

Referat im Rahmen der Tagung der "Interreligiösen Konferenz Europäischer Theologinnen" (IKETH) zum Thema "Schriftauslegung durch Frauen in Judentum, Christentum und Islam als Ressource für interreligiöse Kommunikation und Gendergerechtigkeit in Europa", vom 21.–24. August 2008 in Stockholm

Reading the Bible with Different Eyes – Women's Interpretation as a Resource for Gender Justice and Interreligious Communication A Christian Perspective

Reinhild Traitler

1. Situating my own reading

In which ways can women's interpretation of Holy Scriptures become a resource of gender justice („Geschlechtergerechtigkeit“) and interreligious communication in Europe?

What a title. How many questions it raises! Do we mean interpretation by women as different from feminist interpretation, and what would be the difference? What is the meaning of „gender justice“ when we work on issues that – for thousands of years – have been the monopoly of male definition in most religions. How is gender justice woven into interreligious communication, which is still largely the domaine of men?

And what kind of Europe do we have in mind – a Europe that has the firm resolve to respect and honour the different cultural and religious traditions of all its citizens? A Europe with Turkey as a member? Or a Europe that tightens its borders and alienates all it considers „foreign“? A Europe where antisemitism and islamophobia can still show their ugly faces? Finally: with growing fundamentalisms on all sides, how could we begin a rereading of our own respective traditions with the intent to discover in them more possibilities for pluralist interpretations that could further dialogue rather than exclusivist affirmations?

All these are not „academic“ questions but concern the future quality of social relationships on this continent and the identity we wish to construct as Europeans.

Let me first of all share with you my own assumptions as I approach these questions.

1.1. I am a Christian

It means first of all that I belong to the majority in this group (and on this continent), as far as religion is concerned, and I hope I shall not bore this majority too much with things too familiar.

It further means that I have a holy book, part of which I share with the religion out of which Christianity originally grew – Judaism.

In my tradition the Jewish part of the bible has been called the „Old Testament“, the Christian part the „New Testament“. These names of course, contained a theological statement, that the new book superceded, completed and fulfilled the old one. The antagonism of old/new (along with the early polemics between Jewish–Christian and Jewish communities in the efforts to define a „Christian“ identity), served to discredit the Jewish people and to create a stream of antijudaism in Christian theology, at times with brutal consequences.

I prefer to call the two parts of the bible the First and the Second/New Testament.

In traditional Christian exegesis the First Testament has been interpreted from the perspective of the Second. Especially many of the messianic prophesies of the Hebrew bible

were conferred unto Christ as Messiah, as Jesus and the communities of his followers understood themselves in the continuity of the history of salvation promised to Israel.

Finally, it needs to be remembered that the Bible was composed in historic languages, Hebrew and Greek, and was first translated into Latin. This implies that for some 1500 years the discourse about the bible was a discourse largely between educated men, which is reflected in ecclesial, liturgical and prayer language to this very day.

1.2. Among Christians I am a Protestant

I was raised a Lutheran in Austria, a largely Catholic country, which implies that I know what it means to be in a minority. It also means that I represent Western Christianity and its biases – Orthodoxy would add a different perspective.

Being a Protestant means coming from a spiritual and theological tradition that places a very high value on scripture: „Sola scriptura“ – scripture only – was *the* theological battle cry of the Reformation. It claimed that scripture had a higher authority than the church, and that reading and interpreting it was the task of the whole people of God, the priesthood of all believers. The so called Concordia of 1577 formulated: „We believe, teach and confess that the prophetic and apostolic books of the Old and New Testament are the only rule and norm, according to which all teaching and all teachers have to be evaluated and judged.“ This bible-centeredness shaped the life of orthodox Protestantism for well over 200 years.

It also shaped my religious education from childhood on – I carry a bible around all the time, even when I don't read it. It shows that as Protestants, we have also made a kind of fetish of the bible. Only later I realized that assuming that only scripture „is the rule and norm“ for interpreting itself works to hide the interests of the interpreters, it „canonizes“ their contexts and biases, and it tends to spiritualize the texts.

Like most of us I have gone through all possible stages of understanding biblical texts. I still remember rejecting as a youngster the fundamentalist option that these texts were the word of God in a literal sense, so to speak dictated by God: If they were, I mused, why are there so many mistakes, so many contradictions? But we were not supposed to ask such questions, we had to believe. This option still informs the faith of many Christians worldwide, though in varying shades, ranging from the creationists with their fierce anti-science bias to various forms of Protestant or Catholic „orthodoxy“.

I remember how later I experienced the historical-critical method as a real liberation. It appealed to me as a student of both literature and theology: Yes, even a cursory reading of the bible reveals that many different types of texts are welded together, often within the same book. Many stories are told and retold, with shifting emphases of meaning. God seems to be changing and revealing Godself in ever new ways. I AM WHO I AM, that is God's very name in the First Testament, which emphasizes not God's eternal sameness but above all God's eternal agency.

Many of the contradictions could be explained by the fact that this Holy Scripture had come into existence over a very long period of time, in many different historical contexts, which we have to know in order to understand the intention and the rhetoric of a particular text. The emerging unity of purpose was nonetheless amazing: It was for me divine inspiration that so many different writers in different times and styles witnessed to God and the ways God had touched the lives of the people of Israel and beyond. I could and can speak with conviction the liturgical responsory „This is the word of God – Thanks be to God“.

The historical critical method might be regarded as Protestant theology's response to modernity. It was the essential tool of liberal theology. What mattered was the authenticity of the texts, in light of historical, linguistic and scientific scrutiny: „Did Jesus really walk

on water, did it really happen this way, what could be a modern explanation? / Is this a word of Jesus or of the early church community?“ Subsequently this led to attempts to separate the „inner truth“ of texts from their „outer shape“ (Kern und Schale), the form they took in a particular context.¹

As Dorothee Sölle stated, „ In this view the symbolical, existential dimension of the text which hints at a new experience, was not being considered. The fixation on *authenticity* put a blind eye on the social, political and economic context“.²

Which leads me to my next point:

1.3. I read the bible as a woman

I consider myself a feminist Christian, and theologically I have been most influenced by liberation theologies. „Feminist“ for me implies confronting the systemic dimension of discrimination (patriarchy) and working for comprehensive justice for all, especially for the poorest and most oppressed/discriminated, among who the majority are women and children. I do this in the community of women and men, devoted to the same goal and which Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls the „*ecclesia of women*“.

Feminist and liberation theologies helped me realise that my perspective on biblical texts was decisively influenced by who I am and how I live. Context and experience became a category for interpretation:

During my travels with the World Council of Churches I often noticed that the women did not participate in eating, and learned that this was cultural – women would not eat when there was not enough food for all! I realized that among the poor and oppressed women were still a bit more poor and oppressed.

These experiences were deeply troubling. Though I was a woman and had more than once in my life encountered limitations because of my sex, (not least in my work in a church organisation as a working mother) I realized that I had nothing more in common with these village women in Sumatra or the Philippines than my female body, and the vulnerability it can create, not only physically, but also in the way, social roles and power are constructed. What did it mean, that these women listened to the gospel with an empty stomach? What faith did they have and what faith was required from me?

In a way the question of understanding the bible as the word of God shifted to perceiving the bible as the word of human beings that were sharing something about their experience with God who upheld them in their oftentimes harsh lives and who helped them to liberate themselves from oppressive forces: The exodus narrative of the First Testament – the story of the the march out of slavery – became a key text. This was the meaning of salvation!

It was a process of „earthing“ the biblical texts, of understanding better the social and economic context of the people to who the biblical messages were originally adressed and to who they are spoken today. In my tradition the texts had been spiritualised and turned into archetypical truths that were the same for all people at all times. Now I realized that they contained different messages for different people and demanded different responses. Striving for justice and equality began with acknowledging difference. If we don't do that the idea of equality can also work against those whose situation in life does not allow them to be equal. This became clear to me during the years of intense debate on whether feminism was in fact

1 Dorothee Sölle, *Der Gebrauch der Bibel: Vom liberalen zum befreiungstheologischen Paradigma*, in: *Gott denken*, Kreuz Verlag 1990, pp. 47ff. Sölle offered a helpful grid for different theological responses and spiritual practices, by suggesting an orthodox, a liberal and a liberation paradigm for theology.

2 Sölle, 1990, p. 48

a Western construct that did not take into account the needs of women in Africa, Asia, Latin America, or black Americans. Since then I have learned to respect all efforts to create more justice and freedom for women, no matter what the label. Theologically it prompted me to try to change perspective, and read my tradition with the eyes of others. „Komm, lies mit meinen Augen“ (Come, read with my eyes!) was the title of a small book done in the context of women's work in the WCC, which described this shift of emphasis: Hermeneutics became important.

In subsequent years, I worked as director of the Protestant Academy Boldern, near Zürich, and was responsible for the portfolio Women in Church and Society. I encountered many discriminations women suffered, less pay, less old age coverage, hardly any public child care available. Among the poor in this richest country of the world more women were poor, more migrant women, more old women, more less educated women lived and still live in relative poverty. Above all women had internalized these as a „natural“ part of their lives. At the same time I watched women voting against issues concerning justice for women (e.g. the Maternity Law, that was lost several times, before it was finally adopted). I realized that there was a lot of difference among women themselves that hindered solidarity and weakened the feminist cause.

Such experiences told me that it was necessary to be clear about my own context and stance: In 1994 I participated in the global conference of feminist liberation theologians in Costa Rica, which helped me clarify my mind: it proposed as a feminist hermeneutics of liberation a simple sentence „*What is good for poor and oppressed women, is good for all*“. This sentence became my hermeneutical principle which has guided my work ever since.

1. 4. Finally: I have been involved in interreligious dialogue for some 25 years, for many reasons

I was and still am convinced that Christian Europe (even in its secularized form) has to confront its history of enmity and hatred of *other* religions, especially Judaism and Islam. It also has to make visible the manifold contributions of these religions to its history. In my educational work, as co-founder of the Swiss-German interreligious theology course for women or of the European Project for Interreligious Learning (EPIL), or during my time as president of the Interreligious Association of Switzerland (IRAS), we have also explored ways of changing the public discourse concerning people of other faiths, in which religious issues are often used to transport political messages and to foment non religious conflicts.

In all these I made a paradoxical discovery: on the one hand dialogue with people of other religions made me more conscious of what is important and non negotiable for me in my own religion. On the other hand I discovered „the truth of God“ and a convincing ethics for life in many religions, and I have often felt a spiritual closeness to religious traditions other than my own (which I don't want to be called „syncretism“ – I like better the ideas of *multiple religious belongings*). I realized that religion too, in fact all revelations are in the realm of the human. Beyond them is a horizon and reference point infinitely larger and all encompassing, a truth that lies beyond my fixed Christian identity / or any other fixed identity. I only have a glimpse of this whole. This experience in interreligious dialogue but also the awareness that religions have been and are both, sources of division and potential for peace and justice, have prompted me to look at the bible in new ways, changing my perspective and asking: How does it sound for „an outsider“? How does it sound if I don't adopt the ecclesiological position, if Jesus is not the center in every story and of every answer. And: How does it prompt me to act in such a way that the truth of this text will be manifested by the fruits it brings forth?

2. Interpreting Scripture as a Resource for Gender Justice: The Search for a Liberating Hermeneutics

It is a puzzling fact that the bible contains texts that were not intended to be but can be used to justify the discrimination and oppression of women. This has long been glossed over. More so, the authority of the bible with its canonized content and sacralised use, had made it extremely difficult to mount any fundamental criticism, or to deny certain texts that had been used to legitimize the continuing sexism (and racism) in social and ecclesial contexts.

For me it was helpful and illuminating when the American theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza proposed to introduce salvation and wellbeing³ of women as a hermeneutical principle. She did so in a creative dialogue with the document „*Dei Verbum*“ of the Second Vatican Council, which states that „the Bible teaches surely and faithfully and without error all that God wanted to be said for the sake of our salvation“.⁴

Understanding „our salvation“ as spiritual salvation and physical wellbeing of all, Schüssler Fiorenza invites us to confront critically such texts and /or interpretations that do not further „salvation and wellbeing“ of women. Reading from this hermeneutical perspective she grounds herself in what she calls the *ecclesia of women*⁵, the community of women and men that struggle towards liberation from oppression and for justice.

Let me just give some examples how such a hermeneutics could work in a rereading of texts and how it might be a resource for gender justice. I shall take texts from the Second Testament. In the patriarchal context in which Christianity developed and which it re-enforced I understand gender justice as justice for women and take the sentence from Costa Rica as my guideline.

I start from the observation that justice has something to do with becoming visible and being able to make a claim on the community, with the aim to create equality. Becoming visible further means acknowledging the physical, historical presence of a person, and her being present in the symbolical order of language, symbols, institutions.

2.1. Making women visible as partners in community/society: a hermeneutics of suspicion

The Bible is the story of an unfolding relationship of *a people* with God. Slowly, the notion of *a people* is widened to include other groups and peoples, and in the Second Testament *the people of God* becomes the church. The story seems to be told as the story of a collective. When you look closer, however, it is the stories of many individuals, usually men but among them also a number of women that are specifically mentioned and sometimes even have a name. Still, by and large women remain invisible.

Part of this invisibility is due to the fact that the books of the bible were composed in an androcentric context and in androcentric language: this erased women from historiography „but it does not prove the actual absence of women from the center of patriarchal history and biblical revelation“.⁶ In her great rereading of Christian origins, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza proposed a hermeneutics of suspicion, that women were indeed part of the total fabric of life, as „victims and subjects of patriarchal culture“⁷ She did this mainly by

3 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Gerecht ist das Wort der Weisheit. Historisch-politische Kontexte feministischer Bibelinterpretation*, Exodus, Luzern 2008, p. 111

4 Schüssler-Fiorenza, 2008, p. 111

5 The name is meant to denote the difference to the hierarchically organised institutional Church and its interests, and not to exclude men from participation.

6 Schüssler-Fiorenza, 1986, p.29

7 Making visible the presence of women in history was the main concern of the women's movement of the early

assuming that women were included when generic male language was used, which happens most of the time.

It is important to recall that for Schüssler Fiorenza „*androcentrism characterizes a mindset (a reality constructed in language), while patriarchy represents a social-cultural system in which a few men have power over other men, women, children, slaves and colonized peoples*“.

How contested this hermeneutical approach still is, is borne out by the fierce debates that have arisen around a new German bible translation, the Bible in a Language of Justice.⁸ One of the intentions of this new translation was to make visible the presence of women in all biblical texts by using female grammatical forms and imagery throughout.⁹

The result is mind blowing. Suddenly the world around Jesus is populated not only by male disciples, fishermen and slaves, scribes and pharisees, teachers, missionaries and apostles, but there are women among them, and sometimes they are even mentioned by name! (The same can be said for the First Testament).

A lot of research into social and economic history¹⁰ has shown that women were indeed present in all these contexts, and that a social-historical feminist reading of the texts does make a difference. It shows that visibility of hitherto invisible groups does not only change the fabric of social life but is also a precondition for mutuality, for all to participate in the work of God's kingdom.

I take as example the parable in Luke 13, 20-21. It is one of the many stories which make a theological statement by telling an analogy, usually taken from everyday life. It is the shortest parable of the Second Testament, consisting of only two verses: „To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened /Womit soll ich das Reich Gottes vergleichen? Es ist wie mit einem Sauerteig, den eine Frau nahm und unter einen halben Zentner Mehl mengte, bis es ganz durchsäuert war“ (Harper-Collins Study Bible, Luther 1984).

Traditionally the interpretation of this parable did not give much attention to the woman described here – the title proposed by Luther speaks of the „parable of the sour dough“. The woman only mixed the sour dough into the flour. The rest was God's agency: God in God's mysterious grace let the dough rise in such a way that the flour was totally transformed into sour dough. The exegetical interest lay in the process of the rising of the dough as an analogy to God's salvific action and the mysterious growing of God's kingdom in the world. Let us shift the interest to the woman!

In a feminist exegetical workshop I once did a creative actualisation of this parable: A group of twenty women met in the kitchen of our conference center Boldern, to bake bread from a yeast dough (we made our dough with yeast, as it would have taken days to prepare the sour dough). First we found out that even twenty of us could not work with such a huge amount of flour as is mentioned in the parable, which suggested that the woman in the story did not work alone, but together with the other women of her community. Secondly, the preparation of the dough required much more than just the mixing of the ingredients. We had to go through a lengthy sequence of kneading and waiting and kneading again and waiting again for the dough to rise, and heating the oven, and so on. We realized that traditional exegesis had rendered totally invisible the work of the women (including their times of waiting) who

Renaissance time, known as the „Querelle des femmes“. Christine des Pisan's book „La Cité des Femmes“ presents a collection of biblical, saintly and historical women, that merited to be remembered.

8 Bibel in gerechter Sprache, Gütersloh 2006.

9 The new translation also aims to make visible that the context of the second Testament is the Jewish community and that Jesus of Nazareth was deeply rooted in his religious tradition. Further it shows that many biblical texts reflect God's option for the poor and oppressed majority of the population.

10 cf. especially Luise Schttruff, *Lydias ungeduldige Schwestern*, Gütersloh 1996, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, Gütersloh 2005, Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Frauen in der Apostelgeschichte des Lukas*, Gütersloh 1992.

baked bread together, and provided the most necessary staple food of antiquity and who made sure that the conditions were right for the dough to rise.

The same invisibility has long attended women's work connected with the running of everyday life. It was hardly considered as work and devoid of power, except the power of the kitchen and the bedroom. Above all, it was done today, forgotten tomorrow, it seemingly has no public relevance, and it did not create history and a female line of authority. Justice for women therefore includes making visible and validating all those activities that are necessary to keep life going, and that are still largely done by women. The political struggles to recognize work in the household, in early education, in care-giving (e.g. the Wages for Housework Campaign) are proof of this! So is the ongoing debate on gender roles and public support in a gender-just organisation of everyday life.

Making visible human work/women's work also helped change the perception of how God's kingdom will come, namely with the active participation of women: God needs us! God needs every woman and man.

2.2. Making women visible as partners in the work of salvation: a hermeneutics of mutuality

Some twenty years ago the US -American feminist theologian Carter Heyward offered a rereading of a well known story of a woman who had suffered from a menstrual haemorrhage for many years (Luke 8, 43-48). She now approaches Jesus in a crowd of people, trusting that she could be healed if she only touched the fringe of his cloak. Key in the text is a silent interaction between Jesus and the woman (verse 46): The woman does touch his cloak, and Jesus feels this touch and comments "... I know that power has gone out from me / ich habe gespürt, wie eine Kraft von mir ausgegangen ist."

Traditional interpretations have taken this comment as a criticism, a view which is somehow prompted by the flow of the narrative: „Who touched me“ Jesus asked, almost like an interrogator (verse 45), and Peter apologetically answers that the crowd might have pushed against Jesus involuntarily. But Jesus insists that power has gone out from him.

If we take Jesus as the sole source of power, the action of the woman has indeed taken power away from Jesus, almost in a physical sense. This power heals her, but its „loss“ weakens him. If we adopt mutuality as a hermeneutical principle, we could say that Jesus' power (*dynamis*) is activated by the woman's trust.

Such a reading understands God not as a magician but as the infinite power that chooses to enter our finite possibilities and to act with and through us. The healing occurs as a miracle of faith, and faith, just as power, is a process of mutuality in relationships. God is love as mutuality. By loving we participate in God and vice versa. God is love can also be turned around: „Love is God“. *God is becoming* in relationships. This is the meaning of incarnation.

There are other stories, in which Jesus' mission and teaching are defined in a mutual, dialogical process and interestingly, these dialogues often occur with women (dialogue with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, John 4, dialogue with Martha of Bethany, John 11). Their memory serves as proof that in the early Christian communities memories of women in the Jesus movement and of the „community of equals“ (Schüssler Fiorenza) must have been strongly present, though in danger to be silenced and appropriated by patriarchal Hellenistic culture. The „marriage between Christianity and patriarchy“ (Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel) was a process, in which the *Kyrios* title of God/Christ served as mutual re-enforcement and justification for male power (Schüssler Fiorenza speaks of a *kyriarchal*, rather than a patriarchal arrangement, e.g. in the epistles which regulate relations between

free men and slaves, men and women, men and their children in the Christian patriarchal household).

Making visible the presence of women in the bible is important. But – according to Schüssler Fiorenza – it is only a beginning; it leads to the question *whether biblical revelation and truth are only given „in those texts and interpretative models that transcend critically their patriarchal framework“... and allow us to understand Christianity as a historical, social and cultural process towards the liberation from internalised oppressive/patriarchal structures“.*

2.3. Making women visible at the symbolical level: biblical inspirations for an inclusive God language

The way Christians talk of God is largely, though not exclusively influenced by the bible. Such central questions as the nature of God incarnate in a human person, or the metaphor of the Holy Trinity – God as community in three persons, presented in male imagery, but undividedly One – are the result of early controversies about the nature of God and were decided upon by Councils of the early church on the basis of biblical evidence and theological debate.

But it remains a fact that biblical language of God, while continuously insisting that it transcends all ideas of human likeness, that the biblical God is strictly non-sexual, and cannot be expressed in a word, is welded to its androcentric context and uses male language and male symbols of power and authority (Lord), sometimes interspersed with female images. This had and has a strong formative power, as it is mediated in scripture, in prayers and liturgy, and in the Christian hymnody. It also has made of woman „the other“, and denied her the (biblical) promise of being created in the image of God (Gen. 1,27).

Again, the Bible in a Language of Justice attempts to make visible what an inclusive language could mean: The translators (a team of 54 women and men, that mirror in themselves the linguistic diversity of the bible) have searched for ways to introduce new, biblically inspired ways to translate the JHWE, the „kyrios“ (Lord) of the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Hebrew bible), which occurs some 6000 times in the First Testament and renders the unspeakable name of God with a word that can easily be misused:

“Kyrios“/„Lord“, a term that in modern German is even used for „Mister“ (Herr)!

The names proposed in the new translation (used in male and female forms) range from the Jewish Adonaj to poetic circumscriptions such as „der Ewige/die Ewige/the Eternal One“, „die Lebendige/der Lebendige/the Living One“, „der Eine/die Eine/The One“. Such an open, fluid language, more mystic than dogmatic and trying to avoid images (including the difficult trinitarian metaphor) altogether may be better reflecting the undescribable transcendence of God and might be helpful in interreligious communication.

This leads me to our second question: How can feminist interpretations of the bible help us as Christians in interreligious communication?

3. Interpreting Scripture as a Ressource for Interreligious Communication

3.1. Making visible the „other“

In a way one could interpret European history as a constant effort to conquer, tame, and „civilize“ *the other*, i.e. bring all that compares as foreign to a center under its cultural and political power. This was the policy of the Roman empire and it continued to be the policy of Christian Europe, with varying claims to supremacy among its different regional and

national powers. The policy of subjugating *the other* was used in „colonizing“ the East of the continent, later in conquering the lands of peoples in the Americas, in Africa and Asia. It was also the impetus of the crusades. *The other* became visible, but we learned to see him/her through the eyes of the conqueror, as an object, usable for economic, religious, scientific, sexual or other purposes but not really challenging *our own* identity.¹¹

This situation has been changing over the past decades: Europe has received large numbers of people, as citizens of former colonies, as contracted workers, as students and as refugees, asylum seekers and illegal „sans papiers“, in search of livelihood or security. *The others* have turned into uneasy locals, second and third generation immigrants that enter local and national politics, culture, art, and ... wear a scarf ! Awareness has grown that many of us have multiple identities that do not fit nostalgic ideas of what it means to be a real Dutch, a real German, a real Swede. Suddenly it is becoming more important to be Catalan than Spanish, Turkish than German, Moroccan than French, and vice versa.

Paradoxically, in this situation of shifting identities, religions seem to function again in an identity stabilising manner, even for people that are quite secular. In our continuing discussions on identity in the study course of the European Project for Interreligious Learning, EPIL, students named religion as the one piece of their identity they would not want to compromise on.

In this situation of looking back to a religious past which is imagined as having been more clear and unequivocal, as Christians we have to watch carefully which strands of our confessional traditions and which theological, biblical arguments are being evoked. Whether we look to the past for justification of old and new hegemonial claims to political, economic, but also cultural and religious power, or whether we search for liberating and emancipatory traditions within Christianity that have created possibilities for greater pluralism, dialogue and convivencia (a word we use in EPIL to describe the goal of peaceful and purposeful living together).

In the EPIL project the aim is to see the respective „other“ in the way, she would want to be seen, taking the self definition of the other as the starting point for dialogue. This implies trying to change your perspective and to suspend judgement to allow the other to make herself known. Working with an adapted version of the dialogue method¹², we are trying to develop a hermeneutics of changing (religious) perspective, and to look at ourselves with the eyes of others.

When I look to the bible/the Second Testament, I realize that it is full of encounters with *the others*. Particularly the life of the early church, told in the Acts of the Apostles and in the various letters to Christian communities around the Mediterranean, reveals the difficult, often conflictive relationship to contexts and people who did not share the faith and ethics of the Christian communities. The very missionary spirit that came to be so much associated with the Christian church developed very slowly!

However, already in the gospels, (the stories about Jesus) it becomes clear that living in the Roman province of Judea meant life in an extremely volatile multicultural and multireligious context.

11 Whenever „the other“ came close (e.g. as a centuries long presence on the Iberian peninsula or in the Ottoman sieges of Vienna) this was experienced as a deep and lasting trauma, and while geopolitics were at stake, religion, the notion of „Christian Europe“ was the unifying force against the enemy. At the same time there were periods of cultural fascination with the „Orient“, e.g. the 18th century, with its growing knowledge and interest in „other“ cultures and religions.

12 M.&J. Hartkemeyer, F. Dhority, Miteinander denken - das Geheimnis des Dialogs, Klett-Cotta, 2001.

3.2. Reading the Bible with different eyes – a hermeneutics of a change of perspective

I want to take one such story that has been read from many different perspectives and has a long tradition of interpretation: It is the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7,24 - 30). The story talks about a Greek woman, a Syro-Phoenician from Tyrus, whose little daughter is plagued by an unclean spirit. The text mentions explicitly that she is not a Jew. The hints „Greek, Syro-Phoenician, Non-Jew“ suggest a complicated identity: she is a foreigner, but from the elite, a woman in a patriarchal society, but probably wealthy, thus both marginalised herself but also privileged, certainly the mistress of slave women, above all the mother of an ill child. She asks Jesus to heal her daughter. His answer is shocking: „Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs / Lass zuerst die Kinder satt werden; es ist nicht recht, den Kindern das Brot wegzunehmen und es den Hunden vorzuwerfen“ (Mark 7,27) (Harper Collins Study Bible and Luther 1984).

However, the woman counters: „Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs/ Ja Herr; aber doch fressen die Hunde unter dem Tisch von den Brosamen der Kinder“ (verse 28). Jesus praises this answer as an example of exceptional faith, and heals the woman's daughter.

Traditional interpretations¹³ interested to point to the story's relevance for the (Christian) history of salvation, have often looked at this text as an allegory: The children in the text are the Jewish people (in the parallel text in Matthew Jesus even affirms that his mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel); the dogs are the non-Jews, the table is the bible and the bread the gospel. The story serves as explanation why the missionary work of the early communities of Jesus went beyond the Jewish people. What is important is not the *concrete encounter with Jesus*, but the *saving encounter with his word*.

In Protestant traditions of interpretation, interested in individual salvation stories, the faith of the woman, her humble posture (her „female soul“) have been emulated – faith as dedication to God without conditions, expressed in continuing prayer and supplication (in many English translations the story is titled: The faith of a Syro-Phoenician woman). In missionary discourse such behaviour has been recommended as exemplary for Christians. The Chinese feminist theologian Kwok Pui Lan¹⁴ points to the fact that such biblical stories were used to reinforce and continue so called „female virtues“ in order to anchor Western values and cultural domination in Asian countries.

And a Jewish feminist scholar and friend, Marianne Wallach-Faller, once pointed out to me that the dialogue between Jesus and the woman reminded her of a ritual between a rabbi and a proselyte, wishing to convert to Judaism: the Rabbi has to refuse the person three times before accepting her.

If we read the text from the perspective of „the other“, the Syro-Phoenician woman, we realize that the woman does not approach Jesus because she wishes to follow his religious teachings, but because he is a healer, and she wants her daughter healed. The story – read from her point of view – is not a conversion story, but the story of someone who badly wants something, and is prepared to pay a high price. She meets with Jesus around a particular need, which is finally also perceived by Jesus. Both share *something* of themselves in a very authentic way, thus breaking up a static relationship of *self* and *other*. In the dialogue something happens with both, the woman and Jesus – dialogue always carries the possibility

13 Luise Schottroff, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, Gütersloh 2005, suggests as two distinct hermeneutical perspectives the ecclesiological and the eschatological interpretation. The ecclesiological constructs a dualism between the triumphalist church who knows what is good and bad, and *the others* who don't. The eschatological takes as frame of reference a Christian praxis of prayer and action for the kingdom of God, and leaves judgement to God.

14 Kwok pui-Lan, *Interpretation als Dialog. Eine biblische Hermeneutik aus Asien*, Luzern, Exodus, Luzern 1996.

that people are changed in it beyond what they anticipate.

In postmodern and postcolonial discourse the „woman with the complicated identity“ of Mark 7 has become a reminder that we must begin to overcome persisting easy divisions into powerful/powerless, „us and them“ – in interreligious dialogue „there is always an other in the other“¹⁵ –, and begin to work on shared problems and needs especially in everyday life situation.¹⁶

4. Homework for Christians

Finally, let me just outline two pieces of homework for Christians which I consider indispensable for a meaningful dialogue, especially among the religions of the book:

- Christians need to **reread such passages especially of the Second Testament which may be difficult for their Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers**. Considering how long it took to create a consciousness of the strong antijudaistic undercurrent in the Second Testament, this is quite an urgent task. It is time to reread exclusivist claims, e.g. the verse in John 14, 6, where Jesus states: „I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me / Ich bin der Weg und die Wahrheit und das Leben; niemand kommt zum Vater ausser durch mich.“ This verse has been used as an exclusivist Christian confessional statement. But if we look at its context in the Gospel of John, we could read it quite differently: It is part of the great farewell discourse of Jesus. His community is already divided and broken up. Disaster, trial and execution of Jesus as leader are imminent. The author of the gospel of John presents this verse as a plea of Jesus to his community /the community of the early church, to remain loyal to him.¹⁷

In the same way we have to look at other texts that have justified exclusivist positions, such as the „Great commission“ (Matthew 27,19-20) to go, teach and baptize all peoples.

- **Christians need to be more aware of their own hermeneutical choices when it comes to encounter and relationships with different religions**. Do they hold on to exclusive claims that Christianity is the religion for the whole world? Do they hold „inclusive“ hopes that different religions, while they contain certain truths, will ultimately be brought under the dominion of God in Christ? Or do they consciously look for the possibility to understand their Christian voice as *one* voice in a pluralist religious situation. This voice is the best for them, but not necessarily for all.

Personally I want to develop that pluralist option (maybe that could be ICETH's contribution to a pluralist Theology of Religions). Within that option I perceive a new freedom to speak about those issues that are important for me in my own Christian tradition, as a woman with a feminist perspective, without being seen as wishing to convert the others. This could be a contribution to confront the lingering impact of colonial and Christian missionary history and universalist claims.

My hope is that women of different religions would open themselves in the same way. The dialogue among the different must center on commonly perceived issues: What kind of

15 Manuela Kalsky, 2007, p. 6

16 Manuela Kalsky, Vielfalt umarmen. Überlegungen zur Transformation christlicher Identität, in: Doris Strahm, Manuela Kalsky (Hg.), Damit es anders wird zwischen uns. Interreligiöser Dialog aus der Sicht von Frauen, Ostfildern 2006, also in English Embracing Diversity, Reflections on the transformation of Christian Identity, translated for EPIL by Joanne E. Orton, 2007

17 Cynthia Campbell, A Multitude of Blessings, 2006, offers a rereading of a number of biblical texts, which try a change of perspective in the interest of interreligious dialogue.

future do we want to shape together and what is non-negotiable for all (eg. human rights and democratic institutions)? **My interest is to explore with women of other faiths such ethical and spiritual resources of our respective holy books that will contribute to the wellbeing and salvation of women (and men), and that will emphasize living everyday life well.**

Finally, I am concerned about the fact that while women have developed specific (theological) contributions to interreligious dialogue, their voices are hardly heard nor their insights demanded, neither by their own religious institutions, not by interreligious bodies. An important peace initiative, a letter of 138 Muslim scholars to the Christian churches, inviting them to look at scripture for what Christians and Muslims hold in common, went from Muslim men to Christian men. Here we have to explore how to become more visible also as ICETH. Meanwhile we raise our voices – confidently!

Dr. Reinhild Traitler-Espiritu , 8/2008

© Alle Rechte bei der Verfasserin