

## Riet Bons-Storm

### A Feminist Approach

#### 1. The special context of the feminist approach to theology

The book *With Passion and Compassion. Third World Women Doing Theology*<sup>1</sup> shows us how the feminist approach to theology grew among ordinary church-women of all kinds of churches in the Third World. Likewise in the Netherlands the feminist approach to theology grew out of the grassroots, giving birth to the Woman and Faith-movement. The Woman and Faith-movement started in the seventies, when on several places in the Netherlands women of various churches turned towards each other to talk about their frustrations concerning the theology and the practice of the church. Women recognized in each other their painful concern: how can it become possible to put faith into words and actions, grounded in our particular experience as women in this society? How can our faith become really redeeming and liberating for us in our women-conditions, diverse as they may be? Several women saw a gap between the promise of redemption and liberation on the one hand, and the actual situation of marginalization and exploitation of women, going on inside and outside the churches on the other: the multiple marginalization of women of color, the feminization of poverty, sexual violence inside and outside the home, the banning from ministry and priesthood. These groups heard about each other, and found each other: the Woman and Faith-movement was born. The Bible was read together with women's eyes: the eyes of women in various situations. New vista's unfolded, new anger had to be worked through, new ways of believing found<sup>2</sup>.

The context of the feminist approach in theology is everyday-life, where women, living their lives under various conditions, many of them not officially trained in theology, experience their lack of libera-

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<sup>1</sup> *With Passion and Compassion. Third World Women Doing Theology*, Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye eds., Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lieve Troch: "The Feminist Movement in and on the Edge of the Churches in the Netherlands: from Consciousness-raising to Womenchurch" in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 5, nr 2, 1989: 113 - 128. Foka Brouwer: *Een Béeld van een Beweging. Onderzoek naar de organisatie van de Vrouw-en-Geloofbeweging in Nederland*, Dienstencentrum, Leusden, 1991. Riet Bons-Storm en Diana Vernooij: *Beweging in macht. Vrouwenkerk in Nederland?*, Kok, Kampen, 1991.



tion, ask questions based on faith as it is lived from day to day, and articulate theology in their own voices, longing for life abundant, as promised by the Divine.

This context presents the question of normativity. Many a member of the Woman and Faith-movement was looked sternly in the eyes when she told her minister about her new insights in faith and theology. „But you are not allowed to think in this way“, she was told<sup>3</sup>.

So how did she have to think? What is the norm for theological thinking and who has the power to determine the norm?

## 2. The feminist approach

A feminist is somebody who is aware of the critical hiatus between 'Woman' – that is 'the female other' as institution and representation, mirroring men's fears and desires – and real-life women<sup>4</sup>. Real-life women are a multiplicity of differences: race, class, age, sexual orientation, etc. Real-life women experience their sexual embodiment and their 'normal' roles in everyday-life and have – connected to that – situated and women-based knowledge, which has the possibility to empower them, if they take the courage to raise their voice. This knowledge inspires them to practice a politics of resistance. They start to speak in their own voice, constructing a new idea of normativity. This brings them in conflict with the assumptions of the patriarchal belief-system. The conflict is usually fought on the rational level. It is so fierce however because a deep seated longing in men for women to be 'Woman', and the fear to lose control about the definition of Truth and Normativity covertly fuel the discussions.

The feminist perspective opens our eyes for the basic structures of the belief-systems that guide our quest for knowledge, practical-

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<sup>3</sup> Riet Bons-Storm: „Maar zo mag je niet denken! Over ruimte en richting in een feministische benadering van theologie en geloof“ („But you are not allowed to think that way! About room and direction in a feminist approach to theology and faith“) in Riet Bons-Storm, Corrie Dijksterhuis, Martha Kroes en Eva Ouwehand: *Ruimte en Richting. Vrouwen op zoek naar veel betekenend geloof*, Boekencentrum, 's-Gravenhage, 1990: 31 - 55.

<sup>4</sup> Rosi Braidotti: „Sexual difference as a nomadic political project“ in *Voicing Identity. Women and Religious Traditions in Europe*, Records of the Fifth Bi-annual Conference of the European Society of Women in Theological Research, Louvain, Belgium, 1993.



theological knowledge included. The feminist perspective is part of an epistemological analysis, arguing that sociological and ideological analysis of our ways of knowing is necessary. An intrinsic part of every scholarly endeavour is to try to understand the relationships between ideas and structures of thought on the one hand, and social contexts on the other<sup>5</sup>.

Rhoda Linton sums up some characteristics of the feminist approach:

1. women are the *active central focus/ subject* (italics by Linton);
2. cooperative group activity is the predominant *modus operandi*;
3. there is a recognized need for liberation from the oppression of the status quo<sup>6</sup>.

Feminism is a movement with a political agenda; it fuels and inspires a politics of resistance to oppression and a practice of analysis of power and the concrete liberation of marginalized and oppressed persons.

I argue that the feminist approach mirrors the assumptions of post-modernity, but in a critical way. There is a crack in the mirror. This crack concerns the awareness of the danger of total relativity.

On the one hand feminism can be understood as a side effect of modernity: modernity gave women – i.e. those, who would be willing to identify with reasonable men – the space to think of themselves as subjects. Feminists aspire however to be subjects in their own right, trying to build arguments based in their own contexts. The feminist approach assumes that our ways of thinking and knowing are *gendered*. „Gender' in feminist theory fulfils primarily the function of challenging the universalistic tendency of language and of the systems of knowledge and scientific discourse at large"<sup>7</sup>. As Adrienne Rich argued: a central notion of the feminist stance is that knowledge is marked by a specific location in space and time. The primary location is the body, i.e. the morphological and political space of the embodied

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<sup>5</sup> cf Robert J. Schreier: *Bouwen aan een eigen theologie. Geloofsverstaan binnen de plaatselijke culturele context* (Dutch translation of *Constructing local theologies*), H. Nelliissen, Baarn, 1984: 101 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Rhoda Linton: „Toward a Feminist Research Method" in *Gender/ Body/ Knowledge. Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo eds., Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1992: 276.

<sup>7</sup> Rosi Braidotti: „What's wrong with gender?" in *Reflections on Theology and Gender*, Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes and Atalya Brenner, eds., Kok Pharos, Kampen, 1994: 52.



subject<sup>8</sup>. Another feature of the feminist approach is the acknowledgement that the question of Truth and the Right Normativity is always also a question of power: who has authority to define the parameters of Truth and Normativity, and who has not? On this point Michel Foucault destroyed our innocence<sup>9</sup>: the quest for Truth is a battle between the dominant discourse of reasonable men, that is: *predominantly white, rather affluent, and highly educated men*, and the marginal discourses of all those, who miss those features of reasonableness.

On the other hand, feminism, child of modernity, can only grow up in a climate of postmodernity. When hitherto marginalized discourses – like the feminist discourse – raise their own voices and claim credibility, and when one realizes that the urge for *power and security* is an important factor when settling the dispute between the discourses, then suddenly or gradually one's eyes are opened for the shattering knowledge that there can never be One knowable Truth, who gives the universal norm, not even for Christianity or Practical Theology.

Feminist women, who long to stay christian – be they in the church or in the university – can only be heard if their marginal discourse becomes a partner-in-equality of the discourse, that up till recently could assume it was dominant.

Feminists are aware however of the utmost relativity that features in postmodernity. If there are many equal discourses, each with their own truth, what does one have to live by, what is there to aspire?

### 3. The search for a concept of truth that honours diversity in equality

We need a concept of truth, that is based in women's own discourses and contexts, but that also gives us a basis for dialogue with other discourses. Women's particular 'truth' comes into being when women analyse their marginalization. A 'truth' can be understood as the ultimate value, becoming the point of orientation of one's meaning-giving to all one's experiences. Therefore truth is contextual. Taking over a truth from another context/ another discourse means: to live in conflict and pain in the battle between one's own truth and the imposed truth of a dominant discourse. This painful conflict is confusing and very

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<sup>8</sup> Adrienne Rich: *Blood, Bread, and Poetry. Selected Prose 1979 - 1985*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York/ London, 1986: 212 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Cf Michel Foucault: *L'ordre du discours*, Paris, 1971.



tiring. One needs allies to really find out where one's own truth lies, and to analyse the relationship of this truth to the imposed truth of dominant discourse.

Together with Susan Thistlethwaite I opt for the truth-concept of Sojourner Truth, an African American woman, who as a slave fought for the liberation of slaves, especially for the women. Nobody has privileged access 'the way things really are', to ontological reality<sup>10</sup>. Sojourner-truth could be: the truth of the road towards liberation from oppression and alienation, through changing landscapes, changing contexts. It is an avowed truth, where one stands for, but 'for the time being'. But this 'being' has to be taken in its fullest meaning. For me it means realizing who one is and where one is, what the ultimate value is one lives by, and how the conditions in this place affect one's experience of life abundant in God/dess' name. One is never alone in a place. There are other dwellers. An awareness of where one is includes also an awareness of relations with others in that place, and the relations of power that exist in that place. 'Truth for the time being' means awareness of the values at stake in a certain time and place, knowing where one's own ultimate commitment lies, and also practicing these commitments. With Adrienne Rich I think truth depends on the decision:

*With whom do you believe your lot is cast?  
From where does your strength come?*<sup>11</sup>

Truth has to do with survival of oneself, tested against the survival of the other. This particular, situated truth has to be brought into dialogue with other truths from other discourses, forming an ongoing dialogue about what could be a shared truth, and thus a shared normativity. This dialogue is not an intellectual exercise, but a matter of survival in solidarity. It is a matter of ethical decisions, a matter of learning to live with difference-in-equality.

#### 4. God/dess and normativity

But where is God/dess in this normativity?  
Who is God/dess?

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Thistlethwaite: *Sex, race, and God. Christian Feminism in Black and White*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1990: 12 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Adrienne Rich: *Sources*. The Heyeck Press, California, 1983: 12.



We do not really know. We have only very biased, androcentric accounts of what people experienced as God's voice, God's word in their contexts. We have to use a hermeneutic of suspicion on all canonized texts, because the people who made the canons were all human, and all men. The life-experience of women in their various conditions did not have a voice in this process. Under and between the androcentric patriarchal texts of bible and tradition we have only the whisperings of genuine longings for liberation, for healing of brokenness, for directions in a life full of choices and contingencies. We listen to those voices critically and try to learn from them where we can. We can learn from the texts if we, women in our various conditions, are addressed as who we are in an inspiring way, acknowledging our particular contexts and its hazards that threaten our survival-with-dignity. My canon, my 'measuring rod', for the texts of truth and life, in or outside the tradition, is: can they be heard as liberating, challenging, and inspiring for women also, in their varied circumstances? Or are women absent, only negatively represented or violently destroyed?

This means also that I do theology primarily with those with whom I share the need for a specific liberation. „The theologian must be“ (here is normativity, R.B-S) „engaged in 'a dialogue of life', not only with the poor, who are mostly women, but also with other religious and cultural traditions“, writes Virginia Fabella, a feminist theologian from the Philippines. This means that the longing for full and just humanity, by means of liberation, and associated since time immemorial with the Godhead of Jewish and Christian traditions, can be recognized in longings and their articulations in creeds and rites of other religious and cultural traditions<sup>12</sup>. Behind this lies the assumption, an assumption of faith and longing, that for the Divine of the Bible women and men are of the same importance, have the same subject-quality and responsibility, and are called to articulate their longings and ideas about the Divine in theology and liturgy, just as men are used to do.

The leading image is a society, where men and women of different color, ethnicity, class, age and sexual orientation can live together without oppression and marginalization: a healed society, celebrating difference-in-equality. Everything I say or do, in my personal and in my academic life, has to be weighed in the light of this leading image:

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<sup>12</sup> Virginia Fabella: „A Common Methodology for Diverse Christologies?“ in *With Passion and Compassion. Third World Women Doing Theology*, Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye eds., Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y., 1989: 115.



a community of difference in equality. Then I serve the truth; God/dess' truth, I say in faith.

## 5. A feminist approach to practical theology

This normativity gives us the parameters of the normativity in practice, as understood from a feminist perspective. Practical theology for me is the quest for theories answering the question: how can persons in their specific situations (being male, female, of a certain ethnicity, color, class, etc. etc.) live their lives as faithful persons in this world, experiencing the liberation God/dess promises and the challenge S/He offers to live according to Her/His longings, in critical orientation to the christian tradition, developing this tradition further?

The basis of every theology, practical theology included, is solidarity with persons who live in a particular context of lack of liberation. If I do practical theology in the Netherlands, I have to start with *listening*. I argue that there is much wishful thinking about listening and empathy among practical theologians. Transcultural and transsexual empathy is very hard to obtain. The other will always be the other, even if we share a culture and a sex. Differences, also amongst women and amongst men, have to be acknowledged. In our patriarchal culture many persons who feel subordinated, among them many women, live in a culture of being silenced. Their experiences cannot be recorded by the usual empirical methods. Careful listening has to have the notion of *earned solidarity*. On the basis of this careful and open listening the various practices will be changed, as new data emerge from women's life-experience, hitherto not processed as a part of dominant practical theological thinking. Preaching will change, pastoral care, christian education, liturgy, because, first of all, the language used will change. New questions are asked, new answers have to be found.

The focus of practical theology is 'faith lived in context'. This 'faith lived in context' is a mixture of at least two things:

- the impact of 'faith thought through', i.e. theologies, as heard in christian education, Sunday school, sermons, etc. Many women hear these theologies as if they are articulated in foreign languages. This gives many of them a feeling of alienation and despair.
- the touch of the Holy Spirit, the Divine-in-action-and-communion, who opens women's heart for the longing for liberation of the particular oppressing forces that destroy their experience of

life abundant. This touch has to be honoured. It gives every women the right to be listened to as a theological agent.