; Girard, 2000; Bauman-Martin, 2004; Mouton, 2014). Women's submissiveness would have fitted the ideal of non-violence, forgiveness of enemies, gentleness amidst conflicts and persecutions. These texts would offer freedom and hope to contemporary believers who follow Christ in suffering mistreatment (Donelson 1996). Elna Mouton, writing from a South-African perspective, notes the patriarchal social roots of the household codes and their detrimental effect on family, society and the church; she knows that these texts are used to sanction domestic violence and elicit low self-esteem in women (2014). Yet, she discovers in them a transformative potential and a countercultural perspective.

What matters here is the contemporary relevance of such problematic texts. No doubt, it would be anachronistic to expect from 1<sup>st</sup> century texts modern views on gender equality. This is not the issue here. But defending oppressive texts, finding theological arguments in their favour or explaining away their negative consequences for the life of contemporary women is equally short-sighted. Legitimising submission and accepting abuse referring to Jesus who accepted unjust suffering is particularly problematic. It is therefore difficult to follow scholars who not only explain, but also accept the contemporary validity of this perspective (Yoder, 1994). The household codes are typical examples of patriarchal discourse expressing "ideologies of masculinity", meant to reinforce male control over women (MacDonald 2011). They can hardly be relevant in a radically changed social context, where marriage is based on partner relationships (Gielen, 1990).

### **1.3. Why are such biblical texts problematic?**

The texts addressed above have elicited criticism from feminist exegetes who question the normativity of the patriarchal perspective. The marriage metaphor conveys negative images of women and seems to explain violence (Brenner 1996, 2017). Household codes spiritualise the call to submission and demand the acceptance of an oppressive social order as a religious duty, reinforcing the structures of domination (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1983). Schüssler Fiorenza's concept of kyriarchy, incorporating perspectives from intersectional theory, points to the way such texts may sustain comprehensive, interlocking structures of domination, including racism, economic oppression, heterosexism and colonialism (1999, IX; 2009).

These issues do not concern only biblical scholarship. Biblical texts expressing gender stereotypes and endorsing patriarchal mentalities may have a serious impact on the lives of women, contributing to their social marginalization. Advancing a negative image of women, presenting abuse

as legitimate or idealizing suffering, they may endorse women's compliance with domestic violence (Smith, 2002; Isanga, 2010; Berman, 2015). Such perspectives may be interiorized by the victims and contribute to the perpetuation of abusive relationships (Nash, 2009).

Romanian studies dealing with violence against women rarely address the impact of religion on women's marginalisation, their accepting violence and abusive relationships (e.g. Dumitrescu 2014; Ursa, 2015). Ina Curic and Lorena Văetiși (2005) point to the correlation between biblically sanctioned patriarchal mentalities and women's compliance with gender inequality and violence. Certain biblical passages (or their distorted interpretations) lead to the interiorisation of gender-stereotypes. As women are conceived as inferior, are associated with evil and are demanded to submit, men may feel entitled to rule over women and to use violence as a form of discipline and control, if wives appear to challenge traditional norms.

Muslim scholar Zilka Spahić-Šiljak points to the convergence of conservative Catholic and Muslim religious discourse in the Balkans, sustaining women's full submission to their husband through references to sacred texts (2017). A Croatian Catholic professor of fundamental theology (Ivica Raguž) may claim that women seeking equality are disobedient and reject not only their husband but also Christ as their head. Disobedience becomes a mark of contemporary disbelief. His discourse echoes untenable readings of the creation account in Genesis 2 (man's priority in creation as fundament of his headship), combined with echoes from the household codes. Biblical perspectives on women's submission are supplemented with an Aristotelian-Thomist understanding of the man as the active and the woman as the passive-receptive principle (Raguž 2016). On the other side, an imam from Bosnia-Herzegovina, holding a doctoral degree (Zijad Ljadic) legitimises with religious arguments husbands' violence against their wife rejecting sex. Both positions draw from the creation account, taken to legitimise the subjection of women (Spahić-Šiljak 2017).

Remarkably, contemporary traditionalist discourse on gender roles does not cite (only) biblical texts but often invokes arguments from natural law perpetuating pseudo-biological contentions on male and female nature, of the type advanced by Aristotle (Anić, 2017). Such arguments seem indisputable, as they do not claim religious authority. This essentialist discourse on male and female nature and appropriate roles is used by conservative ecclesiastic circles and affiliated civic groups precisely because it coincides with patriarchal perspectives inspired by biblical texts. In what follows I discuss therefore the way religiously tinted discourse promoting an essentialist understanding of the sexes influences public discourse on Eastern Europe. I shall focus on the issue of violence against women as a test case.

## 2. Violence against women and conservative discourse in Eastern Europe

### 2.1. *Accepting violence and rejecting gender equality in religious-ideological discourse*

Recent years have seen the re-emergence of religious fundamentalism across Eastern Europe. Religious leaders and conservative scholars loudly endorse traditional gender roles and the “traditional family”, limiting women’s right to self-determination. Patriarchal discourse also impacts on women’s right to protection from violence.

Traditionalist discourse manages to shape the political agenda in several Eastern European countries. The phenomenon should be seen in its socio-political context. For a number of years it seemed that Eastern European countries were embracing the values of Western democracy, including the principles of gender equality, and were aligning national legislation to EU-norms, to ensure women’s rights and protection from violence. Yet, the process was slow and ambiguous (Fábián, 2010; Balogh, 2014). Moreover, in recent years a strong contestation of these principles has emerged, notably among conservative ecclesiastic leaders and populist political circles pleading for illiberal democracy. One of the most telling examples is the wave of contestation across Eastern European countries against the Council of Europe *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence* (2011, Istanbul). The Convention addressed the serious issue of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women (rape, sexual harassment, forced marriage, “honor” crimes and genital mutilation) as severe assaults against human rights and a major obstacle in the way of gender equality. Given the gravity of the matter, the importance of the document cannot be sufficiently emphasised.

The reactions of conservative ecclesial or affiliated circles in Eastern Europe were strikingly negative. Polish bishops reacted repeatedly (2012, 2014) against the ratification of the Convention (see below). Due to similar protests of traditionalist circles Lithuania, Bulgaria and Slovakia postponed the ratification. In March-April 2018 demonstrations were held in Croatia and Ukraine in support of the traditional family and against the ratification of the Convention. Poland eventually ratified the Convention in 2015 but subsequently signalled its intention to withdraw, eliciting a strong reaction from the European Parliament (Corazza Bildt, Revault d’Allonnes-Bonnefoy, 2016). Romania ratified the convention in 2016, but conservative circles like the Coalition for Family (to which I shall return) criticise the decision. As of 8/09/2018 the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, the Republic of Moldova, Slovakia, Ukraine have not ratified the Convention (Chart 2018). Croatia eventually ratified the Convention in



June 2018, adding however a declaration in which it distanced itself from “gender ideology” (Government, 2018; Reservations, 2018).

The reactions against the Convention are difficult to accept considering that Eastern European countries are confronted with a high rate of violence against women (WHO, 2013; United Nations, 2015). Analysing the statistical data on Eastern Europe would deserve a study on its own, given that mentalities and unsatisfactory legal provisions commonly prevent women from reporting violence, while states and authorities usually lack strategies, implementing measures or will to act against (domestic) violence, and such phenomena lead to under-reporting. Mentalities in these countries represent in fact a “culture of denial” (Fábián, 2010).

The contestation of the Istanbul-Convention is all the more perplexing as it comes from ecclesiastic authorities, scholars of religion or religiously affiliated civic groups, commonly in the name of protecting the family. A significant example is the reaction of the Polish Catholic Church.

In July 2012, while admitting that violence against women was a serious problem, the Polish Bishops’ Conference claimed that the Convention was based on untenable ideological presuppositions, as it argued that violence against women was systemic, having its source in religion, tradition and culture. The bishops also stated that the definition of gender [in fact *pleć*, ‘sex’ in Polish] in art. 3 would assume that sex [*pleć*] can be changed (Reminder). In 2014, the Bishops’ Conference declared that it opposed any form of violence against women and sustained their equality but Poland had sufficient legal means to counter violence against women and domestic violence. There was no need therefore for solutions based on the redefinition of sex (*pleć*), family or marriage. The dangers of adopting this convention were purportedly also perceived by numerous pro-family and women’s associations and by representatives of the scientific community (Komunikat, 2014, art. 8). Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki (holding a doctorate in Biblical Theology from Rome) pleaded against Poland ratifying the Convention, as it flouted the teaching of the Church on sexuality and family, due to the references to gender (Kaminski 2015). In a 2015-interview, the archbishop claimed that “gender ideology” is worse than Marxism; both ideologies share disregard for the human person, but gender-ideology attempts to destroy the family in a subtler way (Gądecki-Interview, 2015; Kaminski, 2015). Archbishop Gądecki promoted a so-called complementary understanding of gender roles, alluding to the household code in Ephesians (the relationship between man and woman as image of that between Christ and the Church).

Polish bishops’ issue with the Convention is due only in a small measure to the confusion underlying the Polish text, which translates *gender* (a socio-cultural notion) with “*pleć*”, the equivalent of (biological) sex, instead of the more appropriate “*rodzaj*” (Stefaniak, 2014, 64). More importantly the very notion of gender and the concept of gender

mainstreaming, which promotes gender equality in the political, economic and social sphere, is understood in conservative circles as an attempt to deny the biological differences between sexes, to undermine traditional female roles and to destroy the family. (The same contentions are marshalled by Croatian, Slovakian and Hungarian Catholic bishops; Anić, 2015; Anić, Brnčić, 2015; Balogh, 2014; Perintfalvi, 2015). Polish bishops read the passages which refer to “gender” out of their context. More significantly here, they minimised the severe impact of gender-based violence on the life of women and disregarded the fundamental intention of the Convention to prevent such violence by promoting the dignity and equal rights of women. Gender equality and rejecting violence against women remained thus merely declarative.

A similar opposition came from the Lithuanian Bishops’ Conference, which succeeded to deter the government from ratifying the Convention, due to the same (mis)understanding of the notion of gender that would allegedly open the path to homosexuality and other sexual abuses (Lithuania, 2018).

Several observations are in order. Firstly, the Convention does not treat religion as an intrinsic cause of violence, as claimed by the Polish bishops. It signals that violence against women or “honour” crimes *may* use arguments pertaining to religion, to cultural and traditional norms, but the perpetrator *may not* justify violence claiming that the victim has infringed such norms (art. 12.5). Signatory states are demanded to take legal measures against such practices (art. 42.1). But this is clearly a legitimate concern.

Second, art. 14.1 encourages signatory states to promote an education which addresses the equality between women and men, treats gender roles in a non-stereotypical manner, promotes mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution, protecting women from gender-based violence. Conservative critics see here an assault to the traditional family involving an essentialist distinction between male and female roles, and fear that children’s exposure to the so-called “gender-ideology” would undermine family values. Yet, the Convention does not (re)define the family or marriage and it does not demand the levelling of biological differences. It nowhere mentions that sex could or should be changed. It is indeed concerned with eliminating gender stereotypes, but this is again a salutary demand. Gender stereotypes like those promoted by fundamentalist readings of the household codes or by patriarchal (sub)cultures, which endorse the ideal of a submissive, self-effacing woman or models of domineering and aggressive maleness are clearly responsible for legitimising abuse and violence against women, and they should be countered.

## 2.2. A Romanian idiosyncrasy: The campaign of the Coalition for Family against gender equality and the Istanbul-Convention

An umbrella structure of about forty NGOs and associations linked to different religious denominations, the Coalition for Family advocated exclusive legal recognition for the “traditional family”, against a *potential* legalisation of gay marriage or civil partnership. Following an initiative which gathered about 3 million signatures, it campaigned for a referendum aiming at modifying the definition of marriage in the Romanian Constitution, in order to define marriage as the union of man and woman.

The Coalition promotes a mixture of “natural law” and traditionalist Christian religious thought, as the ideological basis for conservative political activism. The “traditional family” stands in the centre of its attention. Marriage is defined as a natural union of man and woman for the purpose of procreation (Coaliția pentru Familie, 2017).

Although the Coalition denies an immediate religious motivation, the background is obvious. The 2017-manifesto admits that it shares an understanding of marriage common to all major world religions (Coaliția pentru Familie, 2017). The same religious backdrop is attested by a 2016-Manifesto, *Romania for the Family*, condemning the atheist attack on religion and the Church (Coaliția pentru Familie, 2016, par. 9). The campaign for the “traditional family” is based on fear-mongering: legalising same-sex marriage would open the path to polygamy, incest and paedophilia.

The Coalition enjoyed the moral and financial support of the Romanian Orthodox Church (Moisil, 2018). The initiative was also supported by the ruling coalition, notably the Social Democratic Party (concerned since the 2016-elections solely with decriminalising corruption). The Coalition had concluded protocols with the main political parties which committed themselves to amend the Constitution, and it conducted a denigrating campaign against political parties and public persons who declined to support the initiative. The referendum for the “traditional family” became thus instrumental in dubious political games. This association explains in part the low participation in the referendum held on October 6-7 2018.

Irrespective of one’s understanding of the family or one’s views regarding gay marriages or civil unions, what matters here is that the Coalition is a vocal critic of gender equality, being closely associated with conservative voices in the Churches and religious associations. This gender-biased perspective is well attested by the manifesto of the Provita Bucharest Association, belonging to the Coalition for Family. The document (*Re-establishing Natural Order. An Agenda for Romania*) endorses natural law and natural order as the legal basis of society. It advances a severely distorted, offending view on gender equality, feminism, and women’s right to self-determination. Feminism and gender theory are

described as extremely destructive ideologies that compromise natural social order and the family, questioning traditional gender roles or dissociating male and female identity from the biological sex. (Otherwise, Romanian prejudice against feminism is widespread: M. Frunză, 2006.) The manifesto criticises women's emancipation, financial independence, and professional career (Provita, 2016).

It does not come thus as a surprise that the Coalition for Family has attacked the Istanbul-Convention. One of the prominent figures of the movement, lawyer Adina Portaru marshalled a number of legal arguments against the Convention, which entirely miss the point (Portaru 2018). She inaccurately claimed that the Convention would use a controversial definition of gender as a social construct *independent of the biological reality* (art. 3 does not say that much). She falsely argued that the convention promotes a discriminatory and stereotyped view of men as aggressors. The Convention addresses a specific issue, - violence against women. That these acts are committed mostly by men is an incontestable fact. Yet, men in general are not taken to be aggressors. Moreover, the Preamble also mentions violence against men. Portaru falsely claimed that the Convention would limit parents' right to educate their children: the right is not contested, but the roots of gender-based violence clearly need to be addressed. Limiting religious freedom is also inaccurate: perpetrating violence in the name of religion cannot be an expression of religious freedom.

Claiming that the Istanbul-Convention endangers the family and obstructs human rights is utterly scandalous in a country where domestic abuse has alarming proportions, where violence against women is sustained by patriarchal mentalities and gender stereotypes deeply entrenched in society, propagated by popular 'wisdom', education, advertising, statements of politicians and leading Romanian intellectuals (Ursa, 2015; Dumitrescu, 2014). Violence against women is perceived as a private and quasi-normal matter, its recognition and punishment is limited, and the criminal justice system proves to be inefficient (Stoleru, 2011). Under such circumstances the phenomenon should be a matter of concern.

### 3. Final thoughts

Responding to the propositions of Yanklowitz (2017), quoted in the introduction, this essay has attempted to critically engage with fundamentalist religious discourse drawing from biblical texts or natural law, tackling the attempts of conservative circles to return women to their alleged place. The issue of violence against women and the influence of conservative religious circles on Eastern European politics show that dealing with religious fundamentalism is imperative. Indeed, "one can be both religious and unethical" (Yanklowitz, 2017), by ignoring the suffering

of certain groups. Subjugated or battered women are one example. Moreover, one can be unethical in the name of ethics, if concern with ethical issues is not paired with critical thinking. The absurd suggestions about a so-called “gender-ideology” backed by a global conspiracy planning to destroy the family and the nation are a case in point. Fundamentalist positions often emerge from fear. But religion is hardly constructive, if advised by fear. Scholars of religion have a major responsibility in proposing critical and ethical, liberating readings of religious texts and beliefs.

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