

## Feminist theology and overcoming violence

*According to Sabine Plonz, the contribution of feminist theology to theology, ethics, and the church should be seen primarily in terms of what it has done and continues to do to overcome violence against women. Feminist theology understands women's history as salvation history and as having the same dignity and relevance as the salvation history of men. Receiving, not sending, is the primary mission experience in today's world.*

"Feministische Theologie und Überwindung von Gewalt," *Ökumenische Rundschau* 2 (2006):171–82.

In San José, Costa Rica, in August 2003, Nidia Fonseca, a pastoral theologian at the *Universidad Bíblica Latinoamericana*, addressed a group of visiting German women on the distinction between a life in poverty and a life in extreme poverty. She invited the group to visit her community, where she serves as an unpaid pastor. On Sunday a handful of women gathered in an unpretentious house of the Wesleyan Church, where there was a tiny faith community. The community was composed primarily of women who live in extreme poverty, raise their children by themselves, are unemployed, and are subject to violence.

While washing dishes before the worship service, Nidia was describing the community's daily life, greeting the day with frank and joyful anticipation, and talking about the importance of the fellowship and level of conversation the community had achieved. These achievements—even as her life—were most remarkable and were constantly endangered by influences beyond her control. Nidia talked about the hurdles she had to surmount on her way to establishing trust and becoming pastor of such a community. At first the women

from the slums were withdrawn. But step by step they discovered that Nidia's biography was "tragic." She was self-educated and divorced, and her personal experiences were reminiscent of their own woundedness. However, they wanted to cover up their anguish with aggressiveness. Only when they began to admit their hurt and accept it as part of their own lives could they accept one another. Only then could God's Word enter into their conversations, and only then could their experiences of violence be accepted as something which the Christian faith opposed.

### Violence and feminist theology

Feminist theology is concerned with women's life experiences, which in many respects are marked by discrimination, insults to their dignity, and violence. Even though these experiences vary from country to country and according to women's social strata, it is obvious that violence against women is the motive for seeking a different theology, a different pastoral practice, and a different church. The contribution of feminist theology to the themes of theology, ethics, and the church should be seen primarily in terms of what that the-

ology has done to overcome violence against women. In so doing it has created a theological-historical and ecumenical novum in recent church history.

Violence against women, a global, epidemic reality, has both structural and ideological bases. Feminist theologians have named this structural violence in connection with the patriarchal violence that occurs in many professions and workplaces. At all levels of the evangelical regional churches there is the responsibility to overcome violence.

The “Ecumenical Decade: Church in Solidarity with Women (1988–1998),” has a strong concern for violence against women, and especially for establishing a legitimate theological grounding for resisting violence. Violence is virulent. It reaches even into parsonages and rectories and is exercised as part of a “daily Christian ethic.” An ordained pastor who studied at the Pacific Theological College in Fiji explained why he had severely admonished his wife: “We had guests for dinner, and she talked too much, even disagreeing with me in front of our guests. It was my Christian duty to teach her to behave as a proper wife and not embarrass me.”

Feminist theology is certainly one of the best sources for drawing forth living water for a world free of violence. To have value, such theology must be rooted in praxis, have a critical interpretive dimension, be anchored in the women’s movement socially and culturally, and have societally effective political power. Furthermore, its significance is not limited only to the female half of humanity.

### **Systematic theology**

Feminist discussions about the doc-

trine of the trinity are reserved insofar as that doctrine is understood metaphysically. The God image that the trinitarian doctrine transmits—and it is not only feminist criticism that says this—emphasizes the autonomy and thus the abstractness of God. It underscores God’s lordship and thus, very frequently, a covenant of God with those who rule.

Newer, ecumenically oriented statements about a “social trinitarian doctrine” ask why there is a reluctance to speak about the ability to suffer, and to ground liberating qualities “in God himself.” Others ask why a trinitarian theology “from above” must be laid out—which then has ethical consequences “in human life below.” Why is it not possible to develop a “theology from below,” which reflects on experiences of violence and which attempts to repudiate that violence?

Trinitarian God-talk is not a goal in itself but should help make comprehensible the relationships between the crucified and resurrected Christ with the God of the covenant people, and should do so in a way that is helpful for Christianity’s life. In the trinitarian doctrine, God’s autonomy is bound up with the suffering and relationally oriented (God-) human Jesus. From the feminine perspective, a trinitarian doctrine of God and relationally oriented (feminist) theology also need to be acceptable to women because unmasking violence and overcoming violence are closely allied.

Another strand of the feminist controversy with the image of God is more strongly related to the Bible and is concerned with God “below.” Gender sensitive reading of the Bible makes it clear that the biblical attributes of God are drawn from actions and experiences that

belong to males as well as to females—especially those that are drawn from the historical context of that time. Many times the OT speaks of God’s justice and compassion in the same breath. Righteousness and practicing love or goodness are inseparably bound together in this God. Appreciating the value of these different qualities and spheres of activity is an important step because women can now discover their own life experience in God’s being and action. Consequently, the image of God no longer mirrors an exclusively “male world.” This process, however, can be only an interim goal and should not be understood as a new basis for the well-known gender ontology where, finally, justice and mercy are diametrically opposed and unilaterally ascribed to one gender or the other. Rather, a biblically oriented ethos of justice needs to integrate a stronger dimension of mercy.

### **Christology**

The feminist concern with christology can be characterized as a dialectical movement: on one hand it protests against christology as a means of violence and, on the other, raises up christology as protest against violence.

In the christological tradition, one recalls the critique of atonement theology where the sacrifice of Christ is abstracted from the historical process and theologically absolutized. This view of christology concretizes the violence of the crucifixion instead of laying open the death on the cross as a critique of violence.

Feminist christology as a theological overcoming of violence asks about the reality of the incarnation in the present, and thus urges the inculturation of Christianity, which is to be understood

as an ongoing process (globally and regionally differentiated, concrete). According to Moeawa Callaghan:

I have a keen interest in christologies from Maori women’s perspectives and within these christologies identifying key understandings and images of Christ that foster life-affirming spiritualities for Maori in our multi-faith, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural contexts today. (*Weaving* 5)

Feminist theology also seeks to find metaphors which take into consideration women’s experiences in such a way that one can speak of “Christ today.” Symbolic images of women from the Bible, history, and popular culture need to be employed and given new currency.

Christology is also anthropology. It is the doctrine of marvelously concrete subjects composed of body and soul, who are created male and female and are seen and affirmed in light of the resurrection. The establishment and empowerment of the subject is a central concern of Christian praxis. For feminist theology, as for liberation theology, the certainty of the resurrection experience is given new importance and expression. The resurrection is understood as

—The empowerment of women and men who conquer death in *this* life. What is needed is a real resurrection faith of present experiences, which is interpreted as Christ/o/phany.

—An expression of God’s solidarity with those who are suffering and who struggle, or as the presence of the Spirit’s power (Heb.: *ruach* = [the breath, spirit, wind of God] in the concrete lives of women (men and children).

—Protest against experiences of suffering that frequently are religiously legitimated or that demean women.

The ability to resist and conquer violent activities becomes an experience of the Spirit, which also animated Jesus. Several historical and contemporary movements serve as signs of protest and resist death in preference to life without having to adopt or identify with the transcendent and unapproachably enduring “Christ.” Examples of such feminine praxis can be found in the women against atomic weapons in Greenham Common, the women in black in Israel/Palestine or in Bosnia, or the Liberian women involved in the peace process of 1995. What unites these women is the power of the Spirit (*ruach*), which allows Jesus to be acknowledged anew as part of a history of groups and movements.

### **Ethics**

Just as feminist christology seeks the restoration and affirmation of life, so also it seeks to establish theological foundations for ethics which have been formulated for a long time in the Christian-European tradition.

—Not only justification, but also justice, not only reconciliation but also resistance to injustice are fundamental ethical ideas.

—The rejection of violence, its denunciation as sin, is an expression of sanctification which must be understood concretely.

Justification and sanctification as understood by feminist theology might be summarized as *having dignity, struggling for freedom, and renouncing sinful activities*.

The Mexican exegete Elsa Tamez thinks “that a life without anxiety in the

presence of violence is one of women’s most coveted human rights.” Tamez underscores the ethical content of justice as a consequence of the vindication of those who were brought to death through injustice. An ethic that overcomes violence fosters and supports human life, provides courage, and effects a countervailing power that leads to the realization of human rights in the cause of inviolability and dignity.

In the end the emphasis is on two basic theoretical principles:

a) Feminists design a new ethics of relationships that overcomes patriarchy; is not exclusive, but inclusive; takes into consideration differences (of the subjects); and occasionally implies separate ways of thinking about the sexes.

b) Feminists stress the “power to act” or “gaining power through free communication” (Hannah Arendt). What Arendt means is political competency which develops from human interaction (conversation, round-table discussion) and supercedes the frequent violent “power over others” (Max Weber).

### **Ethical focus: marriage and family**

Marriage and the family are still largely understood uncritically as the core of society and the locus of fundamental ethical orientation, or even as the apex of the order of creation, although globally marriage and the family are demonstrably also where violence is perpetrated (primarily) against women and children. In light of this reality of violence, the Peking World Conference of Women (1995) acknowledged, for the first time, that the violation of human rights and the object of people’s rights was manifest in the Christian idealization of marriage, which was given as an example of the

theological legitimation of violence: “Around 25% of the women living in Germany, through present or prior relationships or partners, have experienced some form of physical and sexual violence (or both).”

Feminist ethics requires careful circumspection and the use of socio-scientific observations. For our Western industrial society, the thesis obtains that the structure of relationships and the gender division of labor (intimately connected) mutually reinforce one another negatively and ossify the asymmetrical sexual order. The dissolution of the post-war patriarchal welfare state and the liberal middle-class social contract of brothers (Carol Pateman) leads to the erosion of traditional lifestyles and role expectations. The feminist demands for material autonomy and professional participation of women gain currency in light of this new background. Social and work-place politics also have strategies for overcoming violence against women. Not marriage, but the individual, not heterosexual couples, but vulnerable children, the aged, and the sick should be a political challenge and the norms for taxation and family politics.

Ideology, politics, and ethics are thus closely intertwined. Feminist theology can appeal to biblical background in its argumentation for a relativization of marriage as the normative lifestyle:

—The Bible witnesses to many variations of violence in patriarchal households.

—Jesus, Paul, and some early Christian women lived celibate lives.

—The abandonment of the patriarchal household was one of the early characteristics of the Jesus movement and of emerging Christianity.

The results of social, scientific, and

biblical evidence have consequences for the feminist theological critique: By taking into account socio-scientific analyses, overcoming violence—not only in the case of marriage and the family, but also with respect to other economic and political challenges—demands the “critique of images.” Women and men should not be determined by supposedly natural social or economic roles and ethical norms. Stated positively, it is a matter of affirming people’s subjectivity and the acceptance of a variety of lifestyles which are free of violence.

### **Ecclesiology and eschatology**

Feminist theology understands itself as a movement that is critical of the church and that always seeks alternative forms of community. These forms are established in pockets of freedom within ecclesial structures or in autonomous forms of organizations. The model of “women’s church,” which is based on experiments such as those of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, means the creation of a new polis (Ecclesia, Qahal, Synagogue: assembly). Such experiments are a contemporary reaction to the message of the present-eschatological reign of God.

It cannot be emphasized enough that this model is not to be understood as exclusively feminine, homogeneous, or harmonious. On the contrary, the “community of equals” is a political concept that is conscious of the differences that exist in coming together and that requires the ability to handle conflict. One weakness in the concept is that it does not protect against an erroneous identification of “church” and the “kingdom of God.” It is therefore important to underscore the character of the lived vi-

sion of women's church as public and political, as secular and intercultural, and simultaenously to remember the promises of the biblical kingdom of God. These ideas herald a transformation of the world and do not constitute an instance of religious mediation.

### **Mission**

Feminist theology understands women's history as salvation history with the same dignity and relevance as the salvation history of men. A feminist mission-theological alternative to the history of the violence of colonialism and imperialism and the historical paternalism of mission requires a paradigm shift: receiving, not sending, becomes the primary mission experience.

Therefore, feminist theology gives attention to the salvation historical promises of conception (Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary), and giving birth itself is seen as an expression of the advent of the new creation (Rom 8). These unmistakably feminine experiences are metaphors for the efficaciousness of God's mission. Recourse here to feminine biology in no way envisions a new order of creation. Yet this connection with specifically feminine experiences does indeed break away from the misogynistic tradition in the teachings on creation theology and original sin.

By emphasizing the primacy of conception, feminist theology provides an-

other basic attitude that can serve mission theology without gender differentiation: hearing, listening, being dependent on one another. The commitment to the *Missio Dei*, which, unfortunately, was often understood clerically and patriarchally or was misused, can "function" in this way. Receiving, not sending is the first action of missiological communication from the human point of view (we have no divine view!). It asks for a human response to God's call (Jn 20:21ff).

How do "receiving the Word of God" and the experience of violence relate to each other? The base community praxis of Pastor Fonseca in Costa Rica shows that without becoming aware of the pain which causes violence, it is arguably impossible to even begin to come to terms with the pain. The indignation and outcry against violence is already a miracle of faith, which rejects injustice and violence.

Overcoming violence is a lofty goal which ecumenical theology has to strive for anew in today's world. Much might be achieved by acknowledging the praxis of that pastor in Costa Rica, and paying heed to the developments in feminist theology. In so doing violence and its effects would be understood better, the perspective of victims shared and their right to protest against it affirmed. (BAA)