

Dialogue for Life – Feminist Approaches to Interfaith Dialogue*

Helene Egnell

Feminism is, according to Ursula King, “the missing dimension in the dialogue of religions”.¹ Interfaith dialogue is mostly, at least on the official level, carried out by men, and gender issues have rarely been on the agenda.

Likewise, interfaith dialogue has not played a great part in the development of feminist theology, as Rita M Gross has lamented.² Feminist theology has not dealt explicitly with interfaith issues to a great extent, and there has been a surprising lack of awareness of the importance of dialogue between Christian feminists and those of other faiths.

During the last decade however, Christian feminist theology has increasingly taken account of the reality of other religions. In literature, there is an awareness of the demands of a pluralist society, interfaith conferences are arranged, and networks for women in theological research and pastoral work are consciously set up as inter-religious enterprises. Examples are the African Circle of Concerned Women Theologians, the European Society for Women in Theological Research, and the Initiative Conference of European Women Theologians.

In this paper I will argue that to a certain extent, feminist theology and theology of religions deal with the same issues, and pose similar challenges to the churches. They also pose challenges to each other, which could enrich theological creativity in both fields, if taken seriously.

Common challenges to theology from feminism and interfaith dialogue

In feminism and interfaith dialogue, there are parallels regarding issues dealt with as well as in methodology. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki has pointed out that there is a correlation between religious imperialism and sexism. She says:

* Also published in Mortensen, V. (ed): *Theology and the Religions. A Dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2003.

¹ King, Ursula: “Feminism: The Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions”, Faculty of Theology University of Oslo Digital Archive, <http://www.tf.uio.no/lo/king0198.html>.

² Gross, Rita M: “Feminist Theology as Theology of Religions” *Feminist Theology* No 26, January 2001.

Absolutizing one religion, such that it becomes normative for all others, is a dynamic with clear parallels to sexism, whereby one gender is established as the norm for human existence. Therefore the critique of sexism can be extended as a critique of religious imperialism.³

This implies that feminist theology and a theology of religions share the common task of criticizing absolutism, and would gain much in discovering the common mechanisms behind religious absolutism and sexism.

Diane M Brewster has argued that the importance of contextuality, the demand that people must be free to define themselves, and the stress on relationships are three principles that interfaith dialogue and feminism have in common.⁴ She further argues that both feminism and interfaith dialogue challenge theology on two central points: our understanding of the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, and the limits of our “God-language”.

Christology is apparently a major issue in these areas, though from different viewpoints. In feminist theology, the question put by Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Can a male saviour save women?”, still has no definite answer. Not only has the maleness of Jesus, when used as an argument against the ordination of women, been a problem, other ingredients of traditional Christology have been questioned by feminists, for instance the idea of a father sacrificing his son (divine child-abuse as someone has put it) and the concept of redemptive suffering that has been used to keep women in abusive relationships.

Consequently, there has been a lot of energy spent on defining and formulating why Jesus Christ, in spite of everything, is central to the faith of Christian feminists. Solutions include the rediscovery of the Wisdom tradition, where Jesus is seen as the prophet/incarnation of the female Wisdom principle, rather than the male Word. Kwok Pui Lan has highlighted the “hybrid” nature of the Christ-concept, claiming that every generation must answer Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?”⁵

These solutions could have significance also for interfaith dialogue, in which the problem is how to express the uniqueness of Jesus in terms neither of confrontation nor fulfilment.⁶ The Wisdom concept opens up a pluralistic approach to other religions in general, as well as provides a point of depar-

³ Hewitt Suchicki, Marjorie: “In Search of Justice. Religious Pluralism from a Feminist Perspective” in Hick & Knitter (eds.): *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books 1987, p. 150.

⁴ Brewster, Diane M: “Feminism and interfaith dialogue. Some Parallels and challenges” in *The Month* 24(1991) 9/10 pp. 400–404.

⁵ Kwok Pui Lan : “Feminist Theology at the Dawn of the Millennium: Remembering the Past, Dreaming the Future” *Feminist Theology* No 27, May 2001 pp. 6–20.

⁶ Alan Race: *Interfaith encounter* London: SCM Press 2001, p. 71.

ture for a common search for wisdom.⁷ Kwok Pui Lan gives examples of answers to the question, “Who do you say that I am?” inspired by indigenous Asian religious traditions, like “the feminine principle of Shakti” or “a priest of Han”.⁸

The limits of God-language, is another area that has engaged feminist theologians. It has been claimed that if God is neither male nor female, it is tantamount to idolatry to make male images of God the norm. Sallie McFague has made us aware of the metaphorical nature of God-language in *Models of God and Metaphorical Theology*. Thus, feminist theologians explore which metaphors can be used for the Divine within the limits of a Christian context. Likewise, interfaith dialogue forces the question of the nature of religious language and symbols, their contextuality and ultimate inadequacy. Diane Brewster puts the question thus: Although “many of us involved in interfaith dialogue find much to be treasured in other religious traditions that we encounter, what can we use and still remain Christians?”⁹

Challenges of interfaith dialogue to feminist theology

Taking the issues of interfaith dialogue seriously could help feminist theology to explore deeper concepts that are already central to it, such as the principles of contextuality, self-definition and relationship mentioned above by Diane Brewster. There is already a growing awareness of the complexity of reality, wherein male/female is only one strand in a web of race, class, ethnic, and other affiliations. The issue of religious plurality could help deepen this awareness. Contact with feminists from other religious and cultural contexts could also prevent white western feminists from falling into the colonialist trap of condemning other religious or cultural habits from a western perspective. The ideal of letting people define themselves is put to the test here.

Is a pluralist position the only possibility for a feminist engaged in interfaith dialogue? Rita M Gross argues that it is, saying:

It is inconceivable that a feminist theologian would go through all the heart-ache of being excluded from her own religion and doing the theological work required to include herself back in, only to turn around and make exclusive or inclusive truth claims about the religion that excluded her!¹⁰

⁷ I have developed these ideas in my M Phil dissertation *Sophia in Interfaith Dialogue*, Irish School of Ecumenics/University of Dublin 1997.

⁸ Kwok Pui Lan 2001 p. 17.

⁹ Brewster p. 404.

¹⁰ Gross, p. 89.

I don't find that self-evident. It should be perfectly possible to arrive at a "feminist Barthian" standpoint, and claim that "religion is patriarchal" while revelation alone, through Jesus who is Wisdom incarnate, is liberating. Or, to be an inclusivist, claiming that Jesus is the supreme expression of Shakti, Prajna or whatever feminine religious principles may be relevant.

However, I think Rita M Gross has a point when she says that, since a major value of feminist theology is to include the voices that have not been heard, to widen the circle, to learn how to welcome diversity, it makes no sense for those values to stop when they hit the boundary of one's own religion. The necessity of "widening the canon" is an important concern of feminist theology – but other religious traditions have not been among the sources commonly used. On the other hand, Gross warns against "inappropriate appropriation", when symbols are thoughtlessly borrowed from other traditions without proper knowledge of their original settings. Parts of the feminist spirituality movement have been guilty of indiscriminate and unauthorized borrowing from Native American traditions.

Challenges of feminism to interfaith dialogue

As feminist theology in general, feminist approaches to interfaith dialogue include a deconstructive as well as a constructive project. Unlike most other dialogue settings, the participants generally do not come with the presupposition that their own traditions are sufficient. On the contrary, they come with the deeply felt insight that all religious traditions include elements that are oppressive for women, and they seek to identify the sources of oppression, as well as the means to change the traditions, together.

Ursula King has noted, that while the Chicago Declaration Toward a Global Ethic says that there are "condemnable forms of patriarchy" all over the world, "no connection [is] made with the patriarchal exploitation and subordination of women by the religions themselves".¹¹

Women in interfaith dialogue have less "vested interests" in their religious institutions, and thus are able to articulate more freely their personal feelings and opinions; they can challenge "malestream" interfaith dialogue to a critical evaluation of the oppressive aspects of religions.

There also seems to be a tendency to acknowledge conflict in dialogue carried out among women more than in dialogue among men.¹² This is remarkable because, in general, women are considered to be more prone to avoid conflict and seek harmony than men. Maura O'Neill suggests that the reason is that in the areas of religion and philosophy, women have been si-

¹¹ King, p. 8.

¹² O'Neill, Maura: *Women Speaking, Women Listening: Women in Interreligious Dialogue* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1990 pp. 94 ff, Eck, Diana L & Jain, Devaki: *Speaking of Faith: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change* London: Women's press, 1986, pp. 12ff.

lenced for so long that they take the opportunity to express their anger and deal with it when they dialogue among themselves. I don't find this entirely convincing. I would rather suggest that it is in relation to men, that women seek to avoid conflict, but can engage in conflict among themselves; But I don't know if this would be supported by scientific research.

There are also areas of conflict that are specific to a feminist interfaith dialogue. The most obvious example is Jewish-Christian dialogue, where Jewish women have accused Christian feminists of anti-Semitism, when they too easily have contrasted Old Testament misogyny with the liberating message of the Gospel.¹³ Another is the critique from Third World women against the perceived imperialism of western feminists when they criticize oppression of women in non-western settings,¹⁴ as well as differing opinions among Third world women themselves on issues regarding cultural practices.¹⁵ When these conflicts are acknowledged and dealt with, conflict can be found to be an asset, an opportunity to develop respect for the other, and as a source of growth and insight.¹⁶

This tendency to acknowledge conflict could be interpreted as an outcome of the stress on relationship and personal experience in feminist theology. Kate McCarthy argues that feminist theories on "women's experience" offer "resources for a new approach to [religious pluralism] that is both exciting and timely".¹⁷ "Women's experience" has been a key phrase in feminist theology from the beginning, and has developed from a naïvely universalistic concept to an awareness of the complexity of women's experiences depending on class, race, culture, sexuality and other factors. This grappling with complexity could in itself be an important contribution to interfaith dialogue. However, in spite of differences, there are aspects of women's experience that remain constant across cultures. Kate McCarthy highlights three of these as relevant for interfaith dialogue: the experience of otherness, a plurality of social location and an embodied spirituality.

Otherness is a theme that has been developed in feminist theology: the experience of being other, excluded in church and theology as well as in society, of being other than the (male) norm. This otherness is made into a resource, which could be especially useful to a theology of religions, which has to account "for otherness without subsuming it or annihilating it, and without abandoning one's own distinctive religious identity".¹⁸ One could

¹³ von Kellenbach, Katharina: *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1994.

¹⁴ See for example Kwok, p. 10.

¹⁵ See for example Kanyoro, Musimibi: "Engendered Communal Theology" in *Feminist Theology* No 27, May 2001, p. 39.

¹⁶ O'Neill, pp. 95–96

¹⁷ McCarthy, Kate: "Women's Experience as a hermeneutical Key to a Christian Theology of Religions" in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 6(1996) No 2, pp. 163–173.

¹⁸ McCarthy p. 165.

also explore the parallelism between “woman” as Other and “the pagan” as Other in theology.

Feminist theologians have developed an awareness of having multiple identities. To define oneself, as Carter Heyward does, as a “white Anglo Christian lesbian priest and academic”,¹⁹ is to belong to several different communities that interact and can be in tension with each other. This consciousness of multiple social locations could be a “foundation for a new kind of affirmation of religious difference”.²⁰

McCarthy further argues that the pattern of embodied spirituality in feminist theology could facilitate an “experientially grounded rather than conceptual inter-religious exchange”.²¹

An experientially grounded interfaith dialogue must build upon relations between the participants. Women participating in interfaith dialogue have often insisted that the dialogue should start in a sharing of personal experiences and life-stories. It is significant, that Rita M Gross’ and Rosemary Radford Ruether’s “Buddhist-Christian conversation” *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet* starts with the authors telling their “Autobiographical Routes to/Roots of Dialogue”.

“Hearing into speech” has been a key word in feminist consciousness-raising groups, coined first by Nelle Morton. It is essential to create an atmosphere of listening, to enable people who have been silenced, to speak from their own experience and not what conforms to conventional expectations. The experience of being listened to in its turn creates a willingness to listen. In interfaith dialogue, this could help to heighten the awareness that each participant comes with her/his own understanding that might not be identical with that of other adherents to the same religion, or, for that matter, to other women.

Relation is another important concept in feminist theology. It has been developed in the area of ethics, where Carol Gilligan has found that women develop relation-centred ethics in contrast to the stress on rules and autonomy in male ethics. Relation is also a soteriological and ontological concept, where “right relation” or “mutual relation” is a definition of salvation, and God is understood in relational terms: “Where there is no mutual relationship, there is no human experience of God”.²² Such an understanding of ultimate reality as relational should be fundamental to a theology of religions.

Likewise, Mercy Amba Oduyoye characterizes African women’s theology as a theology of relations, from which follows that as it is developed in

¹⁹ Quoted in McCarthy p. 165.

²⁰ McCarthy p. 167.

²¹ Ibid., p. 169.

²² Chung Hyun Kyung, quoted in McCarthy p. 170.

consciously multicultural and multireligious contexts, it is culture-sensitive and intentionally dialogue oriented.²³

Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet, the title of Gross' and Reuther's book is significant. It indicates that in interfaith dialogue in a feminist key, it is not dogmatic issues that are in focus, but it is more concerned with what contributes to the survival of the planet, peace, justice and the well-being of women and men.

The dialogue, besides critiquing the oppressive elements of religions, is about sharing what is liberating and life enhancing in the respective traditions.

For many feminist theologians from the Third world, interfaith dialogue is also an intra-faith dialogue. They appreciate the spiritual heritage from the indigenous religions, which were there before Christianity, and they are not afraid to pick the liberating elements from Christianity and indigenous religions in a kind of "life-affirming syncretism" as Chung Hyun Kyung puts it, while discarding oppressive and life-denying elements. Chung claims that this is what Asian women have been doing all along:

Since women were excluded from the public process of determining the meaning of their religion, they were free to carve out a religion on their own, without the constraints of orthodoxy. Their "imposed freedom" allowed them to develop in private a religious organic whole that enabled them to survive and liberated them in the midst of their struggle for full humanity.²⁴

Instead of looking down upon these women, despising their "ignorance" and condemning their "syncretism", Chung elevates them to models for how theology should be and even tries to reclaim the word "syncretism" from its negative connotations.

One characteristic of the emerging spirituality of Asian women is a celebration of plurality, says Aruna Gnanadason:

Asian women of all faiths together are engaged in a common spiritual search for a new society. They transcend with ease narrow divisions of faith, caste, cultural identity, and ideology to reflect and act of (Should 'of' be 'on'? A question of misprint perhaps?) issues of importance.²⁵

Gnanadason talks of a "spiritual search for a new society". This holistic approach, which refuses to divide reality into a "spiritual" and a "material" realm, is typical for feminist theology, as it is for liberation theology in gen-

²³ Oduyoye, Mercy Amba: *Introducing African Women's Theology* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2001, p. 17.

²⁴ Chung Hyun Kyung: "Following Naked dancing and Long Dreaming" in Russell, Letty et al (ed.): *Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens* (Louisville: The Westminster Press (1989) p. 67.

²⁵ Aruna Gnanadason: "Women and Spirituality in Asia" in Ursula King (ed.) *Feminist Theology from the Third World* SPCK Orbis Books 1996 p. 351–360.

eral. And the “issues of importance” to be reflected upon, are probably not Christology or eschatology, but rather trafficking in women, environmental pollution or the debt crisis. Dogmatic issues are considered important only insofar as they can provide tools for creating a just society, mutual relations or contribute to the survival of the planet.

Paul Knitter, Marjorie Suchocki and others as have suggested that “justice” should be the common norm to evaluate religious traditions in interfaith dialogue. For many feminist theologians it seems that “life” is the key word.

A feminist interfaith dialogue is a dialogue of life. The words “life-affirming”, “life-enhancing”, “survival-centred”, echo through the writings of especially third world feminist theologians like Chung Hyun Kyung, Mary John Mananzan and Mercy Amba Oduyoye. It is a celebration of God as the life-giver, and the criterion for judging diverse expressions of religion is whether they are life-enhancing or life-denying.

Conclusion

We have seen that feminist theology contains resources that could enhance interfaith dialogue. Among them are concepts like relationality, otherness, contextuality, the freedom to define oneself, hearing into speech, widening the canon as well as feminist discourse on Christology and religious language. On the other hand, feminist theology also could benefit from taking interfaith issues more seriously.

Feminist theologians, especially from the Third world, also seem to suggest a norm for judging the validity of religious practices that has to do with what enhances and affirms life.