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Women in Interreligious Dialogue Transformation of Negative Gender and Religious Stereotypes

The European Union and the growing need for interreligious tolerance

Within the contemporary social transformations in the post-industrial age, one of the important issues in a 'united Europe' is the growing need for intercultural and interreligious tolerance. The European Union has defined itself as a system of values and actions based on the basic principles of freedom and democracy, as well as recognition of human rights, fundamental liberties and the rule of law. Freedom of thought, conscience and religion form an integral part of these basic rights, as does the respect afforded by the Union to cultural and religious diversity. Behind the principles and the political and civil rights of the Union lies the assumption that its member states have a constitution that recognizes and guarantees both the autonomy of church and state, and freedom of religion and conscience. Even though all European Union member states are formally secular and recognize freedom of religion, they do not always remain neutral towards different religions and religious denominations. For example, some members have a state church and others do not. Even where there is no state church, one denomination may in practice be privileged above others. On the other hand, recognizing a state church does not necessarily exclude equal treatment of other churches. Each member state has its own history of the relationship between church, state, politics and society, which has resulted in specific arrangements. Thus, on the question of the separation of church and state there is no single European model.

Europe, where there are so many different varieties of religious expression, has some societies that are overwhelmingly Protestant, some overwhelmingly Catholic, and some a combination of both. In addition, the presence of Jews and Muslims varies from one country to another. Europe, in short, is not only religiously diverse; it is diverse in its approach to religion. Many official religious organizations insist on the importance of interreligious tolerance in the face of religious diversity. But such appeals will mean little unless ordinary people themselves are tolerant of those whose faith is different from their own.

At this point the role of feminist theology and active participation of women in interreligious dialogue is of great importance. A necessity, indeed a pronounced significance, the contribution and vantage of women's interreligious dialogue and feminist theology as "the missing dimension in the interreligious dialogue,"¹ as Ursula King has pointed out, will fundamentally contribute to a more concrete and direct transfer of the results of interreligious dialogue into life. An active participation by feminist theologians or the women's voice in interreligious dialogue is, in the first place, the introduction of women's issues into interreligious dialogue and, consequently, the recognition and ascertainment of the presence of negative gender and religious stereotypes and prejudices. This, as a result, enables a more expansive and concrete learning about and recognition of the diversity and specialty of the "other," as well as the uncovering of many negative stereotypes and prejudices that are deeply rooted in our cultural collective awareness stemming from ignorance about the other – in this sense mostly the female. This brings the other, the different, closer. In this sense, the female dimension of interreligious dialogue concretises the fields of diversity and dissension, as it faces the challenges and issues concerning the concrete personal experiences and stories of women, which 'liven up' through interreligious dialogue. It is precisely this 'live dialogism' that is of the utmost importance in getting to know the diversity and particularities of determinate religious manifestations and women's religious experiences. In the words of Maura O'Neill: "We need to learn about these religions not just from books but by meeting and dialoguing with their practitioners, for only personal conversation can place an ideology in its human context."²

Feminist theology in search of interreligious tolerance

Feminist theology has become a worldwide and omni-religious movement, emerging as a response to women's experience of discrimination and patriarchal dominance, which regulated and defined their religious and secular lives. Just as individual Christian women's experiences differ and shape the particular efforts within Christianity, so women's religious experiences within other world religions vary widely. Despite enormous variations, all women share the experience of discrimination and fear of patriarchal violence. Although

¹ Ursula King, "Feminism: the Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions", in: John D'Arg May (ed.), *Pluralism and the Religions: The Theological and Political Dimensions* (Cassell: London 1998), 40.

² Maura O'Neill, *Mending a Torn World, Women in Interreligious Dialogue* (Orbis Books: New York 2007), 3.

discrimination and patriarchy can be defined differently in individual cultural-religious spheres, the desire and need to “talk about the female experience” and to awaken women’s voices are universal. In this sense we can say that feminist theology and religious feminism have together become intercultural and interreligious phenomena. They connect women and empower activism for liberation against oppression and religious patriarchal violence similar to the struggles against slavery, racial discrimination and genocidal ethnic violence. Rooted in women’s religious experience, feminist theology is pluralist and diverse as it strives for liberation and greater respect for the female principle of action and greater gender harmony.

As a genuine intercultural phenomenon, feminist theology faces new challenges for cooperation and dialogue within different branches of Christian feminist theology as well as with feminist theologies emerging from other religions. As a special philosophy of religions³ and theology of religions⁴, feminist theology contributes the variety of women’s experience of past and present discrimination to interreligious dialogue and raises concrete questions and challenges connected therewith. In *Mending a Torn World: Women in Interreligious Dialogue*, Maura O’Neill suggests the following topics and issues for women’s interreligious dialogue: women’s spirituality, sexuality and gender roles, the relationship of the past to the present and the nature of religious authority.⁵ A further, very important topic of women’s interreligious dialogue is the issue of ecofeminism, as the importance of environmental solidarity emerges in today’s nature-unfriendly and discriminatory world. Sally McFague proceeds from the fact that the entire world and nature should be looked upon

³ The possibility of *feminist theology as a philosophy of religion* was noted by Pamela Sue Anderson, who saw feminist theology as a new form of philosophy of religions. For details see: Pamela Sue Anderson, “Feminist Theology as Philosophy of Religions”, in: Susan Frank Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2002), 40-57.

⁴ *Feminist theology as a theology of religions* is a relatively new expression, which in the opinion of Rita Gross denotes the awareness that in the background of religious plurality and diversity there exists a key common to all religions. In the case of feminist theology it is thus about the common key of women’s experience of patriarchal subordination and discrimination of women by all religions. Gross appeals to all feminist theologians to try to develop the right approach for women’s participation in interreligious dialogue to truly come alive. See: Rita M. Gross, “Feminist Theology as Theology of Religions”, in: Susan Frank Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, *ibid.*, 61.

⁵ O’Neill, *Mending a Torn World*, 114-122.

as “God’s body”, which can be polluted and thus desecrated by improper behaviour and treatment. Joining this view is Aruna Gnanadason, who calls on Indian women to strive for a holistic environmental and spiritual theological vision, which should be gracious both to nature as well as to all the oppressed.⁶

Faced with cultural and religious plurality, feminist theology is trying to develop a suitable key, a methodology for understanding the other that can facilitate solidarity, interreligious tolerance and respect in light of interreligious dialogue. In the process it tries to find critical categories that can improve the treatment of gender, racial, cultural and religious diversity within feminist theory and theology. Ursula King points out the importance and necessity of developing a critical approach and methodology that would enable feminist theology to truly face religious pluralism.⁷

Towards a methodology of women’s interreligious dialogue

A good dialogue recognises and breaks up negative stereotyped notions and prejudices, elevates the level of tolerance and strengthens mutual understanding. The incorporation of women’s voices into interreligious dialogue and women’s interreligious dialogue tend to be essentially practical and personal. These two characteristics positively affect the development of tolerance and the quality of dialogue. In order to reach the characteristics of openness, respect, tolerance, directness, honesty, acceptance, regard, listening that are associated with the concept of dialogue and dialogism in Western thought, practical and personal experience is crucial. Exchanging and learning from personal experience is able to overcome the first obstacle precluding a good dialogue, namely the covert presence of negative stereotypes and prejudices, i.e. a stereotyped evaluation of the others.

The danger of stereotyping others is classified as one of the main obstacles on the road towards a quality dialogue by Maura O’Neill who also warns of the danger of selective information and the fear of identity loss.⁸ To avoid these obstacles O’Neill suggests the following methodology:

1. Clarifying the primary purpose of coming together as dialogue and not persuasion or imposition of one’s own belief on others.

⁶ Kwok Pui-lan, “Feminist theology as intercultural discourse”, in: Susan Frank Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, 23-37.

⁷ King, “Feminism: the Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions”, 40.

⁸ O’Neill, *Mending a Torn World*, 104.

2. Using personal stories as a method to break the ice of formality, to stimulate trust, remove distrust and to confront the fear of identity loss.
3. Active listening without preconceived interpretations, but creatively and with an openness to unexpected and unfamiliar experiences.⁹ When this listening is not done, when women believe that their view of women's rights is universal, much damage can occur in intercultural and interreligious situations.

To these three points of O'Neill's proposed methodology I would like to add a fourth: clarification of terminology (including basic value systems, the meaning of womanhood and the concept of feminism). This is important because value systems may differ radically and there is tremendous diversity among feminists concerning the meaning of womanhood. Furthermore, our very definitions of feminism may vary. Therefore, by defining our terms we enhance our ability to understand each other across cultural contexts and we improve our ability to deal with the diversity among the world's oppressed.¹⁰

In addition to these four elements of the proposed methodology for women's interreligious dialogue, we must remain ever vigilant about the covert and pernicious character of negative stereotypes and prejudices that may be present in our mental perceptions. Therefore, let us briefly review the character of prejudices and stereotypes.

Stereotypes and prejudices

The term prejudice was first used by the American journalist, Walter Lippmann, who was also the first to describe a stereotype as a "mental picture" drawn by the individual about himself and others. It is characteristic of a stereotype to be based on unverified facts and reports about a certain event, person, object, etc. Prejudices, for Lippmann, were emotionally charged negative or positive stereotypes. Negative prejudices are typically ascribed by the dominant group to subjected groups, while positive prejudices are only reserved for members of the superior group. It is in the interests of ruling groups to turn such prejudices into objects of a coherent ideology and to accept such prejudices as plain truth.¹¹

⁹ O'Neill, *Mending a Torn World*, 106-111.

¹⁰ Maura O'Neill, *Women Speaking, Women Listening* (Orbis Books: New York 1990), 56-60.

¹¹ Mirjana Nastran-Ule, *Temelji socialne psihologije (Fundamentals of Social Psychology; Znanstveno in publicistično središče: Ljubljana 1994)*, 103.

According to the Slovenian sociologist Mirjana Nastran-Ule, a member of the “superior group” in the European context is a “heterosexual white male, member of the western urban culture, professing affiliation to liberal Christianity and belonging to the middle or higher social class”.¹² As members of the dominant gender, men have formed numerous stereotypes about women’s inferiority throughout history. And women have often accepted these gender stereotypes about themselves since negative prejudices are often received and subscribed to by members of the very group to which these prejudices refer.

In contemporary Slovene society, phrases, such as: “*men don’t cry*” and “*woman – a hen*” (the woman is as brainless and confused as a hen) are quite widespread. These are two very common prejudices denoting characteristics that are supposed to be typical of the male or female genders. Since prejudices are uncritically adopted opinions that are not based on logically and empirically founded judgements, both these phrases qualify since they are based on stereotyped, generalised notions that are extremely simplified and categorical. Let me mention a few more examples of prejudices that are not all gender related, but also mark racial, class and religious determinateness or denotation: “*black people are stupid*,” “*all capitalists are exploitative*,” “*Islam is a religion of violence*,” and “*Muslim women suffer the greatest gender discrimination*.” Although they are unfounded, prejudices and stereotypes catch on easily and persist due to their simplicity and clear character. They assert themselves easily in groups, especially when they perform an important psychological function – enabling easier distinction between groups, helping to create an atmosphere of cohesiveness and greater value for the members of a group, etc. Prejudices are thus based on stereotyped, simplified judgements. They differ from common erroneous judgements in that they are extremely resistant. One does not give them up easily, even when confronted with well-founded arguments about their erroneousness.¹³

The basic standpoints on which prejudices are based are gender, ethnic and racial affiliation, religion and social status. Prejudices are most often manifested in disrespectful, intolerant or contemptuous attitudes towards members of different groups.

¹² Mirjana Nastran-Ule (ed.), *Predsodki in diskriminacije, izbrane socialno-psihološke študije (Prejudices and Discrimination: Select Sociopsychological Studies; Znanstveno in publicistično središče: Ljubljana 1999)*, 299-300.

¹³ Janek Musek, *Psihološki portret Slovencev (A Psychological Portrait of the Slovenes; Znanstveno in publicistično središče: Ljubljana 1994)*, 27.

It is the primary task of interreligious dialogue to uncover and break up such negative stereotypes and prejudices as well as to raise awareness about the true face of diversity. This is the key “medicine” for greater tolerance and better communication, as the unchecked spread of negative stereotypes leads to discrimination and violence.

Women transcending boundaries: a call for women’s interreligious dialogue and the healing of “Balkan war wounds”

Feminist theology in Slovenia is still in its infancy, where it should find an exciting space between Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Muslim religious communities in the new cultural and political setting of a modern European state. Geographically and economically speaking, Slovenia is a bridge between the West and the East, between the “European Union” and “the Balkans” or former Yugoslav republics. It was the first state to secede from Yugoslavia in 1991. Its religious structure comprises members of all major religions of the individual former Yugoslav republics preceding 1991. The differences in ideologies, religious and ethnic affiliation, the different languages, customs and traditions of the inhabitants of Yugoslavia before 1991 were, in addition to different political and economic agendas, the factors that caused the disintegration of the former Yugoslav state. The wounds, which only deepened with the secession of individual former Yugoslav republics from the kin state, were left at the mercy of the winds of a collapsing state economy, capitalist globalisation and time. I would argue that a women’s conference in the framework of interreligious dialogue could be of extraordinary importance in “healing the wounds of the Balkans.” Women’s interreligious dialogue in the territory of former Yugoslavia could overcome many of the present obstacles. There are many practical problems troubling women in different religious spheres of the individual states of the former Yugoslav geographical area. Seeing that feminist theology is still in its early stages in these post-socialist states, women’s interreligious dialogue in this area could also contribute to the strengthening of feminist theology and religious feminism.

As Maura O’Neill pointed out, “ideological issues become secondary when women join forces to work out solutions to practical problems.”¹⁴ In first-world countries, on the local level, women of all religions and religious perspectives come together to improve the quality of their children’s education and

¹⁴ O’Neill, *Mending a Torn World*, 99.

the safety of their neighbourhoods. On a broader, more global scale, women are working together to address problems that affect all sides of economic or geographical boundaries: domestic violence, sexual exploitation of women and children, lack of clean air and water, and religious and ethnic intolerance. Women who are members of these groups are forming bonds that transcend religious or political differences.

Conclusion

Facing and getting to know diversity and the particularities of individual women's religious experiences enlivens women's interreligious dialogue. Women's participation and cooperation through interreligious dialogue erases geographical, political, religious and other ideological dependencies. By breaking up negative stereotypes and prejudices such dialogue transcends the limits of personal and collective blindness and strengthens the awareness of interpersonal and interreligious tolerance. A more active integration and promotion of women's interreligious dialogue in the areas of the European Union and the Balkans is an urgent issue for the women's ethic of care of Europe and around the globe, which can be understood as the next step in the evolution of humankind.¹⁵

Dieser Artikel beschreibt die Bedeutung des interreligiösen Dialogs unter Frauen als global relevantes und gegenwärtiges Phänomenon. Er unterstreicht die Wichtigkeit und Dringlichkeit eines aktiveren und häufigeren interreligiösen Dialogs unter Frauen innerhalb der Grenzen der Europäischen Union, um größere interreligiöse Toleranz zu schaffen. Der Beitrag stellt zentrale Charakteristika des interreligiösen Dialogs unter Frauen vor und zeigt bedeutende Schritte auf, um Hindernisse besser zu erkennen und mögliche Methoden für solche Dialoge zu entwickeln. Da negative Stereotypen eine ständige Gefahr für Dialogprozesse darstellen, beschreibt der Artikel den Charakter solcher Stereotypen und Vorurteile. Schließlich ruft der Beitrag die Frauen auf „dem Balkan“ dazu auf, „die Wunden der Balkankriege zu heilen“, indem sie sich am interreligiösen Dialog beteiligen.

En este artículo se describe la importancia del diálogo interreligioso de mujeres en tanto que fenómeno actual de importancia global. Se subraya que es importante y

¹⁵ For further consideration cf. also Philip Leroy Culbertson (ed.), *The Spirituality of Men* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2002); Ann Cathrin Jarl, *In Justice: Women and Global Economics* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis 2003); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: New York 2005).

urgente que el diálogo interreligioso de mujeres sea más activo y frecuente en la Unión Europea, para generar de esta manera más tolerancia interreligiosa. Se presentan las características principales del diálogo interreligioso de mujeres; se indica cuáles pueden ser pasos importantes para detectar obstáculos y posibles métodos del diálogo interreligioso de mujeres. Teniendo en cuenta el peligro de que constantemente están presentes en el diálogo interreligioso estereotipos negativos, en el artículo se describe brevemente el carácter de estos estereotipos y prejuicios. Finalmente, en el artículo se hace un llamado a las mujeres de los “países Balcánicos” a comenzar a sanar “las heridas que dejó la guerra en los Balcánicos” participando en el diálogo interreligioso de mujeres.

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