

Introduction

A majority of attendees at the ESWTR-Conference in Budapest (2005) voted to make interreligious dialogue of women the topic of a forthcoming volume of the Society's Journal, adding that the notion "feminist" should be included in the title. Subsequently, during the Society's meeting in Naples in 2007, a call went out soliciting members who would be interested in collaborating in this joint venture. This core group of authors/editors met twice in the fall of 2008 to assemble the articles for this volume and to solicit additional authors to increase our religious and national diversity. We were committed to examine feminist interreligious dialogues from different theoretical angles, various religious backgrounds, as well as different European national perspectives. The contributors speak from the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist perspectives and reflect German, British, Dutch, Spanish, Slovene, Hungarian, Turkish and US American cultural contexts. As befits the topic, the editors remained acutely aware of the Society's predominantly Christian character and ongoing struggle to achieve equity and just representation among its European national contingents. At the same time we recognized, that we ourselves, like the ESWTR in general, are mostly Christian and primarily of Northern European (especially German) extraction.

During its twenty-five year old history the ESWTR struggled with its identity as a Christian theological organization and the meaning of its (expanding) European boundaries. Founded by Christian scholars engaged in European ecumenical contexts, especially within the Ecumenical Council of Churches (ECC), the ESWTR was challenged early on by Jewish women. Already during the eighties (Helvoirt, NL 1985; Arnoldshain, DE 1989), the desire to include Jewish women's voices led to the curious decision to include "Israel" into the European fold and to make Israel a member-country in the statutes of the ESWTR. During the nineties (Hofgeismar, DE 1999), Muslim women were encouraged to join the Society as members and invited to serve on the Board as well. Nevertheless, neither Jewish nor Muslim scholars have joined the Society in any measurable numbers. To date, the name, structure and programming of the ESWTR affords Jewish and Muslim participants little more than token status. As far as we know, no Buddhist or Hindu women have asked to join the Society.

The ESWTR gathering in Budapest (2005) proposed the topic of "feminist interreligious dialogue" apart from the question of membership and the

religiously homogenous makeup of the Society. The topic suggested itself because many recognized the relevance and urgency of this theme for any kind of theology, including feminist theology today. Interreligious or intercultural dialogue has moved from the sidelines of religious studies to the centre of theological reflexion. Nevertheless, dialogue has remained promoted and dominated by male religious leaders and scholars. While some of them have integrated feminist theological thoughts during the past years, and although questions of gender are broadly recognized as important subjects in thinking about diversity, there is little sustained feminist focus. With the present volume we want to start to fill this gap.

All of the contributors to this volume refer to a cultural context dramatically changed by the globalization of the economy and massive population migrations. Where one might have supposed interreligious dialogue to be a conversation between strangers living in different countries on faraway continents, such interreligious dialogue now occurs among neighbours, co-workers and family members. Although Europe never existed as an exclusively Christian culture, this nostalgic ideal is relinquished only very slowly. Europe has long struggled with the presence of religious minorities in its midst, but we now confront the “religious other” in a global context and as societies committed to democratic ideals of human rights and respect for religious self determination. At the same time, equal representation and basic human rights remain an unfulfilled promise for many women in the world. Interreligious dialogue envisions and practices a new approach to religious differences based on equality and human rights. Where in the past, religious disputes were solved by torture, forced conversion, expulsion, *auto da fes*, and crusades, contemporary practices of interreligious dialogue envision tolerance, empathy and an embrace of difference. Nevertheless, despite such political commitments to religious tolerance and equal human rights, several of the non-Christian contributors in this journal report their fear of violence and experiences with discrimination that have shaped their lives as members of minority religions in Europe. Western Christian feminists struggle with appropriate responses to religious differences that involve traditions that perpetuate the discrimination and second class status of women in the religious sphere. Pulled between acceptance of religious differences and rejection of central patriarchal tenets within those religions, feminists struggle to find solidarity in the midst of diversity, discrimination and conflict. Non-Christian women in Europe face multiple levels of discrimination and negotiate competing loyalties as members of minority religions or immigrant communities who confront external stereotypes as well as internal

role-expectations. As feminist theology enters into interreligious dialogue, the empowerment of women, respect for and curiosity about women's experiences, and commitment to women's liberation can serve as guiding principles.

This volume of the Journal is committed to giving voice to the growing religious diversity in Europe and to nudge the ESWTR towards greater openness and inclusion of non-Christian religious scholars. Several of our contributors are not theologians but Hindu and Muslim scholars who are trained in academic disciplines other than theology or religious studies (anthropology, political science, history). They may not pursue academic careers because of the politics and institutional structures of European university systems. Should the ESWTR commit itself to increasing religious diversity, we may need to consider the further expansion of European boundaries (by including Turkey, e.g.) along with disciplinary and methodological expansions. As long as the name and programming of the ESWTR is centred on (Christian) theology, we remain unattractive to non-Christian women as a professional organization. Interfaith dialogue strives for common ground between religions even as it acknowledges profound differences. "Theology" may not be the most appropriate access point for dialogue since it remains a predominant Christian approach to religion. This may even be true for a pluralistic "theology of religion" that understands itself as a common platform for all religions. Nevertheless, specific points of view – including Christian theological thinking – will also in future be important for an enriching and differentiated dialogue that confronts the necessity to respect diversity and at the same time searches for a common global ethics and responsibility.

In our attempt to respond to this challenge, we looked for a reflection of the plurality of religious and cultural traditions, perspectives, contexts and approaches that characterize the actual European situation. On our way we had to recognize that such pluralism requires openness and flexibility in handling the diversity of languages, working-styles, expectations, and modes of presentations. We tried to fit this diversity into our concept without forcing or equalizing the contributions. In the end, we are glad to have found a way to present a mosaic which represents the plurality without leaving the readers completely lost – at least this is our hope.

Based on her dissertation research on Christian feminist approaches to religious plurality, Swedish theologian *Helene Egnell* opens the **Theme** section with a plea for greater dialogue between feminist theologians and those engaged in dialogue – often men. She maintains that key insights and concepts of feminist theology, especially women's experiences of marginality and insistence on the "messiness of actual existence" are critically relevant for the

emerging theory of a “theology of religions.” Interfaith dialogue that starts with thick descriptions of the religious life will prove more promising than approaches rooted in doctrine and systematic theories.

For German Protestant practitioner of interreligious dialogue *Annette Mehlhorn* this “messiness of actual experiences” means that individuals who engage in dialogue negotiate not only disagreements with representatives of the “other religion” but also internal divisions among co-religionists. *Interreligious* dialogue necessitates simultaneous *intrareligious* dialogue. No “religion” is ever homogenous. Each religious community is made up of individual religious subjects who navigate internal conflicts along with external relations with “others.”

Manuela Kalsky and *Katharina von Kellenbach*, however, challenge the very existence of “insider” and “outsider” in contemporary Western European societies. Their letter exchange questions the notion of “interreligious dialogue” from the perspective of migrants who cross national and religious borders. A rising number of people are unaffiliated with any particular religious community and claim the freedom to “pick and choose” marriage partners, countries, religious traditions and observances as they fit into their lives. New religious identities are being forged in the maelstrom of globalization. The realities of multicultural societies and of religious pluralism are fast overtaking the timid steps undertaken in official interreligious dialogue settings.

Christa Anbeek, a Buddhist feminist scholar from the Netherlands, retraces interreligious dialogue by way of her own journey and proposes several “travel guides” that emerged from her own adventures across the Buddhist and Christian borderlines. Starting with the philosophical-theological travel guide that exposed her to the comparative academic study of Buddhism and Christianity, she branched out into Zen meditation using a “practical-spiritual travel guide.” As a pastoral care provider in a psychiatric institution, she applied an “inter-human travel guide” meeting each human being at the level of their spiritual needs and finally, she suggests an “ecosophical travel guide” to frame the “multireligious adventure” of human togetherness and dependence on the resources of planet earth.

German theologian *Annette Esser*, finally, addresses the role of spirituality in interfaith dialogue and asks whether the search for feminist spirituality serves to draw women into dialogue or whether it is a particularly divisive topic among dialogue activists. She notes that while on the one hand, individuals who are interested in spirituality seem to be especially attracted to spiritual practices in other religious traditions, on the other hand the prospect of

celebrating together across religious traditions or of creating religious rituals together is often accompanied by great tension and awkwardness. “Spirituality” and religious celebration are both a place of great attraction as well as of profound division among women engaged in feminist interreligious dialogue.

The second section of the *Forum* contextualizes a variety of experiences in feminist interreligious dialogue in different religious and national settings. *Nadja Furlan*, a Slovenian feminist theologian, argues that women’s interfaith dialogue takes on special political urgency “to heal the war wounds” in the aftermath of the Balkan wars. She is especially concerned with the persistence of negative stereotypes and prejudices that always threaten to legitimate further violence and calls on women to come together in order to create trusting relationships across the divisions.

Raised in the secular pluralist atmosphere of the UK, *Humera Khan* credits interreligious dialogue meetings in Bendorf, Germany with her development as a Muslim and a feminist. These Jewish-Christian-Muslim encounters forced her to weather internal conflicts within the small number of Muslim representatives hailing from different contexts but also to develop a coherent position on the topic of “women in Islam” in dialogue with Jewish and Christian feminists. As a child of immigrants in the UK, her religious journey is fundamentally dialogically, forged in the interstices of various Muslim constituencies, European secular culture, as well as feminist political, Jewish and Christian discourses.

For *Alice Schumann*, a German convert to Hinduism and devotee of Krishna Bahkti-Yoga, the religious path proved to be equally fundamentally dialogical. The granddaughter of a Lutheran missionary and daughter of a Roman Catholic father begins her narrative with reflections on the “internal dialogue” that propelled her towards Indian philosophy and meditative practice. Her “intra-religious” battles involved the subordination of women that eventually led her to open a missionary temple in East Germany where she encountered racist hostility and xenophobia. As resident expert on Hinduism she was often invited to interreligious dialogues with church representatives who remain intent on framing Hindu communities in Germany as dangerous cults and sects. In her conclusion, Schumann reiterates that each level of dialogue is indispensable for overcoming ignorance and prejudice.

The third essay looks at the extent of interfaith practice among Christian ministers and rabbis in London. For her dissertation Protestant theologian *Uta Blohm* conducted in-depth interviews with female rabbis, priests and ministers and found high levels of interfaith collaboration at the local level irrespective

of theological or political outlook. Nevertheless for some, sharing liberal political values trumps denominational and religious allegiances. Hence, politics – and current divisions between liberals and conservatives within religions – prove to be in greater need for sustained efforts at dialogue than interfaith dialogue.

The last essay in this section reports on the first, feminist, interreligious “teaching and learning institute” (*Lern- und Lehrhaus*) in Germany. Led by a Jewish, Muslim and Christian feminist religious scholar, this course involved seven modules and exposed participants to the basic teachings of each of the Abrahamic religions as well as of feminist efforts at reforming these teachings. *Rachel Herweg*, *Gisela Matthiae* and *Rabeya Müller* present an overview of this course and draw preliminary lessons at to its successes.

In conclusion, *Annette Esser* and *Helene Egnell* have collected a list of the most important and best-known projects involved in feminist interreligious dialogue in Europe at the current time.

The third section is dedicated to the presentation of *Women’s Traditions*. *Larissza Hrotkó* provides short historical portraits of prominent Jewish and Christian women who became leading figures in the women’s movement/s in Hungary, especially in Budapest. She shows that the Hungarian feminist movement, for better or worse, had deep roots in the religious communities as they transformed women’s charitable organizations into political forums for the improvement of women’s political situation.

For all its obvious cultural and religious differences, the history of the Hungarian women’s movement is remarkably parallel to the history of the (Ottoman) and later Turkish women’s movement. *Nuriye Duran Özsoy* points out that women’s political activism preceded the establishment of the secular state by decades and that women in the Ottoman Empire fought valiantly for political rights. The history of the establishment of the secularist state is important to understand current political battles among secular and religious feminists in Turkey and the heated debates over women’s headdress in the public sphere. *Nuriye Duran Özsoy* argues persuasively that contemporary women who don Islamic head-cover are far from passive victims but choose to forge a modern path for religious women in an urban context.

Naime Çakır points to a similar development, looking at the situation of Muslim immigrant women in Germany. Confronting several layers of discrimination they develop diverse strategies to overcome these difficulties. A reflected religious practice, often supported by academic studies of religious traditions gives them a new and emancipated view on their religious and cultural roots.

The last essay hails from Spain under the heading *From the Countries* and traces the exciting development of Spanish feminist theology against the historical backdrop of the patriarchal institution of the Roman Catholic Church in that country.

While certainly not exhaustive, the editors have compiled a short *Bibliography* of relevant titles in the area of feminist interfaith dialogue. These entries contain our personal favourites and should be accepted with that limitation, as they reveal a predominantly Christian bias. We would ask that readers recognize the need for further study and growing awareness that in the future feminist discourse on religions must include more non-Christian perspectives.

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Annette Esser, Katharina von Kellenbach and Annette Mehlhorn
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