

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN FEMINIST THEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL STUDIES IN EUROPE

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When I agreed to participate in this challenging panel at the 2008 Society of Biblical Literature meeting, I was excited that the two chairs, Dora Mbuwayesango and Susanne Scholz, one from Zimbabwe, one German, had come up with a dialogical introduction. Their paper nourishes our imagination. It makes clear that a dialogue among feminist biblical scholars across contexts and continents *is* possible—and begins right now.

Feminist Theology/Biblical Studies in Europe

A Tour d'Horizon

Let me, in a first step, give you a very rough and short survey of what I see going on in Europe for feminist theology and feminist biblical studies. My insights come mainly from my being part, even a founding member twenty-three years ago, of the European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR) with about six hundred women scholars from more than twenty-five European countries as members and with international meetings in a two-year rhythm.

In the northwestern countries of Europe, like Scandinavia, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the Netherlands, and England, there are many women scholars doing Christian feminist theology and exegesis, and some of them hold positions at universities. An asymmetrical development has occurred in Germany and the Netherlands, however: in the Netherlands, within Roman Catholic departments of theology, feminist theology has been heavily reduced during the past five years or so; in Germany, one chair of feminist theology/women studies in theology disappeared completely, the other one, which I hold, is combined with a classical exegetical chair. At the two still existing seminaries of the Protestant Church, on the contrary, two chairs of feminist theology were newly established. Renate Jost, a feminist biblical scholar in Old Testament, holds one of them.

In Eastern European countries like Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and the countries of the so-called Balticum, few women scholars exclusively do feminist theology. Institutional structures, for example within Catholic

departments of theology in Poland, seem too rigid to let women in. In southeastern European countries like Romania, Bulgaria, and the countries of former Yugoslavia and Greece, there are different local Orthodox Christian Churches, all of which emphasize women's traditional roles in churches. I know of only one feminist biblical scholar in that region, Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzilivadi, a New Testament scholar in Greece, who is actually working at a so-called academy, an educational institution of the Greek Orthodox Church.¹ In southwestern Europe, such as Italy and especially Spain, an interesting and inspiring development has taken place: a number of young women are pushing forward feminist theology, forming networks in their contexts, establishing master programs with a feminist focus, and then trying to network across the ocean to Spanish-speaking Latin American countries. In summary, we experience joys and frustrations, disappointments and hopes at the same time, and we have a significant presence of the global south!

An Unsolved Problem: Languages of Empire

A network like ESWTR helps feminist scholars exchange information and encourage one another; however, it faces specific difficulties, such as its non-professional structure, an all-volunteer board, and language barriers. Europe has nearly as many languages as countries, and we have big discussions on how to do conferences in a way that does justice to this fact: is it better, for example, to have one common language or a plurality of several accepted languages? And if a plurality is the best option, then which ones are the best to use? For northwestern Europeans like me, English is the first foreign language we learn at school, and in general, there is no problem for us to talk in English. After the fall of the iron curtain in 1989, we discovered that women from Eastern Europe—many of whom were able to attend international congresses for the first time—all knew Russian, they *had* a common language but they refused to speak it, as they hated this language of the Soviet Empire; nor did most Western Europeans speak it. In the past five years or so, the Spanish group has worked hard to get Spanish into the set of acknowledged conference languages of the ESWTR, surely an expression of their growing importance as a group within the ESWTR but also a reasonable plea given that Spanish is one of the leading languages in the world.

This makes me hint at the situation I noticed with our panel: as far as I could tell, English was not the first language of the majority of the panelists. We all accepted, for the sake of practicability, to speak English, the language of another empire, but it required a special effort for the majority of us. In addi-

¹ As for France, we tried hard in our society to find or to help women doing research in theology who are interested in women's concerns. Except one, Elisabeth Parmentier at Strasbourg, there seems to be none.

tion and in a very general way, one might say that the transfer of our thoughts and insights into a foreign language is already a source of possible misunderstandings, but certainly also an opportunity for mutual learning in intercultural hermeneutics.

As far as I can see, no feminist biblical scholars in Europe would work with purely historical critical methods. In German-speaking countries, for example, feminist biblical scholars combine literary and historical methods; and from Mercedes Navarro Puerto in Spain there comes a fresh impulse for psychoanalytical perspectives. Indeed, that might be an approach feminist biblical research could intensify. But this leads me to my second step.

Important Issues for Contemporary Feminist Biblical Studies

Interreligious Encounters

Islam is growing in importance not only in Europe but also worldwide. Christians share with Muslims the tradition of holy scriptures, and Christian and Muslim women have in common the experience of having men use holy scriptures to limit them to their traditional places.² An exchange between Christian and Muslim women about holy scriptures could be fruitful for both sides. From within my own context, I am aware of many difficulties and asymmetries. First, very few Muslim women scholars until recently received the type of education needed to enter into academic reflections on their own traditions, as our Muslim communities are mainly migrant workers or refugees with male-dominated families and community structures. Second, Muslim women in Western contexts are in a very difficult inbetween position: on the one side, they encounter the Western style of women's rights and emancipation, and on the other hand, they might share, with the men of their culture, a suspicion of Western so-called freedoms, which appear to destroy their community values. Muslim women, then, need to develop their own way of widening women's spaces in their community. They have to develop their own methods of rereading the Qur'an, starting with approaches of their own tradition, for example, philological explanations by which they can, if they consider it useful, very carefully introduce historical considerations of language development. When I discuss the Bible and Qur'an with Muslim women, I have noticed that there is a common ground about an antipatriarchal reading principle for our holy scriptures: God would not allow women to be oppressed. In light of this principle, we can begin rereading "ugly" traditions in our holy books.

Of course, I know that not only Islam but also Judaism is based on holy scriptures—indeed, Christians and Jews share part of their holy writings. In the United States, much more so than in Europe, Jewish and Christian biblical

² For Jewish women the problem is different; rather, it is connected with the halachah.

scholars and even feminists work together on common methodological grounds. But Christian-Jewish encounters are different from Christian-Muslim encounters on many points and on many levels, and we should know and respect that. This is why I take a second step here to speak about Judaism. From my context, I want to highlight that Europe is the continent where the Holocaust, the Shoah, occurred, and Germany, my country, is the country that organized it. Therefore, I feel that Germans must keep alive the memory of this crime against humanity and it is from Germany that special efforts to develop a biblical scholarship with deep respect to Judaism should come. In the 1980s and 1990s, German women had challenging discussions on anti-Semitism in our own Western feminist theology, which was still too much rooted in traditional anti-Semitic theological and cultural assumptions. Today, I would identify a new structural problem: on the one hand, we need to decolonize biblical studies, but also for the Bible itself, we need to point out where the Bible fosters colonization. On the other hand, there could be a seduction to project the colonizing parts of the Bible onto the Jews and to claim decolonizing as the Christian way. This is especially tempting when we look at the Near East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Let me say it very concretely: when we link the politics of the state of Israel to the imperial lines in the Hebrew Bible and blame Israel for the misuse of her holy scriptures, we oversimplify a complex political situation, overlook many critical voices within the Jewish communities, and overestimate the influence of holy scriptures in a modern democratic state like Israel. In brief, we are then in danger of producing a postcolonial form of anti-Semitism.

Europe also has large Buddhist and Hindu communities, and communities of Chinese are growing all over the continent. This increasing diversity means that new intercontextual encounters are developing. I cannot comment on this here, but I am sure that the interaction with their holy scriptures and their ways of reading those texts—encounters with women of all of these cultures and religions—will be an exciting adventure that will further open our eyes.

Methods and Hermeneutics of Biblical Studies

Dora and Susanne point to the split between academic and community-oriented readings of the Bible. We should teach our students how to read the Bible with people in their communities, how to bring in their points of view and their questions. My research assistant Stephanie Feder, who is doing African biblical hermeneutics, has brought to my attention the work of Gerald West from South Africa and his way of listening to the ordinary reader's experience. Maybe this could be a starting point for other contexts, too. At the same time, I would like to keep in mind that the Bible is a book that comes from a specific context—a context that is most definitely not the context of contemporary readers. We need historical perspectives and methods to do justice to these texts, which are like guests in our world; we need historical perspectives to be able to understand fully the stories and messages of these texts.

If I understand Susanne, her critique is not so much against the historical dimension, in general, than against a reading of the Bible that focuses on the individual, a liberal protestant historical critical model of exegesis without much sense for social structures and challenges. I agree with her on this critique and we need the help of those who analyze social structures. I would like to add that we also need the help of friends who do systematic theology. We need to know what is going on in theology, as our colleagues grapple in *their* ways with modernity, postmodernity, decolonization, and reconstruction. We can learn with them.

We have to take into account that the F-word is an ugly label for many men and women. Of course, we can try to explain that it is not, and the English language, as I learned from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, is a brilliant tool to open eyes and conscience: *women* includes men, *females* includes males, and *s/he* includes he. What I try to do in my lectures and seminars is to show how gender is relevant to everybody—and that by using a gendered lens you discover and can then better understand asymmetries, hierarchies, and power structures. I am firmly convinced and I agree with Dora that we have to include men in our efforts and to include both masculinity studies and also GLBT perspectives into feminist studies.

In conclusion, we should soberly accept our own limitations. We need time for friendship, family interaction, and rest. Maybe we need times and spaces just to enjoy reading our Bible personally and individually so that we can continue working and struggling together.