

*Anne-Louise Eriksson*

## Radical Hermeneutics and Scriptural Authority

### The challenge

Anne-Marie Korte's staging of "the problem", by way of elaborating the Tolbert/Weberian mapping of Scriptural authority, and her presentation of how feminist scholars have responded to the problem of Scriptural authority are very clear, and in my view also accurate. Therefore, I feel no need to comment on her text in detail and will instead try to take up the challenge she poses.

To me, Korte's highlighting of the risk that feminist theological hermeneutics will constitute a *reflection on* feminist biblical liberation rather than *being* a liberating hermeneutics, and her call for the recapturing of the sacredness of the texts, are urgent questions that highlight the growing divide between feminist theology in the academy and the need for a liberating theology for women of faith.

In the academy, there are of course no sacred texts, or at least there should not be. There, scriptural authority can only be studied as a second order question, that is, we can study *how*, *when* and *why* Scripture functions as an authority for *whom*. But within a discourse of the *science* of religion, there are no holy texts *per se*. Nevertheless, a simple dismissal of the sacred can hardly be a liberating praxis for women of faith. So I am very grateful that Korte has spelled out, as a challenge and a task for us, the need for a theology and hermeneutics that are liberating within a religious discourse. However, although I agree with almost everything Korte says, I remain extremely ambivalent about the picture she offers us as a heuristic tool for accomplishing our task. For me, the *headless woman* she places in our midst simply confirms the male image of women as being *nothing but bodies*; preferably a passive, mutilated body with no arms – and therefore able neither to embrace nor to push away – and no legs – able neither to come nor to go at will.<sup>1</sup> Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial note: Eriksson refers here to a sculpture by Mieke van de Hoogen, on the cover of *Common Bodies* (Münster: Lit, 2002), used by Anne Amrie Korte to illustrate her discussion of the work of Else Tamez. This image could unfortunately not be reproduced in the Yearbook. Charlotte Methuen.

when Korte points out “the risk of reinstalling the gender-based distinction between the sacred and the profane,” I want to add to that the risk of confirming the gender-based distinction between body and mind. Feminist theologians are sometimes liable to do exactly that. In our zeal to refute what we often consider to be a male theology, hostile to the body, we tend to end up with a theology concerned with emotions and bodies, but less so with intellectual credibility.

### **An authority – not authoritarian**

Instead of taking my point of departure in the body, I prefer to start in a reflection on a conceptual level. To my mind, if we want to hold on to some kind of liberating Scriptural authority, a crucial distinction is that between being an authority and being authoritarian.

*Being an authority*, as Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi notes above, is always something that is given to you. *Being authoritarian*, on the other hand, is to take power and control and impose it on others. In her brief definition, Korte refers to authority as a “status or power to *compel* or *evoke* other people’s *assent*.” In my way of thinking about authority, assent can be *evoked* but it cannot be *compelled*. You can compel obedience, submission and conformity. But assent, if it is honest and true, cannot be forced. It is always given freely. In other words: to *compel* is to be authoritarian and to *evoke* is to be an authority. Acting in an authoritarian way always implies some kind of violence: If not physical, then psychological, as a controlling of minds. I would therefore go so far as to say that it is impossible to be an authoritarian authority. The moment an authority – be it a person, an institution or a text – operates in an authoritarian way, she, he or it is no longer an authority.

Thus, for the sake of conceptual clearness I want to suggest that we reserve “authority” as a word for power, influence and assent *freely given* by someone to someone or something else. And giving authority means to acknowledge the *authorship* of the authority.

The words authority and author share the same Latin root, *augeo*, which means *originator*. The Swedish word for author is *författare*, which literally means the one who has *understood or grasped something before or ahead of* the implied readers or listeners. In other words: the author knows something ahead of the reader. And the reader or the readers will give authority to the text, i.e. acknowledge the pre-understanding, the pre-cognition, the knowing something before, when she or they experience the text’s suggestions or claims or descriptions as making sense.

Please note: I am not really interested in the author, still less in what he or she intended with his or her text. I am talking about the text, and the interpretation of reality that the text offers when I, as a reader, interpret it in my turn. If the text makes sense, i.e. if it offers something that helps me “make meaning”, it will evoke my assent. If the text does not make sense, the readers may still obey it. The context for reading might be such that it allows for the text to be used in an authoritarian way. But that would not be an example of Scriptural authority, but of an authoritarian use of Scripture.

### **Authorities make sense**

As humans we are always engaged in a quest for meaning. Reality never presents itself to us in an objective way, but calls for interpretation and a making of meaning that enables us to orient ourselves in the world. Thus we are engaged in a making of meaning that allows us to act and respond to whatever comes our way, in order to sustain life.

It is this making of meaning that is at stake also when reading Holy Scripture. If the different texts, be they narratives, laws, hymns, prophecies, letters or whatever, interpret my life and suggest actions that enhance and sustain my life, then I will give the texts authority. I will listen to them and try them out to see if they “work”.

This is what we find on the first level in Korte’s appropriation of Tolbert: “The text gains existential authority for *the individual’s* personal quest for meaning.” On this individual level the question of authority is not particularly complicated. Either the text makes sense or it does not. And that is not something that can be forced. It either works or it does not. However, on this individual level, I, as an individual, am extremely vulnerable to an authoritarian use of the texts. By appealing to doctrinal authority, the institutional Church and its representatives can wield power in order to defend what is usually called Christian identity or the true faith (cf. Tolbert’s third level).

Confronted with such a demand for obedience of body and mind, as an individual I will either have to obey or to disentangle myself from the Church’s authoritarian use of the text. As Korte points out, separation from the Church is the path taken today, not only by radical feminist theologians, but also, in our anti-authoritarian post-modern times, by many who do not find that the reading strategies imposed by the Churches make sense.

The problem, however, is not only the obvious fact that in this way we are freely or forcibly separated from the church. More important is that if the text

is interpreted, evaluated and judged *only* by the individual reader, sooner or later he or she will most probably rob the text of its *otherness*. Thus, the text will no longer be holy but a mirror of myself, always confirming me and never offering resistance and challenge to my life.

### Communities of readers

For me, therefore, the second level, the in-between level in the Tolbert/Weberian model, is the most interesting. Feminist hermeneutics need communities of readers. And that points me in the direction of, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *women church*. Like Korte, I find Fiorenza's hermeneutical work both imaginative and powerful, and yet not entirely satisfying. The problem for me with her model is not so much the "wishful thinking" of which she has been accused by, for example, the Danish exegete Lone Fatum,<sup>2</sup> but that her (*perhaps* overly optimistic) reconstruction of the "beginnings of Christianity" seems to tap into a *foundational* way of thinking about Biblical authority. We do not need Biblical proof of women's equality, or women's *imago Dei*, in order to claim equality as a necessary part of a Christian praxis today.

In fact, I am pessimistic about the possibility of finding a liberating praxis for women as a part of the historical heritage testified to in the Bible. But being a Christian today is not to mirror what it was to be a Christian 2000 years ago. We do not need biblical proof that we are fully human. We know that, with body and mind and soul. And the pre-understanding of life, the world and God that is offered by Scripture, does not carry automatic authority. It is *given authority* when it makes sense. And when it comes to women's liberation, Scripture does not, at least not in a self-evident way, help me to orient myself in the world in ways that bring nourishment and make me flourish.

In order to be *Christians* we are *committed* to working with the Christian Bible. The Bible is *our* heritage, our "golden bag" given *to us* (just as, in order to be Muslims, we are committed to the Koran, and in order to be Jewish to the Hebrew Bible). In Holy Scripture we find pre-understandings of God and life and the world. To be a Christian is to evaluate these suggestions of how to understand life and to figure out what would be an

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<sup>2</sup> Lone Fatum, "1 Thessalonians, in: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed), *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 2: *A Feminist Commentary* (SCM Press: London 1995), 250-262.

adequate response today. But in order to guard against the text's becoming simply a mirror of myself, I need to locate my interpretation and evaluation in a dialogue with others. Reading the Bible as a Christian is therefore a communal task. However, when we read, what we are searching for is not a liberating past, but rather for how the texts can be read in order to establish liberation *now*.

Thus, what we have are not foundations, but contesting interpretations with no pre-determined criteria for how to evaluate the different readings. Such a radical point of hermeneutical departure might be accused of a nihilism that fosters endless battles over the best interpretations or over "what makes sense". However, following Vattimo's defence for his radical hermeneutics, I would suggest that, taken seriously, such hermeneutics will rather foster humility,<sup>3</sup> for no-one can claim to possess a final interpretation; no-one can claim to possess the ultimate truth about what Christianity is. This will always be something that Christians (or Muslims or Jews or Buddhists and so on ...) are called to find out along the way. Like the North American theologian Kathryn Tanner,<sup>4</sup> I claim that what constitutes and unites Christians is precisely this task of finding out what it is to live in the world as Christians. And we do that, inspired by, among other things, the authority of Scripture, that is, by the understanding of God and the world that is authored forth in Scripture. What feminist theologians need to do today is therefore to find praxis and theories that encourage and cultivate that kind of non-foundational, and therefore humble, interpretive communities.

In ihrer Reaktion auf Anne-Marie Kortes Beitrag versucht die Autorin, auf die von Korte gestellte Herausforderung zu antworten: eine Hermeneutik zu entwickeln, die innerhalb eines religiösen Diskurses für Frauen befreiend wirkt. Die Autorin akzeptiert die von Korte vorgeschlagene Unterscheidung zwischen narrativer, begründend-gestaltender und dogmatischer Autorität und fügt eine absolute Unterscheidung zwischen "eine Autorität sein" und "autoritär sein" hinzu. Letzteres impliziert stets Gewalt in irgendeiner Art und muss deshalb abgelehnt werden. *Autorität* der Schrift auf der anderen Seite meint *eine freiwillig zugestandene Macht*, wenn ein Text für eine Leserin oder einen Zuhörer Sinn macht, das heißt, wenn es einem Text gelingt, Bedeutung und Struktur zu begründen und Leben zu fördern.

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<sup>3</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Utöver tolkning: Hermeneutikens betydelse för filosofin* (transl. William Fovet; Daidalos: Göteborg 1996), 13-19.

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1997).

Außerdem wird die Wichtigkeit einer Gemeinschaft von Lesenden unterstrichen, damit der Text davor bewahrt wird, lediglich als Spiegel für den Leser / die Leserin zu fungieren. Um Bescheidenheit in solch einer Gemeinschaft von Lesenden zu fördern, wenn Uneinigkeit über die "Bedeutung" eines Textes besteht, befürwortet die Autorin ein nicht-fundamentales Verständnis des Textes, das auf der radikalen Hermeneutik Gianni Vattimos beruht.

Dans sa réponse à la contribution d'Anne-Marie Korte, l'auteure essaye de relever le défi lancé par Korte: développer une herméneutique libératrice pour les femmes dans le discours religieux. L'auteure accepte la distinction suggérée par Korte entre l'autorité narrative, formatrice et dogmatique et ajoute une distinction absolue entre "être une autorité" et "être autoritaire". Cette dernière implique toujours la violence, quelque que soit sa nature, et doit être par conséquent refusée. L'autorité de l'Écriture, d'un autre côté, est un *pouvoir librement consenti* quand un texte prend un sens pour une lectrice ou un auditeur, quand il parvient à libérer un sens et une structure qui accroît la qualité de vie. L'auteure souligne par ailleurs l'importance de la lecture en communauté, afin d'éviter que le texte ne devienne le miroir d'un seul lecteur. Pour stimuler l'humilité dans une communauté de lecteurs lorsqu'il y a désaccord sur le "sens" du texte, l'auteure préconise une conception du texte non fondationnelle, puisant dans l'herméneutique radicale de Gianni Vattimo.

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