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## **Transformation and the Virtue of Ambivalence**

In this paper, delivered as key-note lecture at the Feminists Association's Colloquium on transformation and the Church at Lisbon, 2015, it is argued that contrary to the suspicion of both secular and post-Christian feminists and the anti-gender movement in the churches, feminist theologies as well as women and faith movements offer strong transforming theological and spiritual dynamics for contemporary churches. To discover this transformative potential, a new and different vocabulary for faith, spirituality and Church is needed. Clues for this different vocabulary may be found in the application of a typology of the characteristics of feminist religious imagination, derived from Bednarowsky (1999) and illustrated amongst others by the life and work of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz; the various implications of the 'quotidian turn' (de Certeau) for theology; the 'ekklesiality' (sense of community) of feminist theology and the importance of the experiences of God's presence. Central for the transformative potential on all levels is the on-going, creative ambivalence that women and other marginalised people have about the status quo of both Church and society. These 'relative outsiders' have contradictory experiences combining simultaneously a deep sense of alienation and a deep sense of belonging and commitment. It is this inescapable ambivalence which maintains a dialogue both critical and committed with the Christian tradition; which offers a creative and transformative approach to traditional Church content, symbols and rituals; and which calls to imagine a community/ecclesiology in which plurality and differences may be considered 'mixed blessings'.

In diesem Beitrag wird die These vertreten, dass, im Gegensatz zu den Behauptungen der säkularen wie der nachchristlichen Feministinnen als auch der Anti-Gender-Ideologie mancher Kirchen, feministische Theologien genauso wie die Frauenbewegung und religiöse Gemeinschaften sehr wohl eine starke theologische und spirituelle Dynamik aufweisen. Um dieses transformative Potenzial zu entdecken, ist ein neues Vokabular für Glauben, Spiritualität und Kirche erforderlich. Ich sehe Ansätze dieses Vokabulars in a) der Anwendung der Typologie einer feministisch-religiösen Vorstellung nach Bednarowsky wie zum Beispiel im Leben und Werk von Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz; in b) den verschiedenen Implikationen des sogenannten *quotidian turn* in der Theologie und c) in dem, was ich die 'Ekklesialität' der feministischen Theologie und die Bedeutung der Erfahrung der Gegenwart

Gottes nenne. Zentral für dieses transformative Potenzial auf allen Ebenen ist die fortlaufende kreative Ambivalenz von Frauen und anderen marginalisierten Menschen gegenüber dem Status quo in Kirche und Gesellschaft. Als vermeintliche relative Außenseiter haben wir widersprüchliche Erfahrungen von gleichzeitig einem tiefen Gefühl der Entfremdung und einem tiefen Gefühl der Zugehörigkeit und des Engagements. Es ist diese unausweichliche Ambivalenz, die sowohl den kritischen als auch den engagierten Dialog mit der christlichen Tradition vorantreibt. Dieser eröffnet einen Raum für einen kreativen und transformativen Umgang mit den traditionellen Lehren, Symbolen und Ritualen der Kirche und für eine Gemeinschaft, in der Pluralität und Unterschiede als ambivalente Segnungen gelten.

## Introduction

For religious “outsiders” and secular intellectuals – among them many feminists – the combination of women and Church, synagogue or mosque seems hard to understand.<sup>1</sup> How can sensible women in our day and age still want to belong to or identify with “traditional”, or better, “institutional” religion, given the fact that in general, these are not the most supportive places for women to be? How is it possible that women, who claim to be feminists, also call themselves Christian in these increasingly – at least in Europe – secular times, all the post-secular philosophy notwithstanding?<sup>2</sup> But not only secular critics, feminist theologians like Mary Daly and Daphne Hampson also question this Church-engaged position of religious feminists.<sup>3</sup> Already in 1975,

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a thoroughly revised and updated version of a text that was originally published as “A Sense of Belonging: The Challenging Complexity of Women and Church,” in: *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 4 (2004), 3, 249-261.

<sup>2</sup> On the post-secular see for instance Jürgen Habermas, “Notes on a Postsecular Society,” in: *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, 4 (2008), 17-19; Rosi Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn In Feminism,” in: *Theory, Culture and Society* 25 (2008), 6, 1-24; Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age* (SCM Press: London 2013); Rosi Braidotti, Bolette Blaagaard, Tobijn de Graauw and Eva Midden (eds.) *Transformation of Religion and the Public Sphere: Postsecular Publics* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke 2014). Note, however, that this “post-secular” and its “return” or “transformation” of religion is discussed by philosophers who claim to be not religious but who, notably after Nine-Eleven, came to see the public relevance of religion. Philosophers and social scientist seem to discover what religious feminists have known for years: the secular-religious divide does not work. See: Elaine Graham, “What’s Missing? Gender, Reason and the Post-Secular,” in: *Political Theology* 13.2 (2012), 233-245.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father Toward a Philosophy of Women Liberation* (Beacon Press: Boston 1985); Daphne Hampson, *After Christianity* (SCM Press: London 2002).

Daly wrote: “Christianity can ‘include’ feminism only in the sense that a cannibal includes his meal.”<sup>4</sup> Contrary to many secular reflections on the relation between religion and women, feminist or not, none of these theologians would deny or reject the importance of spirituality, transcendence or “God”. In fact, all feminist theologians, whether or not explicitly Christian or post-Christian, are convinced of the importance and the necessity of engaging in religion and spirituality, both in academic reflection and in religious or spiritual practice. The same would go for many contemporary women and men who left the various churches. They often consider themselves to be “spiritual but not religious”, thus mostly indicating that they do not want to be identified with the Church.<sup>5</sup>

Though feminist theologians disagree about the reforming and transformational potential of the Church, it is strongly argued that feminist religious imagination and reflection, feminist theology and philosophy, as well as the praxis of many so called “women and faith movements” and other “counter or marginalised religious groups” have a lot to offer to institutional churches, since it is precisely their Christian faith that fuels their struggle for the transformation of society, Church, and theology. Therefore, one can wholeheartedly agree with Robert Schreiter, who in his book *The New Catholicity* describes Feminist Theology as one of the contemporary global flows that “point to the failures of global systems to live up to the value of equality and inclusion.”<sup>6</sup> According to Schreiter, feminist theology, like theologies of liberation, ecology and human rights, can lay claim to being one of the new “universal” theologies.<sup>7</sup> While Schreiter emphasises the “universal” character of these theologies, I would like to stress the aspect of their being “new” and therefore

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Daly, “A Short Essay on Hearing and the Qualitative Leap of Radical Feminism,” in: *Horizons* 2 (1975), 121.

<sup>5</sup> Daly and Hampson in their times had to explain this position and explicitly “claim” a space for this non-Church religiosity or spirituality. The expression “spiritual but not religious” nowadays seems common speech. In that sense, it could be considered a sign of “secularisation”. See for instance Nancy Ammerman, “Spiritual but not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion,” in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52 (2013), 2, 258-278; Elaine Graham, “The Unquiet Frontier: Tracing the Boundaries of Philosophy and Public Theology,” in: *Political Theology* 16, 1 (2015), 33-46; Linda A. Mercante, *Belief without Borders. Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity. Theology between the Global and the Local* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll 1998) 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

consider feminist theologies as important transforming movements and dynamics in contemporary churches.

But how to make sense of that which is for many people a contradictory phenomenon? And how to discover the transformative, critical, (theo)political, theological, and spiritual potential of the Christian tradition in its contemporary feminist theoretical and practical appropriation? Especially in a situation where, many Church leaders consider “gender” and gender informed theology to be one of the contemporary cultural and religious threats?<sup>8</sup> What is needed is a different perspective on both Church and transformation. What is also needed is a different “vocabulary” for theology, faith, spirituality, and Church. Reframing and renaming in order to be able to re-imagine are important methodological and epistemological tools for a gender specific theology.

The following contribution shall describe some of the elements in feminist theology that may contribute to the development of this different perspective and different theological vocabulary, and thus develop a different religious “cartography”. First, a description of central characteristics of contemporary feminist theology shall be provided. Next, the meaning of the “quotidian turn” for theology and Church shall be considered. Lastly, a so-called “ekklesiality” of feminist theology and experiences of God’s presence as central transformative dimensions shall be discussed.

Feminist theologians are developing many intelligent, scholarly, creative, evocative theologies, visions, rituals, and symbols, and many contemporary women are deeply engaged in the work in their parishes. This should however not conceal the highly complex and ambiguous relation between women and the Church. The mere description of the problem as a problem of “women and the Church” is an indication of this complexity. Why “women and Church”?

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance the 2004 Vatican Letter to the Bishops of the Church: *On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World* ([http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040731\\_collaboration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html), 8 February 2015). See also the more recent Vatican 2014 working document on the special synod on the family ([http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20140626\\_instrumentum-laboris-familia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20140626_instrumentum-laboris-familia_en.html), 8 February 2015), or the discussion held by the Pontifical Council on Culture on the document titled *Women’s Cultures: Equality and Differences* in February 2015 (see for instance <http://www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie/2015/01/womens-cultures-equality-and-difference/>, 16 March 2017). Both documents gave no rise to optimism. See Mary Hunt’s critical comment on this last event (<http://religiondispatches.org/vatican-council-on-women-would-be-funny-were-it-not-so-insulting/>, 8 February 2015).

Why not “men and Church”? Whose church? And who has the power to define what Church is?

In her study *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, Mary Farrell Bednarowski describes the characteristics of US American women’s religious thoughts at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Although she limits her findings to the US American context, it appears that her findings can also be applied in Europe and especially within a Christian context.

Bednarowski’s study is the first general description of the central themes and questions brought to the fore by women in religion, be it in academic studies or other religious writings. It offers an excellent starting point for further reflections. She distinguishes five key elements or themes in the religious writings of US American women:

- (1) an ongoing, creative and increasingly cultivated ambivalence toward their religious communities; (2) an emphasis on the immanence –that is, the indwelling of the sacred; (3) a regard for the ordinary as revelatory of the sacred; (4) a view of ultimate reality as relational; and (5) an interpretation of healing, both physical and spiritual, as a primary rather than a secondary function of religion.<sup>10</sup>

These are not just themes but rather characteristics of a broad and general interpretative framework that shapes both women’s critical gender analyses in their churches and communities, and their approaches to theological and spiritual transformations of their traditions and communities. In fact, these themes shape our ways of doing theology. Bednarowski is very convincing in claiming that these themes are not to be an exclusive – let alone “ontological” – religious mode for women. This theological preference has deep roots in the specific social and cultural history of women, and the same may be true of other “historical outsiders” – blacks, poor, LGBTQs, and colonised people – within Christianity. As such, all those different histories, experiences and memories have had their impact on both form and content of this “voicing of faith”. Let us focus on some of these themes from a theological perspective and explore the possibilities of their transformational power for theology and the churches in the western context.

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington 1999).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

For a start, consider the following example in which some of these themes come to the fore. Of the few great women known to history, the Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695) is among the most famous. She is perhaps most celebrated for her outstanding Hispanic Baroque poetry, which made her into a great Spanish poet and one of the first “New World”, Latin American colonial poets. Moreover, she was also an eminent scholar and a trained philosopher. There is only one well-known picture of her – by Miguel Cabrera the famous indigenous Zapotec painter of “New Spain”, as Mexico was called in those colonial times. In this painting, Sor Juana is sitting at a table in a study or library, looking every bit the intellectual woman she is known to have been. She is portrayed as a woman who, alluding here to Virginia Woolf, occupies “a space of her own”. Or the other way around, it is this concrete “space” that “constructs” her religious and scholarly identity, even though many theologians never heard of her.

As a self-conscious intellectual woman of her times, especially among the religious, Sor Juana had to deal with attacks by misogynists and betrayal by her spiritual, moral, and legal superiors, who apparently could not bear such creativity, intelligence, and wisdom in a woman. This resulted in a temporary prohibition of reading and her banishment to the simplest work done in her convent. There she discovered that her observations of daily life led her to important philosophical insights and experiential knowledge: “For although I did not study in books, I studied all the things that God created.”<sup>11</sup> After describing all she learned working in the kitchen, she concludes with the famous quote, “Had Aristotle cooked, he would have written a great deal more.”<sup>12</sup> A woman, who was considered a threat or a nuisance by influential men in her surroundings, valued the insights and knowledge gained from such everyday activities as cooking and gardening, the gaining of knowledge in so-called “women’s places”. It is therefore not surprising that feminist scholars, with good reason, and with all the reservations necessary for such a comparison, consider her a “proto-feminist”, a title manifest primarily in her humorous awareness of marginalisation and oppression evidenced by gender in her writings.<sup>13</sup> After her description of what she learned while cooking, she

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<sup>11</sup> Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *The Answer/La Respuesta: Including a Selection of Poems* (The Feminist Press at the City University of New York: New York 1994), 73.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Michelle A. Gonzales, *Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll 2003), 113.

mockingly writes, “But in truth my Lady, what can we women know, save philosophies of the kitchen?”<sup>14</sup>

All this makes Sor Juana, her writings and the image we have of her an apt first example for the points to be made in this contribution.<sup>15</sup> It is here that one finds parts of the historical conditions of women mentioned earlier. In Juana’s case: banned to the kitchen and other “women’s places” and forbidden to read. But more important here, Sor Juana also discovered that there are more and different ways of gaining knowledge – theological knowledge included – than by reading the works of the great philosophers and theologians. Daily life, even against Sor Juana’s own expectation, turned out to be a rich source of valuable knowledge and insight in the works of God. In the insights, knowledge and wisdom gained in the course of actual lives lived by those on the margins of Church and society, one finds the sources and conditions for the recent turn to the epistemological meaning of everyday life in cultural studies, philosophy and theology. And women scholars were among the first to emphasise its importance.<sup>16</sup> Translated into the more explicitly religious terms of Bednarowsky’s analysis we can label this epistemological preference as “a regard for the *ordinary* as revelatory of the sacred.”<sup>17</sup> Really honouring this knowledge would mean a shift in the epistemological power structures of both theology and Church.<sup>18</sup> Aside from the epistemological importance, one may point at another theological reason for this prevalence of everyday life in the works of so many feminist and liberation theologians.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>15</sup> There is a great amount of scholarly literature on the life and works of Sor Juana. For a good theological introduction to her work, see Gonzales, *Sor Juana* above. For a feminist introduction, see Stephanie Merrim (ed.), *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz* (Wayne State University Press: Detroit MI. 1999); Theresa A. Yugar, *Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz: Feminist Reconstruction of Biography and Text* (WIPF & STOCK: Eugene OR. 2014). Perhaps the most famous introduction to her life and work is Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana: Or, the Traps of Faith* (The Belknap Press: Cambridge MA 1990).

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Maaïke de Haardt, “A Way of Being-in-the-World: Traces of Divinity in Everyday Life,” in: Maaïke de Haardt and Anne-Marie Korte (eds.), *Common Bodies. Everyday Practices, Religion and Gender* (LIT Verlag: Münster 2002), 11-27. For an overview of this approach, see also Maaïke De Haardt, “A Momentary Sacred Space: Religion, Gender and the Sacred in Everyday Life,” in: Angela Berlis, Kune Biezeveld and Anne-Marie Korte (eds.) *Everyday Life and the Sacred* (Brill: Leiden 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Elaine Graham, “Power, Knowledge and Authority in Public Theology,” in: *International Journal of Public Theology* 1 (2007), 42-46.

In everyday life – regardless of both its conceptual and actual messiness – one finds what Michel de Certeau calls the tactics of appropriation, that is, the dynamics of contest and struggle, of resistance and protest.<sup>19</sup> Even more important from a theological perspective is that in the messy actuality of daily life, *lo cotidiano*, one can find the hope, dreams, and longings for a better life.<sup>20</sup> This point shall be retaken later in the context of the experiences of God’s presence.

The messiness of everyday life and the epistemological challenges everyday life offers lead to Bednarowsky’s first point, the on-going, creative ambivalence of women and other marginalised people regarding the status quo of both Church and society.

### **Virtuous Ambivalence and Creative Appropriation**

Many metaphors used to describe the relations between women and other marginalised persons and their religious traditions are spatial. Insider/outsider, margin and centre, and resident aliens are some of the most famous metaphors used in feminist, black and postcolonial studies. They question traditional centres and insiders; they criticise the power structures implied in these images and create room for new definitions. It is also clear that the “original insider”, the “ecclesial centre” or the “non-alien resident” is the male/mainstream tradition of the churches. As such, these critical metaphors also reflect the deep sense of estrangement, exclusion, humiliation, and distrust that is one aspect of these “double space” expressions. It is important to keep in mind an awareness of this estrangement, this permanent “uneasiness” of women, blacks and other marginalised persons, for whom the relation to – and place within – Church (or society) is never completely obvious. The other facet of these metaphors emphasises the affirmative part of women’s religious experiences: their/our acknowledgment of the formative, inspiring, sustaining, spiritual power of the Christian tradition, in spite of exclusion in any form. The contradictory experiences expressed by these metaphors mirror the fundamentally ambivalent nature of women’s relation to their traditions: a deep sense of alienation and an equally deep sense of belonging, familiarity and commitment.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1984), translated by Steven Rendall.

<sup>20</sup> Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha / In the Struggle* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Bednarowsky, *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, 19.



In what may be described as a “scientific post Enlightenment society” with its strong emphasis on rationality and non-contraction, ambivalence is not a highly-respected attitude, even among theologians. By contrast, Bednarowsky highly values this ambivalence and even speaks of it as “a new religious virtue”. It is precisely this ambivalence that keeps women in dialogue with their tradition without losing their own religious balance and identity, and without expecting too much or too little from their churches or themselves, she says. Ambivalence is a virtue, because it maintains both a critical and a committed dialogue with tradition; it offers ways of dealing with tensions and contradictions as well as a creative approach to traditional content, symbols and rituals. Furthermore, as Bednarowsky notices, although women acknowledge the truth of other religions, they generally continue to speak the language of their “own” tradition. One may assert that this being able to deal with a plurality of truth claims also demonstrates insight in the fundamental ambiguity of the epistemological foundations of one’s own tradition, as well as every other tradition. Even more so – and in following the British philosopher and theologian Ruth Page – since the world itself is ambiguous, ambiguity is our condition. Page herself, feminist cultural scientist Mieke Bal and postmodern thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman all point at this ambiguity and ambivalence as our – whether or not “post” – modern condition.<sup>22</sup>

This ambivalence implies that in our religious expressions, theological research, and religiously motivated acts, women do not simply repeat the language, symbols, rites or acts of the Christian tradition but do so in their own voices and interpretations of Christianity. In doing so, they expand the meaning of the concepts, symbols or rituals of their own traditions. There is more to this than self-creation or establishing oneself as an autonomous religious subject. Following the earlier mentioned French theologian and cultural scientist Michel de Certeau, these acts may be considered as creative appropriations of the Christian tradition, in which the sustaining, subversive, emancipatory, liberating, and celebratory power of the tradition is presented in a new light.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ruth Page, *Ambiguity and the Presence of God* (SCM Press: London 1985); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Polity Press: Oxford 1991); Mieke Bal, *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto Buffalo London 2002).

<sup>23</sup> For the notion of appropriation and its transformative and subversive meanings, see Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable. Volume One, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London 1992), translated by Michael B. Smith; See also Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Appropriation as a notion is also used by

In a way, these forms of appropriation are actual “transformations” of tradition by giving different meanings to a shared language, making visible the inherent ambiguity or even openness of the tradition. In finding God and God’s works in the kitchen, Juana was able to appropriate her belief and theology, and by doing so, to transform this theology at the same time.

What is ignored in the dismissal of many feminist contributions to Church and theology is the ongoing “conserving”, “continuing” as well as transforming character of many of such creative appropriations of tradition in feminist writings.

The “positive” side of this ambivalence, women’s explicit commitment to their religious tradition in spite of all the opposition and exclusion, as well as their appropriation and affirmation of religious and spiritual attitudes, reflects a deep sense of belonging. It is this deep sense of belonging – actual belonging and a longing to belong – which ultimately fuels the continuing dialogue, on many different levels, with Church and tradition. This is where the ambivalence demonstrates its most virtuous, creative and strong communal power, where it ultimately finds its ground, spirit and motive. This sense of belonging and desire to belong is in the end an expression of the divine, “in which we live move and have our being” – as many feminists would translate Act. 17:28.

### **On Ekklesiality and the Presence of God**

The spoken sense of belonging also indicates what may be one of the most striking characteristics of feminist theology, that is, their strong “ekkesiality”. This notion can be understood primarily on the basis of feminists’ overwhelming emphasis on community. It is no coincidence that the Wicca theologian Starhawk is often quoted on this subject by both Christian and other feminist theologians, when she states that “Earth-based spiritual traditions are rooted in community. They are not religions of individual salvation, but of communal celebration and collective change.”<sup>24</sup> Or, as Roman Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether notes, “One important aspect of this emerging feminist

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US womanists and black theologians to name the specific Biblical interpretations by black people and black theologians (female/male). See, among others, Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness. The Challenge of Womanist God-talk* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Miriam Starhawk, *Truth or Dare. Encounters with Power, Authority and Mystery* (Harper San Francisco: San Francisco 1990), 23.

religion or spirituality is its recognition of the need for intentional communities of faith and worship.”<sup>25</sup>

This feminist ekklesiality, this “community dimension” is not focused solely on the internal structures of, and changes to, contemporary institutional churches. In this sense, it is preferable not to speak of a feminist ecclesiology in the strict sense of the word,<sup>26</sup> even when this general ekklesiality, as an expression of this communal dimension or desire for community, has good ecclesiological credentials.<sup>27</sup> Hence, no strict ecclesiology is hereby maintained, despite the fact that the history of the Christian feminist movement has its origins in the churches, and despite the fact that the reformation of the churches has been, and for many still is, one of the movement’s important goals. Gradually, the aim of the feminist movement in the churches became not only reforming or adapting the Church to the visible presence of women, but a more fundamental transformation. Women’s “sense of belonging” does not have anything to do with the Greek *kyriakos* (“belonging to the Lord”) in its traditional patriarchal and hierarchical meaning. If women belong to someone or something, then it is only in the sense of a far more indefinable belonging to a kind of “community of God”. A sheer institutional belonging – regardless of how greatly the Church as institution is valued by many Christian feminists – would not cover this sense of belonging, nor answer the desire to belong.

“Belonging” has a different meaning here. It has to do with the manifold experiences of the relation with, and the presence of, the Divine in this world, with the meaning of this divine presence for women’s daily lives and the need

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<sup>25</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church. Theology and Practice* (Harper and Row: New York 1985), 3.

<sup>26</sup> As is the choice made by Rebecca Chopp for linguistic convenience and by way of claiming that feminist discourse on ekklesia continues classical ecclesiology. See Rebecca Chopp, *Saving Work. Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville 1995). Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza speaks of ekklesia-logy as the discourse on the ekklesia of women; see Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals. A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (SCM Press: London 1993). In later publications, Schüssler speaks of the “ekklesia of wo/men” as a heterogeneous, multi-voiced open space or forum; see Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision Explorations in Feminist Theology* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2011), 89-95.

<sup>27</sup> See Rebecca Chopp, *The Power to Speak. Feminism, Language, God* (Crossroad: New York 1991), 73. Chopp refers to Schleiermacher and Barth for their insistence on desire for community as the nature of Church.

for women to speak of these experiences.<sup>28</sup> Sor Juana, after her banishment, continued to speak. This explicit and unremitting talk of God's presence, despite the general Western cultural tendency to consider speaking of God a taboo, makes one think of feminist theology as well as the women-and-faith movement, as perhaps the least "secularised" theological approach in contemporary Western society.

Contrary to a large part of contemporary Western academic theology, the aim of this speaking of God is not to prove the coherence of God-talk, nor is it to speak of God's absence or of the hidden or absolute transcendent God, but rather to discuss the meaning of God and the experience of God in everyday life.<sup>29</sup> Without rejecting a definitive distinction between God and world, this feminist emphasis on the presence of the Divine – in Bednarowsky's terms the emphasis on immanence – is an attempt to overcome a dominant dualistic approach of God and world, to overcome a traditional preference for a distant transcendence, and to emphasise the revelatory power of creation, the materiality and embodiment of life. With this "immanent approach", feminist reflection wants to make explicit the well-rooted conviction that both the experience and speaking of God matter and that this becomes most evident in the theologically and spiritually neglected practices of everyday life.<sup>30</sup> In "regular academics", everyday life is mostly seen as trivial, since it is the domain of

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<sup>28</sup> For a more empirical report on these experiences of Divine Presence and immanence, see Maaïke de Haardt, "Feminist God-praxis in religion to Feminist Theology," and its South African counter text by Susan Rakoczy, "Feminist Reflections on God in South Africa: Presentation and Analysis of Feminist God-praxis in Relation to Feminist Theology," both in: Nico Schreurs and Thomas Plastow (eds.), *Juxtaposing Contexts. Doing contextual theology in South Africa and the Netherlands* (Cluster Publication: Pietermaritzburg 2003), 98-132 and 63-97, respectively. In this respect, it is a rather ironic coincidence that at the very moment marginalised people – theological outsiders – entered the field as self-conscious theological subjects, many philosophers and theologians spoke of the death of the subject, proclaimed the absence of God and prioritised God's transcendence and ultimate incomprehensibility.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is. The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Crossroad: New York, 1995); Laurel C. Schneider, *Re-Imagining the Divine* (Pilgrim Press: Cleveland 1998); Anne-Claire Mulder and Kune Biezeveld (eds.), *Towards a Different Transcendence: Feminist Findings on Subjectivity, Religion and Values* (Peter Lang Pub Inc: Oxford 2001); Elaine Graham (ed.), *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present* (Ashgate: Farnham 2009); Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery. Discerning God in Process* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2008).

<sup>30</sup> See for instance Maaïke de Haardt, "Vinde, comei de meu pao.... Consideratiocoes exemplares acerca do divino no cotidiano," in: Lieve Troch (org.) *Passos comPaixao, Uma teologia do dia-a-dia* (Nhanduti Editoria: Sao Bernardo do Campo 2007), 59-84; Maaïke de Haardt and

women and other marginalised persons. At this point, one can see the inherent theological connection between Bednarowky's theme of immanence and the epistemological preference for the ordinary as revelatory. That, and the question of whether God matters at all, should therefore be the centre of theology and Church. In the end, speaking of the "matter of God" only matters in a perspective of life abundant for all; in a perspective of shared hope, solidarity, survival, joy, resistance, and celebration of the gift of life; or in the perspective of the full humanity of women and men, to name but a few of the images used to formulate the ultimate meaning of the "matter of God". In the end, it is this perspective that fuels the dreams and hopes and the power to survive.

It is in this vision and perspective of "life abundant" that one also finds both the centrality of the themes of relationship and the healing mentioned by Bednarowsky, in their specific Christian formulation. Thus, it is no coincidence that many feminist Christian theologians are engaged in a re-thinking and re-imagining of their sense of belonging, both in their re-thinking of "God" and in their re-thinking of Church. And in doing so, they are actively and effectively constructing images and practices of "ecclesia", or, as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza prefers to put it, "ekkleisia of wo/men", as this "different community" is named in order to distinguish this community from the Church as belonging to *kyriakos*.<sup>31</sup> This is not just an academic perspective. One finds the same approach not just in feminist theological reflection but also in accounts of religious experiences. To give just one example: a small research project in which a group of Dutch members of the "women-and-faith movement" was asked to state their personal creeds, similar results were found. Only a small number of respondents mentioned the institutional Church in a spiritually meaningful way, while the notion of community and the longing for community was strongly present in their creeds.<sup>32</sup>

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Anne-Marie Korte (eds.), *Common Bodies. Everyday Practices, Gender and Religion* (Lit Verlag: Münster, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> It was Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza who first coined the term Ekklesia to name the specific form of women Church. See Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*. Rebecca Chopp, following the early Schüssler Fiorenza, speaks of the "practice of ecclesia" to describe not only the community focus of feminist theology, but also in order to name the ambivalent relation to the Church; see Chopp, *Saving Work*.

<sup>32</sup> This group consists of the participants in feminist theological seminars that were offered annually for a wider audience by the Catharina Halkes/Unie NKV Chair for Religion and Gender Chair at the Faculty of Theology at Nijmegen until 2015. The participants can be considered part of the "women and faith movement" in the Netherlands, which may be seen as the "natural

The importance of the notion of community, in its relational and healing dimensions, also opposes and criticises, as Starhawk claimed, a strong subjective, individualistic interpretation of salvation and reconciliation, in favour of a far more communal salvation and a communal responsibility for salvation and well-being for all. This characteristic also influences the interpretation of Christ. It is one of the reasons that classical Christological language and symbols in their highly individualistic interpretation of salvation have lost their adequacy and relevance for many Western contemporary women, as well as men. Therefore, the re-imagining of Christological concepts and symbols in a far more relational as well as communal perspective is also an important part of feminist theological reflection.<sup>33</sup> However, one should avoid calling this re-interpretation of central Christian doctrine a “de-Christianisation” of religion, or a simple rejection of these affirmations. Rather, it seems better to speak of an opening up of the continually changing interpretations of the meaning of Christ, a capacity the Church leaders seem to have lost over the last centuries. It is yet another demonstration of the fundamental ambiguity of concepts and dogmas and of the power of tradition to renew itself with the help of those who

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base” of feminist theology. The Dutch “women and faith movement” can be described as a very loose movement with different levels of organisation, no central address or institution, and no affiliation to a specific denomination. Within this broader movement, all kinds of groups and organisations can be found, such as (parts of) the traditional confessional Women’s Organisation, the Netwerk IFWT (a network of feminist theologians), The Dutch Women Synod, diocesan women-faith-society groups, and all kinds of other formal and informal groups. Some of these groups and organisations were established with a specific social-justice goal, such as the Religion and Incest group, the Sexual Violence in Pastoral Relations Foundation, or the Committee of Women Religious against the Trafficking of Women. There are also many individual women and men who consider themselves part of this movement, but who are not affiliated to a specific group and who participate in occasional events. Most of the women (and men) participating in this broad movement are (still?) members of one of the larger Christian churches. Some of them have left their church, without giving up their Christian or religious commitment and inspiration.

<sup>33</sup> See for instance Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart. A Christology of Erotic Power* (Crossroad: New York 1988); Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream. Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition* (SPCK Press: London 1989); Manuela Kalsky, *Christaphanien. Die Revision der Christologie aus der Sicht von Frauen in unterschiedlichen Kulturen* (Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus: Gütersloh 2000); Muriel Oreville-Montenegro, *The Jesus of Asian Women* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll 2006); Marion Grau, *Of Divine Economy* (T&TClark: New York London 2004); Wonhee Ann Joh, *Heart of the Cross. A Postcolonial Christology* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville 2006); Lisa Isherwood and Elaine Bellchambers, *Through Us, With Us, In Us. Relational Theologies into the Twenty-First Century* (SCM Press: London 2010).

have the courage to reject one-dimensional or logical explanations and interpretations. Proposing a variation on Page's notion, the justification of these processes can be found in the effectiveness in which the attractiveness of this faith, the experience of the presence of God and the vision of an all-inclusive life abundance or well-being, is conveyed to contemporary culture.<sup>34</sup>

### **Difference and Plurality: Mixed Blessings**

Whenever feminist 'ekkleziality' aimed at a homogeneous and harmonious community, the actual diversity of the feminist movements, religious and/or secular, soon put an end to this romantic and otherworldly image.<sup>35</sup> The proclaimed classic image of feminism as "sisterhood", based on assumed unity, reciprocity and equality, appeared to be exclusionary to many women. Differences of race, class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity were erased because of the vision of this new and different community. This ideal of community was soon to be exposed as white, Western and middle class.<sup>36</sup> This led to a rethinking of the meaning of community as well as diversity and differences within communities. Audre Lorde's insight is still provocative in this respect:

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects on human behavior and expectations.<sup>37</sup>

All this did not imply the loss of the notion of communities as places of hope, solidarity, joy, celebration, resistance, sustenance, and sharing – in other words, communities as places of divine revelation. But this notion was complemented by a new acknowledgment of other fundamental characteristics of community: a diversity of heterogeneity, of unwanted or unknown mechanisms of exclusion, of the balance of power within communities, of existing conflicts and privileges, contradictions and – one again – ambivalences and ambiguity.

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<sup>34</sup> Ruth Page, *Ambiguity and the Presence of God*, 117.

<sup>35</sup> This is excellently documented in Elizabeth M. Bounds, *Coming Together/Coming Apart. Religion, Community and Modernity* (Routledge: New York 1997).

<sup>36</sup> In white Christian theology, one of the first reflections on challenges offered by the critics of black women's reflection can be found in Susan Thislethwaite, *Sex, Race, and God. Christian Feminism in Black and White* (Crossroad: New York 1989). Many others followed.

<sup>37</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches* (The Crossing Press: Trumansburg 1984), 115.

In the words of Letty Russell: “trouble and beauty together.”<sup>38</sup> The feminist ecclesiological and theological challenge is not to see these contradictions as threats that have to be eradicated as soon as possible, but to accept differences and diversity as contradictions and ambiguities one has to live with, both in the actual situatedness of concrete communities and on the theoretical level of reflection on these communities. In this perspective, one has to read Sharon Welch’s remark that

(...) to be a Christian is to belong to a community that extends beyond the individual, and to find meaning in participation in the affirmation of the struggle for humanity. The hope of resurrection is the hope for the power of solidarity to transform reality, a hope that human identity is found in relation to others, in participation in the formation of a community that transcends us now and after death.<sup>39</sup>

In her later work, Welch stresses repeatedly the importance of community, as well as the importance of an immanent transcendence.<sup>40</sup> One also finds in her work, as in that of many other feminist theologians, the emphasis on the here and now, on the inevitable vulnerability and particularity of this time and place and of finite, embodied, relational human existence, as the only place from which one can love the world. In a creative use of her ambivalence towards “traditional” theological language, Catherine Keller uses Moltmann’s expression of “the spirit of life”, to speak about the presence and power of God and the communion of the holy spirit that enables the members of the community to resist “the powers and principalities” and so, in a new way, to represent the body of Christ.<sup>41</sup> Keller not only succeeds in demonstrating the primacy of praxis, she also shows again and again that the community and God are the locus of hope and transformation.

However, a continuous self-criticism and self-reflection is needed in order to respect differences and plurality, actual distance and different locations, as

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<sup>38</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round. Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville 1993), 196.

<sup>39</sup> Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll 1985), 45.

<sup>40</sup> Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1990) is very explicit on these points.

<sup>41</sup> Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then. A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Beacon Press: Boston 1996), 221. This is a recurring theme in Keller’s work; see for instance her *On the Mystery, Discerning God in Process* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2008) and her *Cloud of the Impossible. Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (Columbia University Press: New York 2015).



recent publications by post-colonial and queer theologians demonstrate.<sup>42</sup> For that reason, Mary McClintock Fulkerson prefers the notion of affinity instead of the much-used notion of solidarity with the other, as “Affinity acknowledges love’s inability to know the other, to resist the domination of the other.”<sup>43</sup> Although these different approaches do not necessarily exclude each other, McClintock Fulkerson’s notion of affinity reminds one of the inalienable otherness of others and the risks posed by an all too easy inclusiveness. “The continued approbation of reality as God requires from us the capacity to see grace in the lives of those who speak of God’s way under the adverse conditions we rarely or never live in.”<sup>44</sup> Formulated as an appeal to feminist theologians, it seems equally important and challenging to all theologians and churches.

### Concluding Remarks

What can be the meaning of all these reflections on the characteristics of “women’s faith” for the future of the Church? If it is true that, since the Enlightenment, “religion joined women in the margins of modernity, in the realm of the private, in the so-called non-essential real, women’s religiosity comes to look more and more intuitive of religion itself,”<sup>45</sup> this would imply that the characteristics and actual forms of “women’s faith” as described here are shared by many women and men. Recent empirical research projects indeed confirm this development.<sup>46</sup> According to the view presented here, institutional churches need to integrate these characteristics of faith and community in their

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<sup>42</sup> Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera, *Postcolonial Theologies. Divinities and Empire* (Chalice Press: St. Louis 2004); Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (SCM Press: London 2004); Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider, *Polydoxy. Theology of Multiplicity and Relation* (Routledge: London/New York 2011); Marcella Althaus Reid, *Indecent Theology* (Routledge: London/New York 2001); Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (Routledge: London/New York 2003); Lisa Isherwood and David Harris, *Radical Otherness. Sociological and Theological Approaches* (Acumen: Durham 2014); Stephen D. Moore and Mayra Rivera (eds.) *Planetary Loves. Spivak, Postcoloniality and Theology* (Fordham University Press: New York 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject. Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 1994), 384.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>45</sup> Chopp, *The Power to Speak*, 118.

<sup>46</sup> See for instance Hans Georg Ziebertz and Ulrich Riegel (eds.) *Europe: secular or post-secular* (LIT Verlag: Münster 2008); Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (eds.) *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (Routledge: London/New York 2012).

theology, rituals, concepts, images, and the structure and centre of their institutions. Otherwise, they risk alienating more and more people who still feel a belonging or want to belong. The plurality of images, models and structures, as developed in the “women and faith movement” and in feminist theology, offer alternative and constructive contributions for transformations. They exhibit a viability of faith that utilises hidden strands of tradition to empower itself. The question of whether institutional churches are willing to take up these challenges is up to them. In any case, since the “women and faith movement” is Church – as feminist theologians emphasise – these transformations have already started.

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