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Feminist Theology

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Feminist theology is a very broad subject. I would like to put before you what I consider essential:

1. An attempt to characterize feminist theology
2. Reflection on patriarchy
3. Feminist approach to the Bible
4. Feminist emphasis on mutuality and connectedness

1. Some Characteristics of Feminist Theology

We understand already from the name itself that women are the point. At present many believing (Christian) women have stopped repeating what has already been created and expressed in theology. They are starting to articulate their faith again.

a) Feminist theology originated in the *heart* which has been *touched*. It comes from the inner being of a person who has been painfully affected by injustice. As any other theology of liberation, this theology also stems from the experience of being wounded. It grows out of destruction occurring in the lives of women—out of economic, political, social, physical, psychical and intellectual damage. And it makes this damage visible. It originates among the women who realize their situation and together work towards a change by breaking through the conventions and forms of dominating theology and its arrangement with power.

It is evident that the destruction is not limited to a certain geographical region. After the United States, feminist theology spread rapidly in Western Europe, especially in Germany and the Netherlands. It crosses over frontiers of countries, denominations, races and classes. It is a global matter. An African feminist theology of liberation exists as well as an Asian and Latin American one.

The essence of things is often better described through a negative delimitation. So I will continue in this manner.

b) Feminist theology does *not* take place in isolation. It does not appear primarily in isolated studies, but in the community. It has a distinctly *dialogical* character. It is created in the process of a dialogue between women who are teaching and taught, who lectures and listen. Written works—books, articles—are only one aspect of it, the systematizing one. Another is life, life experience. Feminist theology grows out of the milieu of the women's movement. It develops

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in the community of simple women, female preachers and women who work as scientific researchers. To think and take a direction which is indicated by feminist theology means everywhere—and certainly also here in India—going on a narrow and unknown path. It is a road to the goal which is the transformation of society and churches as we know them.

Feminist theologians have newly defined what is the task of theology. According to Dorothee Sölle the task of theology is *cooperation with God in God's work of liberation*. This vision of the task is connected with the primary experience of oppression and humiliation.

c) Feminist theology is *not only an intellectual work*. It sees the link of the brain, hands and feet, it sees and takes into account the whole body. Body is good. We don't *have* a body. We *are* body. By body we also understand. Feminist theology is not only open to contemplation but also to movement, to songs and dances.

d) Feminist theology is *not oriented against men*. It sees in them partners on the way to liberation. And it is not meant only for women. It welcomes the cooperation of men provided they are willing to give up their privileges. The goal is a fully integrated humanity of all. A characteristic element of contemporary feminism is a considerable participation of men. They listen to the experience of women who speak of oppression and join in their struggle for justice in society, in the churches and for better relations with nature. I know male feminists in Protestant circles, but they are elsewhere too. In the USA an organization of Roman Catholic priests exists which is called Priests for Equality. This group sides with the interests of women.

e) My last negative delimitation : Feminist theology should *not serve* the interests of women *ideologically* but address them in their situation.

Sometimes voices can be heard in theological circles saying that feminist theology is only a symptom of our times. It is believed that it is simply a kind of feminism—but that it is not a theology. The primary concern is not God but self-development of the female subject, its dignity and power. In short, feminist theology is a kind of ideology. This view can be challenged by a question: Who has a right to judge what is and what is not theology? Is theology a reflection in which the word "God" occurs frequently but a neighbour is outside our interest? The shape of feminist theology is related to the understanding of God's transcendence which pervades the immanence. It can appear to be secular, and yet it has a genuinely theological and christological content. The question of relationship between theology and ideology would require special attention,

including the definition of ideology, i.e., how to define the term of ideology. In my view the danger of ideologization threatens every intellectual action and every theological expression and trend. The only defense is to be on guard and to continue holding a dialogue.

I think that feminist theologians are free one pitfall: we don't think that we have found all the truth. We do not pretend that we know the answers to all questions.

At the same time we do not want to forsake our destiny—identical with other theologies of liberation—to be defenders of women and of the poor, i.e., of all victims of history—and also to be defenders of extra-human creation.

Feminist theology is a challenge for the churches to recognize and to admit that patriarchal socialization caused a deformation of Christian witness. It challenges the churches to renew their theology, language and their structures so that they may confirm the full humanity of all —men and women. Nobody should be openly or in a hidden way humiliated because of his/her race, gender or for any other reason. Nobody should be robbed of God's createdness in the image of God.

2. Reflection on Patriarchy

It is characteristic for the contemporary global feminist movement to I use the concept of patriarchy. For women on a world scale patriarchy has become the most important analytical model for understanding our situation.

The struggle against patriarchy is a strong common element of feminism in any context. During these last weeks I have studied the essays of our Indian feminist movement and I have encountered this term over and over again. In many parts of the world feminist theological books and studies are being published which deepen the understanding of patriarchy. When we use this term it is important to clarify its content. Let us remember some basic elements.

The word patriarchy is derived from two Greek words—*pater* and *archein*—*an* means the rule of the father or of the fathers. At a certain point in history the father took the power in the family, in this smallest cell of society. He became the unrestrained ruler over his wife and children. The position of the father imitated the power of the sovereign. The ruler was also called father of the country—*pater patriae*—and finally also the church authorities were called *patres*, the pope. The patriarchy developed into a social system which legalized the domination and rule of one kind of people over another.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, one of the most outstanding feminist theologians defines patriarchy as "*a pyramidal system and*

hierarchical structure of society and church". Everything that exists, any aspect of reality—both visible and invisible to the human eye, is placed in this system in a hierarchical order. God as the supreme good is at the top of existence and in a descending order are the angels, Jesus, men, women, children, animals, plants, the earth, evil and chaos. Patriarchy is a construction of the human mind. At the same time it is an organization of society which is based on a false relationship, i.e., on domination. This system hampers the development of all people, especially women, of persons who are weak, of a different race, and it destructively affects the world of nature. The patriarchal structure stands on several connected pillars: racism, sexism, classism (class exploitation), militarism and ecological destruction.

The Austrian scientist Ernest Borneman studied the issue of patriarchy during 40 years. The results of his research were published in a 700-page book. Borneman reaches the conclusion that patriarchy did not exist from the beginning of time and is not going to last forever. It is about 6000 years old—which in human history is not a very long period—and will end soon. It is a human construction and because of that it can be changed. According to Borneman patriarchy is a tragedy of human history, something highly negative and disastrous. I quote his hopeful vision: "The patriarchy will soon be behind us and our descendants will hardly understand it" (*Das Patriarchat*, p. 10). I am somewhat skeptical regarding this optimistic view. I believe that ahead of us there is still a long and strenuous struggle with patriarchy which will require perseverance. The struggle may still last for several generations.

The New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza believes that the struggle to change the patriarchy into domestic communicative social structures started long before the birth of Christianity. It continued then in some less prominent smaller streams of Christendom. It determined the women's movement of all centuries. The recognition of this historical dynamics, of this unrelenting struggle of egalitarian structures with the patriarchal social structures has led Schüssler Fiorenza believes to establish new Bible study rules.

3. Feminist Approach to the Bible

What is the place of the Bible in the feminist movement and in feminist theology? This is an important question here in India, in Europe and everywhere.

It is necessary to see very clearly that in the world today there are feminist movements which consider the Bible to be an irreparably

patriarchal book. They give it up, and at the same time these women leave the Christian Church. Already in the 1890's Christian-oriented feminists chose another way. They did not refuse nor did they accept the Bible as a whole. They started on a narrow and inexperienced road of feminist biblical criticism.

Feminist biblical work today is marked by *continuity and discontinuity* with traditional hermeneutics. Feminists are another link in the long chain of those who with dedication have read the Bible from ancient times up to the present and who have tried to liberate the Bible from the captivity of the past so that it can speak to contemporary people. Already in the Bible itself it is possible to follow this process.

What then makes the feminist Biblical work radically new and of a discontinuous nature? Historical research has taught us that the Bible is the human work of people who throughout the centuries have registered their own and other people's experiences with God. They did it in the language and in the way of thinking of their times. What was handed over—the experience with God—was going through the prism of the human eye, human mind and human heart. Women now come with a further very important insight and discovery: although some hypotheses do not exclude the possibility that the authors of some biblical books might have been women—it is evident that men have written the majority of the biblical books. The biblical message was seen through the prism of *male experience* and it bears visible signs of this reality. We have to go further: all the biblical authors have lived and written in a patriarchal, androcentric society. Men were at its centre, women and children on the margin. This reality is also clearly noticeable in the biblical writings—in their use of androcentric language. Men had power to name the gods and to define male and female sexuality. They had power to decide. They also decided how the experiences of women with God were to be considered in the texts and in the canon. This was only by way of exception, since normally women were excluded.

Because of all this the Bible is an ambivalent book. In it we can find both the *tradition of liberation*, the living hope in God's justice, and the *tradition of oppression*, which humiliates and offends women. The Bible is a patriarchal book, but—and this is admirable—in the Bible itself there is a strong resistance against any injustice. And so not only a seeming inconsistency but a real contradiction exists in the very core of biblical tradition. It is indispensable for us to be aware of it. Only then will the churches be in a position to liberate themselves from the remainder of patriarchy.

A differentiation of biblical voices is necessary. Schüssler Fiorenza defends the principle of critical examination and evaluation of all biblical texts. We should ask whether they contribute or not to a wholesome healthy being, to a good life and freedom for women. According to this criterion it is possible to find God's revelation and truth only in the texts and traditions which transcend and criticize the patriarchal culture and the religion of their times. Only the non-sexist biblical traditions can claim that they are God's revelation.

As Jesus was free in regard to tradition in view of human well-being and human wholeness—let us remember the healing on the Sabbath—also feminist hermeneutics, in solidarity with women of the past and of the present, makes a choice liberating and oppressive biblical traditions.

In the view of feminist theologians it is necessary "to defeat the Bible as a patriarchal authority by using it as a liberator" (Mary Ann Tolbert). That is not easy. It is not easy to bear this paradox: *to read the same book as an enslaver and a liberator* (*Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, p. 140). But it can be done—and it must be done.

4. The Question of God

I would like to make a few remarks showing the direction of feminist thinking in this field.

All our human talk about God is very untruthful, in fact, it is always mere stammering. Our images and metaphors cannot do justice to God's reality. Besides calling God Father, it is proper to see and to call God's reality a mother, a sister, a friend, etc. We should not forget the metaphors from the area of nature as they were used by medieval mystics: God as an ocean, as fire and so on. It is just abstract designations: God as source, as death and foundation of our existence.

According to Dorothee Sölle "The Divine must be understood in categories of a relationship of opposites which are harmonious and dynamic in themselves: present and hidden, powerful and powerless, suffering and confronting, Mother and Father, punishing and saving" (*Reader from Bristol*, conf. 41). And still one voice: "The last word as well as the first word in theology is surrounded by silence. We know...that when we try to speak of God there is nothing which resembles what we can conceive when we say that word" (Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, p. 194).

5. Mutuality and Connectedness

Sometimes feminist theology is called theology of mutuality. The starting point for this kind of reflexion is not as isolated deity or an

isolated human being but relation, relationship. In this process God and human beings happen. Feminist theology is rooted in the personalism of Jewish thought. For Carter Heyward, as well as for Martin Buber "in the beginning was the relation". Relation is where it all begins, life and love and work and pleasure and pain, our selves... We come into this world connected and related to one another—by blood and tissue, history, memory, culture, faith, joy, passion, violence, pain and struggle. The lines of continuity between and among us are visible/invisible, sturdy/fragile, inviting/frightening, delightful/sad..." (C. Heyward, *Touching our Strength*, p. 192).

Traditional theology interprets God's relation to human beings according to the patriarchal scheme. God is what appears in this thinking to be the highest: King, Military Commander, Victor, Judge, Father. Although these metaphors articulate a part of the truth they exclude a real mutuality. A good traditional theology always corrected them by speaking about God also as Servant, Accused and Suffering. God was also spoken of as Mother. However, this dialectic is not able to grasp the real mutuality. We can become God's friends, whom we already are in God's eyes. Let us remember that Jesus called friends men and women who followed him (Luke 12:4; John 15:13–15). Jesus' story shows the power of mutuality. If we ask about the model of real mutuality it is Jesus's life, his death and his resurrection. There it was manifested—as it is manifested today—*that God's presence liberates us for mutually saving activity*. It integrates us in the christological process. As friends need friends God needs us. We are needed for God.

Patriarchal thinking and practice cannot be overcome by speaking about Goddess in place of God. It is necessary to make visible we are thrown upon the power of life and how the power of life needs us. *We rely on mutual help. We experience mutual dependence of one being on another being. In spite of all the differences there is the basic interrelatedness of all that exists.*

All theological work is happening today in the broad context of the entire planet. This is the context which we share and without which we cannot survive. Theology originating in this context has a chance to see God's transcendence more deeply than ever before. It has a great responsibility to understand God, human beings and all forms of life as kinds of beings radically connected and mutually dependent.