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Prayers and Practices of Women: Lex Orandi Reconfigured

*God may well operate ... in a particular construct of textual tradition, but what about the rituals and feasts? What about the prayers and practices of women?*¹

I. Liturgy as a source for theological reflection

In recent years, the liturgy has (re-)emerged as a distinctive source for theological reflection. Theologians from a broad spectrum of positions now claim liturgy as a fundamental site for understanding, interpreting, and configuring the Christian faith. These liturgical theologians often summarize their claim by an oscillating shorthand version of a Patristic axiom, *lex orandi, lex credendi*: the law of praying is the law of believing; worship shapes faith; as you pray, so do you believe. What is striking about this development is the way in which these theologians have occluded the distinct shape of the prayers and practices of women. While emphasizing that God operates not only in textual traditions, but also in “the rituals and feasts”, they have clearly not attended to “the prayers and practices of women.”² The reasons for this inattentiveness are multiple, but three stand out. First, the theological recourse to liturgical tradition is based on a liturgical historiography which is inattentive to the profoundly gendered nature of worship practices in the Christian community. That is, liturgical tradition continues to be constructed as gender-blind or gender-neutral, and our understanding of liturgical history thus continues to be shaped by complex forms of marginalization, of silencing, and of misnaming of women’s prayers and practices. Theologians claiming this liturgical tradition for their work cannot but reproduce the androcentrism of the liturgical master narrative. Second, this androcentrism is exacerbated by the nature of the theological arguments made through the

¹ Rebecca S. Chopp, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville 1995), 80.

² *Ibid.*

recourse to liturgical tradition. As Rebecca Lyman notes: “Many theologians have used liturgy or devotion as a conservative weight for theological work or development.”³ An example might be the favour the axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi* has enjoyed in arguments against the use of inclusive language in the liturgy.⁴ Reference to liturgical tradition here – and elsewhere – is tantamount to a conservative theological approach. A theological recourse to liturgical tradition has thus (apparently) been capable only of engendering “liturgical erectitude.”⁵ Third, the claim to liturgy as a theological site has produced its own forms of gendered discourse. For example, discussions of the distinction between *lex orandi* as a form of “primary” theology, and *lex credendi* as a form of “secondary” theology, often point to a “Mrs Murphy” as the one in the pews who engages in primary theology. The secondary theologian is tacitly coded as male.⁶ It does not take a feminist theologian to notice that most Mrs Murphy analogies are stereotypically gendered and a caricature of the diversity of (worshipping) women’s lives.⁷ With these gendered metaphors, however, a seemingly natural alliance comes to be established between, on the one hand, women, *lex orandi*, and non-scholarly liturgical “experience”, and, on the other, men, *lex credendi*, and scholarly reflection on liturgy. Like other forms of malestream epistemology,⁸ the theological recourse to the liturgy, too, is gendered, with the privileged aspects of knowledge being coded as masculine, while the non-reflective emotions

³ Rebecca Lyman, “Lex orandi: Heresy, Orthodoxy, and Popular Religion,” in: Sarah Coakley and David A. Pailin (eds), *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1993), 131-141, here 138-139.

⁴ To name just one example: Richard J. Schuler, “Lex orandi, lex credendi: The Outrage of Inclusive Language,” in: *Sacred Music* 121/2 (1994), 6-10.

⁵ I borrow the expression from Ronald L. Grimes’s wonderfully witty and satirical piece “Liturgical Supinity, Liturgical Erectitude: On The Embodiment of Ritual Authority,” in: *Studia Liturgica* 23 (1993), 51-69.

⁶ Cf. Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Pueblo: New York 1984), 146-147.

⁷ Cf. Paul V. Marshall, “Reconsidering ‘Liturgical Theology’: Is there a *Lex Orandi* for all Christians?” in: *Studia Liturgica* 25 (1995), 129-151, here 147. Colleen McDannell notes similarly how categories of gender are used to distinguish liturgical art, which is coded as “virile”, from liturgical kitsch, which is depicted as “effeminate”: see *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Yale University Press: New Haven 1995), 163-197.

⁸ For more, see Rebecca Chopp, “Eve’s Knowing: Feminist Theology’s Resistance to Malestream Epistemological Frameworks,” in: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland (eds), *Feminist Theology in Different Contexts* (Concilium; SCM Press / Orbis Books: London / Maryknoll 1996, 116-123.

and the body (Mrs Murphy is always “in the pew,” the male secondary theologian is seemingly location-less) are gendered as feminine.

In light of these problematic constructions of gender in the theological turn to the liturgy, it is not surprising that feminist theologians have only recently begun to give more sustained attention to the themes of liturgical theology in a broader sense.⁹ Two examples are Susan A. Ross’s *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology*, and Elizabeth A. Johnson’s *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*. Ross rethinks fundamentals of sacramental theology in light of the liturgical practices of women and of feminist theory. As she rightly asks, if the axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi* suggests that the primary context for theological reflection is worship, what or whose worship are we to privilege?¹⁰ For Ross herself, the answer is clear: both the official worship of the church and women-identified liturgies count as *lex orandi* to which theology has to be attentive. Elizabeth Johnson’s book points in a similar direction. She actually begins with an allusion to a feminist liturgical community and focuses her work on “the current resurgence of women’s practices of memory.”¹¹ These women’s practices of memory are the crucial building-block for Johnson’s feminist reading of the communion of saints. Both Ross and Johnson, then, point to the need to reconfigure the *lex orandi* while embracing a theological recourse to liturgical tradition.

Given the fact that theological work as a whole, however, has neither drawn on a gender-attentive narrative of liturgical tradition, nor paid any attention to current liturgical traditioning in women’s hands, I see continuing and sustained reflection on a feminist reconfiguring of *lex orandi* as a pressing task. In what follows, I want both to honour the theological turn to the

⁹ An exception to this is the handful of feminist theologians in liturgical studies. I mention here especially Marjorie Procter-Smith’s two books, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Abingdon Press: Nashville 1990), and *Praying With our Eyes Open: Engendering Feminist Liturgical Prayer* (Abingdon Press: Nashville 1995). See also Denise J.J. Dijk, *Een beeld van een Liturgie: Verkenningen in vrouwenstudies liturgiek, met bijzondere aandacht voor het werk van Marjorie Procter-Smith* (Narratio: Gorinchem 1999).

¹⁰ Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (Continuum: New York 1998), 30-31, see also 203-204. Cf. also the publication of a collection of essays on the same topic, from the other side of the Atlantic: Regina Ammicht-Quinn and Stefanie Spindel (eds), *Krafffelder. Sakramente in der Lebenswirklichkeit von Frauen* (Pustet: Regensburg 1998).

¹¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (Continuum: New York 1998), 26.

liturgy, and at the same time to claim women's prayers and practices as a prominent, if largely hidden part of the *lex orandi*. While the historical reconstruction of a liturgical tradition that is gender-attentive will have to await another day,¹² my argument here focuses on the contemporary surge of liturgical practices of women. I contend that these women-identified prayers and practices offer possibilities of challenging, broadening, and reconfiguring established claims to the liturgy as a theological site. I begin by highlighting four recent (and quite divergent) developments which coincide with and substantiate my claim to women's liturgical practices as fundamentally important to theological work. I then offer two small pointers to the material contours of women's *lex orandi*, past and present. I conclude with some thoughts on the nature of a feminist appeal to liturgical tradition.

1. Liturgy as a theological site

My argument for women's *lex orandi* as a theological site can draw substantially on well established arguments for the importance of liturgical tradition for theological reflection. Since the publication of Geoffrey Wainwright's *Doxology: The Praise of God in Doctrine, Worship, and Life* two decades ago,¹³ a growing number of Protestant theologians have joined the many Orthodox and Catholic theologians who consciously draw on liturgical materials for their work.¹⁴ As a result of this development, *lex orandi* is once again being appreciated as a fundamental part of the Christian tradition and as a crucial source of theological reflection. Although there are distinct differences between theologians as to how *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* are to be related – from claims to the priority of doxology over theology, to the subordination of the liturgy to dogma, to a conviction of worship as theology – all these theological proposals are part of the (re-)turn to the liturgy that so profoundly marked theological work in the second half of the twentieth century.

Because women's faith practices are both an integral and a distinct part of Christian tradition, the fact that the peculiar shape of women's liturgical practices remains invisible constitutes a distinct problem in this theological return

¹² For a beginning, see Teresa Berger, *Women's Ways of Worship: Gender Analysis and Liturgical History* (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN 1999).

¹³ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Doctrine, Worship and Life* (Oxford University Press: New York 1980).

¹⁴ For an overview of recent developments, see Teresa Berger, *Theology in Hymns? A Study of the Relationship of Doxology and Theology according to "A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People Called Methodist" (1780)* (Abingdon Press: Nashville 1995), 31-57.

to the liturgy. Gender as a fundamental marker of liturgical life is occluded and thus written out of what comes to be constructed as “The Liturgical Tradition”. For example, in most theological claims about the importance of the eucharist for the life of the church, there is no acknowledgement of the peculiar ways in which women’s gender has shaped, circumscribed, and, last but not least, restricted their engagement with this sacrament.¹⁵ More than half of the church, in its gendered particularity, remains invisible in these claims about the centrality of the eucharist. To put it more humorously, the Roman Catholic girl’s response to the priest’s question: “How many sacraments are there?” highlights what much liturgical theology has veiled: “Seven for boys, and six for girls.”¹⁶ Theologians claiming the liturgical tradition as a profound source for theological reflection have remained satisfied with the first half of the girl’s insight. There is no surprise here, since, overwhelmingly, these theologians have belonged to the gender for whom the answer “seven” is quite appropriate.

2. Women’s ways of worship

Although women’s faith practices continue to be written out of the recourse to liturgical tradition, there has been a burgeoning interest in women’s ways of worship outside of theology proper. It is startling to realize how much we have learned of women’s *lex orandi* from authors other than theologians who profess the crucial importance of worship for theological reflection. I can only highlight a few of these works here, and, indeed, will have to limit myself to more recent studies within the Christian tradition.¹⁷

¹⁵ Glimpses of the importance of gender for eucharistic practices are offered by Caroline Walker Bynum, “Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century,” in: *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (Zone Books: New York 1994), 119-150, and by Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge University Press: New York 1991), 9, 120-122, 167-173. For other sacramental practices, see, for example, Catherine Vincie, “Gender Analysis and Christian Initiation,” in: *Worship* 69 (1995), 505-530, and Ursula Silber, “‘Zwiespalt’ und ‘Zugzwang’. Katholische Frauen und die Beichte,” in: Andrea Günter / Ulrike Wagner (eds), *What does it mean today to be a (Feminist) Theologian?* (ESWTR Yearbook 4; Kok Pharos / Grünwald: Kampen / Mainz 1996), 84-95.

¹⁶ The story is told in Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 21-22.

¹⁷ For earlier studies, compare especially Marjorie Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship: A Feminist Analysis of the Uses of Religious Symbolism* (E. Mellen Press: Lewiston, NY 1985), and my own “Liturgie und Frauenseele”. *Die Liturgische Bewegung aus der Sicht der Frauenforschung* (Praktische Theologie Heute 10; Kohlhammer Verlag: Stuttgart 1993). A burgeoning interest in women’s ways of worship is also evident for religious traditions

Gisela Muschiol's magisterial study *Famula Dei* examines the liturgical life of women's communities in Romano-Merovingian Gaul. Muschiol shows that the center of daily life for these women was a liturgy which the women themselves shaped and celebrated under the liturgical presidency of their abbess, including hearing confession and absolving.¹⁸ These women thus had a considerable measure of control over their own liturgical lives. Robert Orsi, in his study *Thank You, St. Jude*, focuses on the prayers and practices of American Catholic women devoted to St. Jude Thaddeus, the saint of hopeless causes.¹⁹ Orsi uses ethnographic research to read women's prayer practices as ways of negotiating particular cultural shifts in their lives. Marie Griffith's *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* examines the lives and narratives of North American members of the Women's Aglow Fellowship, an international charismatic Christian women's group. Griffith, similarly to Orsi, weaves together in-depth ethnographic research, careful textual analysis, and insights from cultural studies in order to read practices of prayer as a lens through which to view women's strategic ways of negotiating their daily lives.²⁰ Lesley Northup's *Ritualizing Women* approaches its subject, namely "What women do when they get together to worship?" by drawing broadly on diverse methodological tools, including ritual studies, gender studies, anthropology, and sociology, as well as by attending to diverse faith communities, from Christian feminist groups to Korean women shamans.²¹ Northup's study provides an analysis of the distinct patterns and emphases which emerge in women's ritualizing.

What these diverse studies show, whether they are concerned with Romano-Merovingian women's communities, women's devotion to a particular saint, charismatic women's prayer meetings, or feminist ritualizing, is the simple fact that gender shapes *lex orandi* in manifold ways. However, given

other than Christianity. These range from studies of women as ritual experts in Jewish communities, to women's worship of Krishna, to the place of ritual fasts in the religious lives of Hindu women, to women in Korean ritual life.

¹⁸ See Gisela Muschiol, *Famula Dei. Zur Liturgie in merowingischen Frauenklöstern* (Beiträge zur Geschichte des alten Mönchtums und des Benediktinerordens 41; Aschendorff: Münster 1994).

¹⁹ Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (Yale University Press: New Haven 1996).

²⁰ R. Marie Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA 1997).

²¹ Lesley A. Northup, *Ritualizing Women: Patterns of Spirituality* (Pilgrim Press: Cleveland 1997), 1.

that none of these studies is explicitly theological, the consequences of the impact of gender on constructions of the *lex orandi* – and the consequences for any claim to liturgy as a theological site – are not explored. Women's faith practices are simply seen as exciting ethnographic, cultural, and historical material. In other words, these studies have not affected theological reflection in any sustained way.

3. The theological turn to practice

The recent theological attention to practice, particularly in postliberal narrative theologies with their emphasis on the tradition and practice of the church, also coincides with my argument that women's liturgical practices are fundamentally important to theological reflection. Postliberal theologies understand the church and its canonical texts as a cultural-linguistic universe into which people are initiated and by which they are formed. These theologies consequently turn to traditional ecclesial practices, particularly baptism and eucharist, as shaping Christian identity and as constituting the most foundational source for theological reflection.

I take from this theological turn to the church and its texts and practices the poignant reminder of the importance of what the faith community has actually done through the ages. One of the distinct weaknesses of this approach, however, is the assumption that there is an easily discernible, pristine core of fundamental texts and practices in the tradition of the church, and that these texts and practices are gender-blind and not marred by the pervasive historic marginalization of women. Those texts and practices thus become sheltered from critique and reconfiguration. For most postliberal theologians, a hermeneutic of trust is assumed, and ecclesial practices continue to be drawn on normatively as if they are not also practices of domination and marginalization.

4. Privileging ordinary sites

I turn to a fourth development in theology in order to weave it into my claim for women's liturgical practices as of fundamental importance for theological reflection. This fourth development can be described as a turn to ordinary sites of the production of Christian meaning. There are many different forms this particular theological turn to ordinary sites can take, such as attention to local theologies, attention to the marginalized in various liberation theologies (for example, the poor of the base ecclesial communities in Liberation theology, Black slaves and their African American descendants in Black theology, different groups of women in feminist theologies), and

attention to popular religiosity, or “theologies of ordinary people,”²² to name only the most obvious. Rather than privileging official texts and doctrines of the church, these approaches focus on the symbolic and material productions of ordinary Christians. These Christians’ discourses and their sites for the production of Christian meaning become fundamental sources for theological reflection. Clearly, this approach is congenial to reading women’s liturgical practices as an important source for theological reflection. In actuality, however, little theological work has been done concretely on women’s ways of worship as one of those “ordinary” sites which are to inform theological reflection.

Although the four strands highlighted above are rooted in very different theological presuppositions, they each, in some of their argumentative moves, coincide with my claim that women’s liturgical practices are of fundamental importance for theological work. From the turn to liturgy as a theological site I derive the claim to women’s *lex orandi* as a *locus theologicus* to which theology has to attend. From recent research into a variety of women’s devotional practices, I gain the insight of women’s ways of worship as distinct forms of *lex orandi*, forged in the crucible of women’s lives. From the postliberal turn to the practices of the community of faith, I derive the insistence on women’s *lex orandi* as an ecclesial practice, a fundamental part of the life of the church through the ages. With the theological turn to ordinary sites as the source for theological reflection, I lift up women’s liturgical practices, often found at the fringes of official worship, as an important site of the theologies of ordinary people. I claim women’s *lex orandi* as an ancient ecclesial practice and as an integral yet distinct part of “The Liturgical Tradition”. The fundamental problem of this claim is that we have not yet recovered much of women’s liturgical history, and, therefore, can only speculate about the impact of gender on constructions of the *lex orandi* and about its consequences for any claim to liturgy as a theological site. In order to show that there is much to (re-)discover about the shape of women’s *lex orandi*, past and present, I want to offer two brief pointers to women’s ways of worship in the Christian tradition. I will conclude with some thoughts on the nature of a feminist appeal to liturgical tradition.

²² See Kathryn Tanner, “Theology and Popular Culture,” in: Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney (eds), *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection & Cultural Analysis* (Routledge: New York 1996), 101-120.

II. Women's *lex orandi*, past and present

Women have been liturgical practitioners through the ages, even if often neither in their own right nor in their own rite. Unfortunately, no liturgical history is available to date which goes beyond the problematic add-women-and-stir approach. Liturgical "facts" continue to be constructed as gender-blind or gender-neutral, with little or no recognition that what comes to be counted as "fact" is always theory specific.²³ As feminist research has shown again and again, a theory oblivious to gender as a fundamental marker of reality will: a) present apparently ungendered facts, b) thereby occlude an important shaper of historical practices, and c) therefore offer few guidelines for shaping practices in a world where gender systems are in crisis. For a feminist reconfiguration of *lex orandi* the task is clear, namely to begin to write gender back into the liturgical tradition. Such work is not about discarding the liturgical tradition, but about uncentering malestream constructions by inscribing a gender-attentive narrative in their place. Obviously, this is a colossal task which will demand sustained collaborative effort by diverse women scholars in the future. For the present article, I illustrate the above claims with a brief look at two distinct traditions of women's practices of prayer: biblical accounts, and the recent surge of feminist liturgical practices.

A look at the Scriptures offers a glimpse of the problems related to reconstructing women's ways of worship. As far back as the earlier parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, songs and prayers are put in the mouths of women; however, only about ten of the nearly three hundred instances of recorded prayers or allusions to prayer in the Hebrew Scriptures are clearly those of women.²⁴ If we look for a biblical *lex orandi*, then, the asymmetrically gendered amount of the evidence is striking. The content of the prayer traditions also speaks to the power of gender in shaping *lex orandi*. The majority of prayers put in women's mouths in the Hebrew Scriptures are related to women's reproductive and maternal roles. There is Hagar's desperate plea in the face of her dying child (Gen 21.16-17); Leah's praise of God at the birth of her son (Gen 29.35); the blessing over Naomi by her women friends on the occasion of

²³ I am indebted for this concise formulation to Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (University of Minnesota: Minneapolis Press 1999), 227.

²⁴ Cf. Patrick D. Miller, "Things Too Wonderful: Prayers of Women in the Old Testament," in: Georg Braulik et al. (eds), *Biblische Theologie und gesellschaftlicher Wandel* (Herder: Freiburg 1993), 237-251, here 237.

Ruth's marriage to Boaz (Ruth 4.14); and Hannah's agonizing prayer for a son (1 Sam 1.10), followed by her exuberant praise after the prayer is answered (1 Sam 2.1-10). Disproportionally, then, women's *lex orandi* is shaped by women's reproductive and maternal roles (which are, of course, coded differently, namely much more broadly, than today). That these roles exhaust neither women's lives nor women's prayer practices becomes visible in two powerfully prophetic voices of prayer and praise in the Hebrew Scriptures:²⁵ Miriam's triumphant song after the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 15.21) which is part of a larger women-centered ritual under Miriam's leadership, and the mighty song of Deborah (Judg 5.1-31) after Jael's killing of Sisera. In the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books, indeed, prayer "often undergirds female actions that are courageous, unconventional and subversive."²⁶

Looking to the New Testament, we find two prayers put in the mouths of women that became part of the liturgical tradition of the church. Mary's song of praise at her encounter with Elizabeth (Lk 1.46-55), known by its Latin opening word *Magnificat*, has its place in the daily evening prayer of the church. Elizabeth's prophetic blessing of Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Lk 1.42), is part of the prayer known and loved by many Catholics as the *Hail Mary*. These two songs of praise, like their counterparts from the Hebrew Scriptures, are situated within women's reproductive and maternal roles. Both Elizabeth and Mary are pregnant, miraculously so, and their praises emerge out of their encounter with one another as bearers of distinctly God-sent children. Beyond the powerful voices of these two pregnant women, however, the other women described in the New Testament as praying and as praising God remain speechless in the recorded testimony, from the prophet Anna (Lk 2.38), to "certain women" devoting themselves to prayer with the other disciples of Jesus after the Ascension (Acts 1.14), to the four nameless daughters of Philip who prophecy (Acts 21.9). This uneven witness of the Scriptures to the prayers and practices of women continues within the Christian tradition. Two thousand years of women's prayers and practices remain largely hidden; their painstaking

²⁵ Cf. Gail O'Day, "Singing Woman's Song: A Hermeneutic of Liberation," in: *Currents in Theology and Mission* 12 (1985), 203-210.

²⁶ Toni Craven, "'From Where Will my Help Come?': Women and Prayer in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books," in: M. Patrick Graham et al. (eds), *Worship and the Hebrew Bible* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series 284; Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield 1999), 95-109, here 99.

reconstruction has only just begun. Where women's prayers and practices surface, they are often related to women's bodily and reproductive functions.

Given this historical occlusion of women's prayers and practices, the surge of contemporary women-identified prayers and practices is a telling contrast to "The Tradition" (although if we reconfigured this tradition in gender-attentive ways, the contrast would be much less stark). These vibrant songs, prayers, and rituals, I suggest, already allow a glimpse at of the shape of a theological recourse to the liturgy that is gender-attentive. In recent decades, liturgy, indeed, has developed into a crucial site of women's activism within the church, "the symbolic equivalent of the right to vote and receive equal pay," as Catherine Bell has put it.²⁷ The importance of liturgy as a site of struggle over what shapes Christian women's lives cannot be overemphasized. For the Christian tradition in which liturgical authority seemed to be the prerogative of a male priesthood, or, more recently, a caste of (mostly male) liturgical experts, the fact that women themselves now actively construct and interpret their liturgical world is a primary mode of claiming power.²⁸ To put it differently, women today have rendered visible the liturgy as a crucial site for what, arguably, it has always been: the negotiation between faith and women's lives. This has involved a recognition both of the regulatory power of the traditional liturgy and of worship as a potential site of alternative liturgical practices.²⁹

What shape does *lex orandi* take in this women-identified form of liturgical traditioning? Granted that it is too soon to write a liturgical theology on the basis of women's ways of worship throughout history, it is worth anticipating what it might look like. How would one write a liturgical theology attentive to women's prayers and practices, that is, to the distinct shape of women's *lex orandi*? Taking contemporary women-identified liturgies³⁰ as an

²⁷ Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford University Press: New York 1997), 238.

²⁸ Cf. Northrup, *Ritualizing Women*, 11, 22.

²⁹ Christian women-identified prayers and practices are not alone here; there are analogous developments in other faith traditions. Witness for example the long struggle of Jewish religious women to pray publicly at Jerusalem's Western Wall (cf. the documentary film "Women of the Wall," directed and produced by Faye Lederman, 1993).

³⁰ For a succinct introduction to the North American scene, see Janet R. Walton, *Feminist Liturgy: A Matter of Justice* (American Essays in Liturgy; Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN 2000). For the European side, see, for example, Ute Knie and Herta Leistner (eds), *Laß hören deine Stimme. Werkstattbuch Feministische Liturgie* (Gütersloher Verlagshaus: Gütersloh 1999).

example, one might say that such a theology would attend to women as subjects of the liturgy who confront the Holy in the crucible of women's lives. In other words, this theology would begin with the presence of women and of women's bodies in worship, rather than being predicated on their absence or on their presence as a problem for the presence of the Holy. This theology, then, foregrounds women's liturgical practices as a primary *locus theologicus*, a site of reflection on God. A women-identified liturgical way of doing theology would also take clues from the careful interplay between liturgical tradition and a reconfiguring of the tradition through women's lives witnessed to in so many of the new liturgies (where a ritual of anointing will be offered to a survivor of rape, an exorcism might be directed at the evils of patriarchy, and a Good Friday liturgy can center on women's suffering). Such a theology would adopt the rich and intense pleasure of symbols readily apparent in women-identified liturgies. It would be a theology not dependent on binarist constructions of the ordinary and the sacred, and able to claim sacred space in all of life, especially in the ordinary of women's lives so often subject to trivialization and marginalization. With the poetic and imaginative language of women-identified liturgies, a feminist liturgical way of doing theology speaks the language of passion and compassion unafraid. From these liturgies' ability to bring women's diverse lives into the presence of the Holy One, such a theology takes clues about presencing women in theological discourse all the while healing and hallowing that presence. Lastly and most importantly, a feminist liturgical way of doing theology will attend to God-talk in ways revelatory of "She Who Is Worshipped" in women-identified liturgies: the Root of Wisdom, the Weaver of the Web of Life, the Divine Midwife and Passionate Sister, Sophia. The wealth of these images in women's liturgies witnesses to the intensity of the search for new and authentic ways of naming and encountering God.

Theology does well to listen to this *lex orandi* of women. Two reasons in particular lead me to stress this claim. First, a theological turn to liturgy, given its own interpretive commitments, can only be enriched by drawing on the centuries-old and ever-new wisdom of women liturgical practitioners. Why impoverish the *lex credendi* by inattentiveness to the prayers and practices of more than half of the Body of Christ? A second reason for my insistence on the importance of a liturgical theology attentive to women's lives is the work this tradition-friendly approach does in reconfiguring what counts as Christian tradition in the first place. I want to conclude with some thoughts on this subject in light of a challenge recently issued by Kathryn Tanner.

III. Reconfiguring *lex orandi*

In a wise challenge to feminist theologians, Kathryn Tanner has argued that feminist theologians do well to “remain traditional”. She writes: “The influence of feminist theology is strengthened to the extent it wrestles constructively with the theological claims that have traditionally been important in Christian theology; the more traditional the material with which it works, the greater the influence of feminist theology.”³¹ Tanner’s starting point for this challenge is a reconceptualization of the task of theology on the basis of marxist and poststructuralist theories of culture. These theories enable her to read theology as a site of struggle over symbolic resources and as an always selective, never stable site of the production of meaning. For Tanner, this reading of theology through the lens of cultural theories means that feminist theology becomes most effective and convincing not in distancing itself as far as possible from the tradition, but in claiming tradition as a site of struggle over meaning today. Thus, the more feminist theology is able to use and realign elements which have been appropriated by patriarchal interests, the greater the feminist claim to theological credibility. Tradition here is quite clearly not understood as a fixed and unified block of material, which is merely received and passed on. Rather, tradition is understood as constructed in the here and now in an ongoing struggle over a diversity of practices and interpretations. As such, what comes to be designated as tradition is firstly, highly selective, but secondly, rather unstable, open to redesignation.³²

Tanner’s argument resonates with my own effort to construct a feminist account of a liturgical way of doing theology. Like Tanner, I am convinced that feminist theology’s appeal is strengthened by tradition-friendliness in the sense of claiming as many elements as possible from the tradition, while at the same time reconfiguring what is authorized as “Tradition”. The claim to liturgy as a site of theological reflection is a seemingly traditional move, while the reconfiguration of *lex orandi* in the light of women’s ways of worship expands the very meaning of liturgical tradition. Tanner’s reading of tradition

³¹ Kathryn Tanner, “Social Theory Concerning the ‘New Social Movements’ and the Practice of Feminist Theology,” in: Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (eds), *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms* (Fortress: Minneapolis 1997), 179-197, here 192.

³² For a more detailed account, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Guides to Theological Inquiry Series; Fortress: Minneapolis 1997), 128-138.

as a struggle over meaning today is also helpful in interpreting the contemporary surge of women-identified liturgical practices. Rather than designating these practices as a decisive break with – indeed, the very undoing of – “The Tradition”, women-identified liturgical practices can instead be seen as part and parcel of the continuous construction and reconstruction of *lex orandi* in the life of the church. As Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg claims: “Rather than representing a break with tradition, new ritual and liturgical activity are the very essence of a living tradition.”³³

In reconfiguring the history of the liturgy in gender-attentive ways, we will undoubtedly discover what the contemporary surge of women-identified liturgical practices has made so very clear for our own time: that women engage the liturgy in the crucible of their own lives, including its manifold ways of marginalizing. But we will also discover what Andre Myre has recently put so well with a view to the biblical witness: “There is a word of God to women, spoken millenniums [*sic*] ago [and continuing to be spoken! – TB], a word which has not yet been heard, a word to which the men who wrote the Bible have not really given testimony.”³⁴ Confronting and acknowledging this “word of God to women” will force us to rethink notions of revelation, liturgical tradition, and authority in the church, to name just a few. Confronting and acknowledging this word of God to women will also force a new listening to the word of God which women hear today and to which they witness amidst continuing ways of silencing. The prayers and practices of women are indeed a crucial site of “the word of God to women” becoming flesh today.

Der Beitrag hinterfragt den Rekurs auf die Liturgie als *locus theologicus* im Licht feministisch-theologischer Theoriebildung. Die Autorin argumentiert, daß die traditionelle Diskussion um das Verhältnis zwischen liturgischer Tradition und theologischer Reflexion (*lex orandi, lex credendi*) auf einer Liturgiegeschichtsschreibung aufbaut, die die spezifisch weiblichen gottesdienstlichen Lebenswirklichkeiten unsichtbar läßt. Ein feministischer Rekurs auf *lex orandi* muß von daher das, was als liturgische Tradition zählt, neu konzipieren. Für diese femini-

³³ Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, “Introduction,” in: Lesley A. Northup (ed.), *Women and Religious Ritual* (Pastoral Press: Washington 1993), IX-XVI, here X.

³⁴ Andre Myre, “The New Testament in the *Women’s Bible Commentary*,” in: *Women Also Journeyed with Him: Feminist Perspectives on the Bible* (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN 2000), 83-98, here 97.

stisch-theologische Konzeption von *lex orandi* können neuere Kulturtheorien entscheidende Impulse geben.

La contribution remet en question le recours à la liturgie en tant que locus théologique à la lumière de la théorie théologico-féministe. L'auteur argumente que le discours traditionnel sur la relation entre la tradition liturgique et la réflexion théologique (*lex orandi, lex credendi*) construit sur une histoire liturgique, rend opaque les réalités spécifiques de la vie culturelle des femmes. Un recours féministe du *lex orandi* qui compte comme tradition liturgique, doit donc être reconçu. Pour cette conception théologique féministe du *lex orandi*, des accents décisifs peuvent être donnés par de nouvelles théories culturelles.

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