



IG (Interest Community) of Feminist Theologians
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Reformed Churches – are they places for women’s liberty? A challenge addressed to the present-day orientation (track-switch) of some Reformed Cantonal Churches

Since twenty years the IG of Feminist Theologians is monitoring the positions and practices of Churches in Switzerland, examining their contributions to gender equality. How serious are Churches in terms of women friendliness and to what extent are they eager to employ well educated women who self-consciously raise the question of their place within the Church? This time, the IG focuses on the situation within the Reformed Cantonal Churches. Usually one considers these to show a fairer sense of justice for the equality issue, as they accept women occupying the same pastoral positions as men. But the formal act of respecting gender equality does not establish much more than a fair point of departure. In what direction (track-switch) do Swiss Reformed Churches today prepare the ground in terms of gender justice? The pressure to reduce budgets should not put at risk the achievements of the theological and ecclesial women’s movement over the last 25 years.

This year, in January, the interreligious Think Tank discussed the issue of compatibility of women’s liberty and religion, and this compatibility has been clearly affirmed (see www.interrelthinktank.ch). Today, the IG is restating the same question, asking: Can women consider churches as places/spaces warranting female liberty, places women may inhabit for good, or are churches to be considered rather as

provisional places/spaces women may cross while they are searching for a home and for justice – a place they will however leave behind if they intend to pursue their search seriously?

As we can normally expect Reformed Cantonal Churches to come up with impulses for the shaping of society, such questions may fairly well be taken into consideration in our church life. Who else, if not them (the churches) could be expected to consider these issues? The well-known sobriety of a Reformed Cantonal Church normally guarantees an enlightened awareness of what should still be bettered in our country in terms of justice and quality of life. Therefore we should not neglect paying attention to what churches intend to achieve in terms of gender relations and the access of women to decision making processes.

The Churches in the north-western part of Switzerland

The northwest of Switzerland has the reputation of being somewhat more open-minded than other parts of the country. As to the Churches, this statement corresponds to reality, as these, under the pressure of the women's movement, have established four positions for women's issues during the eighties and nineties (of the previous century): the consultation office and the project office for women of the Evang.-ref. Church in Basel-City, the ecclesial office for women's issues in Basel-Campaign (Reformed Church), as well as the office for women's concerns of the Roman Catholic Church in Basel-City.

During a period of twenty years the Basel women's offices challenged/moved their churches and their women in the direction of creating an open church in solidarity with others, a church responding to needs of people inside and outside of church life. In the meantime 'gender themes' have been largely integrated into permanent education programmes (of the churches) and positions for women's issues as such have

namely disappeared (added by translator: in favour of gender mainstreaming). While we are inclined to consider this evolution with some sympathy, further developments are to be expected under increased budget pressure. The IG wants to recall the fact that educational work is part of the Creed of the Churches of the Reformation, it is one of their core mandates. So, the IG is raising the question: what are the Reformed Churches prepared to do in this regard for women?

In any case, it cannot be true that the Forum for contemporary issues (Forum für Zeitfragen) with its well-profiled female public will be closed down for budgetary reasons – such a decision would certainly cause an outcry! One would close down a light-house and the Church would continue sailing in the dark. It is to be hoped that the Church in Basel-Campaign will not follow the same path. On the contrary, they should strengthen their office for women's issues and make it visible for churches in their vicinity and farther away.

And in the Reformed Church of Zurich?

In the year 2012, the Protestant Study and Conference Academy of Boldern will have to phase out its study directorship work. For women, this means that a place with a tradition for networking will be lost. In this regard we should consider that Boldern is the only venue in the Swiss reformed church scenery which may be associated with feminist theology. So, putting an end to the work achieved at Boldern equals a loss for other parts in the country as well.

The fact that another Swiss Women's Synod could take place in Zurich this year is – among others – due to the work of this Study Directorship. 660 women gathered in Zurich for the Women's Synod on the theme of "Value creation". These women came from all parts of Switzerland gathering for a full day, just as they had done in 1987 in Lucerne, where some 700 women had assembled. So, 24 years after the creation of this

movement in the Church women continue to flock to such an event, and the offices for women's concerns carry a heavy workload.

Without Boldern women in Zurich are left with a single ecclesial part-time position for women and gender work. As this office is already now crumbling under the workload it will by no means be able to compensate for the loss of the Boldern study directorship. A 50% position cannot, of course, suffice to the needs of the 50% of church tax payers in Zurich who are women. In such a situation there is need to look for and to find a future oriented solution. What has been accomplished at Boldern in terms of public oriented education and debate has been determining for generations of women and men. Boldern has been a home for those in search of freedom, a venue for living renewal in an ecclesial setting. Where will this renewal be anchored in the future?

As to the Zurich Church Council, from the year 2012 on it will count only one female member. Thus, the new start inaugurated in 1999 with the election of four female Councillors will come to an end. Gender equality in terms of numbers in a decision making body is of course not in itself sufficient to guarantee the ability to carry out reform and to show flexibility. The masculinisation of the church leadership is, however, a cause of concern. The answer given: we have not found a suitable woman, appears to be too easy. Of course, it is possible to find competent women. But as a rule, it is easier to find a man. For up to now, women pay a heavy price for taking over leadership positions. The evident formula is: it is easier for women to make a career when they renounce founding a family, while men with a family even make a quicker career than singles. They are considered to be serious family fathers when they are hardly ever at home. Women, on the contrary, are considered as less reliable candidates, as they have to be at home, at least from time to time.

The signal set by the Zurich Church Parliament is an expression of conservative stability, in other words: the presence of women is well accepted when they easily fit into the prevalent structures. If not, we better elect a man, whose spouse takes care of all household and family duties, so that he may take volunteering commitments which have the merit to equally serve his professional promotion.

Transformations are also occurring in Bern

The Reformed Bernese women used to have the Gwatt Centre. During the eighties and nineties this permanent education home offered exciting programmes and public debates. But then the Church had to give up Gwatt. The office for women's concerns did exist from 1998 to 2003; since then it has been transformed into a 'Delegation for women's issues', at a reduced occupation rate, to be finally dissolved, respectively to be transformed. – Relinquishing the Delegation for women's issues did, however, not mean abandoning gender work, that's what the Synod clearly stated. In establishing the new "Delegation for gender issues" gender work shall be implemented without additional personnel resources, i. e. it shall be pursued not separately, but integrated into the daily working processes of the General Ecclesial Services (added by translator: gender mainstreaming). The Church thus intends to allow the roles, duties and interests of men and women, as shaped by society and culture, to be screened by the criteria of gender equality, so that these considerations are fully integrated into all decisions, discussions and projects.

The IG is inclined to accept such relinquishments and transformations, *ecclesia semper reformanda* – rigid structures present hurdles to the development of life. Scepticism, however, is allowed, when these actions entail reduction of personnel resources previously allocated to feminist theology, networking of women and projects for and with women. What

is gender work in its essence? Do all those who speak about it really understand what they are talking about? In saying this, we have to differentiate between equality concerns of the Church as an employer, facing normal obligations regulated by common law, and the furthering of feminist theology, feminist spirituality, feminist theological courses and of venues where space is given for the discovery of new theological insights. The women's renewal movement of the 70ies and 80ies has led to the adoption of laws of equal treatment of men and women subject to constant evaluation and monitoring, but this renewal movement equally led to the elaboration of new contents, to the raising of deep searching questions and new answers in a variety of areas (for instance in Christology, Bible translation, living together, language, the image of God) – what will be the contribution of the Reformed Churches in this area to insure that this work is being pursued at the content level?

Churches – are they places for women's liberty?

In our view, the really exciting question is the following: what gain can women actively involved in their church draw from their commitment, their collaboration, their intellectual and spiritual contribution – be it professional or voluntary work? Churches - are they places offering free space to women, which they urgently need aside from all the odds and ends, places where they may develop new visions and live resurrection experiences? Or are they simply good for some administrative help, grappling with the same duties as they do at home (respectively don't at home)? Female liberty starts where women may grow – where they are not compelled from the start to belittle their expectations/claims. Where they may experience new impulses of thought and breathing pauses, join in a walk of life with others and develop common projects. Who do the protestant cantonal churches mandate at present to launch such impulses of thought and projects?

A bit more than twenty years ago the World Council of Churches launched the decade "Churches in Solidarity with Women" (1988-1998). This Decade was a good start containing promising elements and the potential for discussion. During this period many initiatives have been taken by women (for more details see the project *merk.würdig Frauen-Kirche-Theologie seit 1985*, <http://merkwuerdig.fama.ch>) and first steps of progress in terms of equality have been achieved. The very fact that for the first time there has been a majority of women as members of the Zurich Church Council is an illustration of this progress, as well as the establishment of reformed offices for women's concerns in Basel-City (even before the launching of the Decade!) and in Basel-Campaign. Among others, the women's offices pursued the aim to further the cause of women in the Reformed Churches and the larger society, to strengthen networking and to work in favour of gender democracy. They were committed to implementing feminist theology as well as to transparency and valuing correctly voluntary and unpaid work done in ecclesial settings.

Education contributes to prevail justice, religion and freedom. The reduction of educational and women's work represents a loss not only for women, but also for the Churches and the community at large, in its solidarity and democratic awareness. A church doing this cuts off her nose to spite her face – and will still not be able to save its bones.

The re-dimensioning of our Churches is a painful process which has to be seen within the general context of our society. But are the Church Parliaments and Boards aware of the consequences of the course they set and the signals they dress? The IG seeks to encourage the Churches not to let down *those* women and men who are eager to sense a breeze of reformatory freedom in the churches, who wish to enter learning and growing processes within or at the margin of the churches. Maybe this is one of the core questions for us today:

Churches – can they be homes for learning and gardening processes, where learning for life becomes possible – or shall they be service centres for funerals and for sermons hardly anybody continues to listen to? Where does the Church become eventful, with whom, for whom – and how should we consider her relationship towards society in general? Do Reformed Churches generate impulses for democratic and social togetherness, for renewal movements in times of crisis, or do they shut their windows and close down their shutters in such times?

Now, precisely at a moment when women's offices are closed down, rumours are spread deploring a "feminisation of the Churches". The Women's Conference of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (FSPC) has taken up the challenge of this catch-word and will dedicate its autumnal conference on October 31 at Bern to a debate and clarification of this issue. Simultaneously, debates are going on in Germany, where the protestant professor of theology, Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (Munich), has gone public with the provocative thesis of the "feminisation of theology".

Rev. Dr. Regina Sommer (Kassel) considers fear to be at the origin of such discourse (see FAZ 24.11.10) – fear of a loss of relevance of theology, a phenomenon typical for our secular and neoliberal society since many years, which our professor of theology seems only now becoming aware of. As a matter of fact, nowadays female students make up for almost half of the students of theology, and there are more and more women preparing their theological doctorate and habilitation thesis – while we still only have a few female theological professors. This means that women may perfectly well think, write and speak, as long as the cost remains limited. The larger research projects however, need a university structure as background and can only be put into motion by professors – und here the

chance for women to have access to financial subsidies is rapidly shrinking.

Before Churches may speak of feminisation one should introduce gender budgeting. How much, indeed, do congregations respectively Cantonal Churches spend for women and how much for male members? This instrument of budget control developed at cantonal level will help to have a clearer picture of the work done by volunteers. And here it is evident that women still accomplish an astounding rate of 80 % of the unpaid work. In addition, female pastors cover the largest portion of part-time positions with a reduced work-rate.

Women as disciples and shepherds (Jüngerinnen und Hirtinnen)

But equality in terms of numbers and stipend percentages alone do not yet create an exciting perspective. At stake are contents and visions for which it is worthwhile to commit oneself! When the Bible in gender-just language was published (Gütersloh 2006; the fourth edition, slightly reviewed, will be published in autumn 2011), a heated debate on feminist and liberation theology positions also arose in the Churches. This debate was sometimes led in a malignant, though affirmative way: and indeed, the renewal movements of the 70ies, which many had considered as obsolete, came as an unexpected surprise to many journalists and professors (cf. I. Dalferth, NZZ, 18.11.06). More than 50 high-level biblical scholars (men and women) had joined in this project and here they presented an exciting translation project to the world, while our dear professors had lulled themselves into a false sense of security. By then, feminist theology had been marginalised for some thirty years – and here appeared, all of a sudden, a bible translation speaking of female and male disciples (Jüngerinnen und Jüngern), and of female shepherds (Hirtinnen) in the fields. This raised a tempest of indignation! The rediscovery of the time-honoured name of God, made visible thanks to

modern graphic arts in the layout, caused not only the omnipresent LORD (HERR) to vanish, but became for many readers a source of a more contemporary spirituality, and the related debates on this issue brought a fresh wind in the midst of theology and of many congregations.

This example illustrates how theological contents are still closely connected to the subjects of those doing theology. Churches should therefore ask themselves: who is able to interpret the impulses of women theologians to female respectively male constituencies, given the fact that there are hardly any women theologians teaching in our university faculties? The distribution of full professorships in our protestant theological faculties is indeed still quite unilateral: In Basel, all ordinary professorships are occupied by males, so it is in Zurich. Only in Bern there are full professorships in female hands. In the area of theological research and education we have still a long way to go before reaching some kind of gender balance. The habilitated women theologians are like female shepherds (Hirtinnen) in the fields today: they mediate outside, not in secure conditions and sustainable positions, what lies in the air, trying to watch over visions of justice.

While universities in Switzerland did hardly engage in the liberation theology movements of worldwide ecumenism, finding rather sufficient internationality in their Swiss-German discourse, it were the Churches who in their permanent education centres accepted fresh breezes from all areas of the world – and thus also impulses coming from women theologians. Given the loss of Conference Centres (Gwatt, Leuenberg, Boldern), Cantonal Churches should seek ways how together they may support feminist liberation theology and interreligious encounters (not limited to the participation of men). For the future leads us into the world – and cannot avoid engaging in the theology of women.

Given the media situation in Switzerland it is not astonishing that church media and secular media pay little attention to the area of feminist liberation theology. There are hardly any female chief editors while women journalists mainly work freelance. Quite a few editors find it fascinating to report on the IG of Antifeminists – even when these only come up with the idea of founding a party list. And when they cannot establish such a list for lack of signatures, the fact is still interesting enough to become the subject of another press release. By contrast, Swiss media will not report on the awarding of the Marga Bührig Price, to quote an example. Last September, two women theologians were honoured together at the Basel Center for Literature: PD Dr Klara Butting and Dr Beatrice Bowald. The reason why the Foundation had decided to double the award was the following: the Foundation had received an astonishing number of excellent applications. This is a signal for an open future: for these publications are expressions of female liberty and may be helpful in shaping the world of tomorrow.

Beatrice Bowald: Prostitution. Überlegungen aus ethischer Perspektive zu Praxis, Wertung und Politik. Lit-Verlag 2010
Klara Butting: „Hier bin ich!“ Biblische Spiritualität und gesellschaftliche Verantwortung. Erev-rav 2011