# Feminist Theology and Jewish-Christian Dialogue

| Grohmann, Marianne

**Confrontation, shock and rethinking in feminist theologies. The struggle to correct anti-Judaic prejudices.**

## Feminist Theology and Jewish-Christian Dialogue

**by Marianne Grohmann**

Feminist theology and Jewish-Christian dialogue[1] are both areas at the fringes of theology, which as a rule have little to do with each other: For many men and women engaged in the Jewish-Christian dialogue the word "feminism" in itself represents a red cloth, and in their heads some Christian feminist theologians stubbornly hang on to the prejudice of a patriarchal Judaism. In the area of academic theology both fields of study are considered outsiders. As contextual theologies they have difficulties in conquering for themselves a place in the scientific discourse and are tolerated at most as exotic subjects. However, they have little influence on the mainstream of theology.

The fact that feminist theology and Jewish-Christian dialogue somehow relate to each other, first became clear in a confrontation: Towards the end of the 80s in the debate around the anti-Judaism of feminist theology[2] Jewish theologians like Susannah Heschel and Judith Plaskow reproached Christian feminist theologians, for adopting the anti-Judaism of Christian theology and giving it now a feminist variant.

Judaism becomes the negative background to Christianity in a twofold form: in the area of the Old Testament, matriarchy research has been looking for matriarchal currents in the old Orient, partially also in search of female divinities. Judaism was now reproached for displacing matriarchy with its patriarchal social order and suppressing God's feminine side with its male image of God.[3]

## Jesus, the new man?

In the area of New Testament studies Jesus, the new man and feminist, was painted in luminous colors and set apart from the dark, patriarchal Judaism of his time. His God of love was contrasted with the Old Testament God of wrath.[4]

Since feminist theologians commonly pursue a "Christology from below", emphasizing the humanity of Jesus more than his divinity and moving the earthly Jesus - especially in the Marcionic representation - into the center of their interest, this person Jesus must be presented as special, and that appears to be possible only in differentiation from Judaism.

## Judaism as a dark foil

In both variants Judaism is examined only as a dark foil, it is described negatively in order to set off one's own image of God positively against it and sources are frequently handled in an unreflective manner by comparing texts from different eras - for instance Talmudic sources with the New Testament. Such methods deserved the legitimate and serious reproaches by Jewish women. The debate caused great bewilderment among feminist theologians,

and today the majority tries to pursue Christian theology without anti-Judaism.

For so young a theology as the feminist one, it is especially astonishing how quickly it is ready for self-criticism and working on a revision of their conditions, which does not operate at the expense of Judaism.[5]

In order to avoid the error of commenting on "the role of the woman in Judaism" in a prejudiced way it is necessary to start by listening to what Jewish women themselves have to say.[6]

At a closer glance a very diverse, pluralistic picture emerges: as in Christianity, there never was and there is not now the one status of the woman but very different kinds of self-images of women in Judaism: "The status of the Jewish woman is not something once given and unchangeable, but has been subject to constant changes throughout history."[7] The sources from the Bible through to the Talmud and from medieval Bible commentaries to modern times contain much and diverse material which can be rated as positive and negative for women, depending on the weighting and present level of experience of the observing scholar.

## A diverse picture

Even in present times the positions of women in individual Jewish streams and in diverse geographical contexts are very dissimilar. The discussion revolves around questions such as the rabbinate of women (in Reform Judaism officially accepted since 1972 and in the Conservative movement since 1984) or the interpretation of the Halakhah: female secular and Reform Jews look at the Halakhah rather critically, Conservative and Orthodox women emphasize the central meaning of the Halakhah in Judaism and plead for changes of individual commandments, but also for its retention as a whole.[8]

"Again and again women have personally advocated an improvement of their position, and their wishes were at least partially granted by the rabbinical authorities. It serves to the disadvantage of women, that they personally have no power of decision and that the codifications of the Halakhah occurred at times and places which were unfavorably disposed towards women. As a consequence the present status of the woman in Orthodoxy is not in keeping with our times in which there is a tendency towards equality of men and women. Modern Orthodox women along with supporting rabbis are therefore demanding a change in their status in the awareness that such changes have always occurred. Reform and Conservative Judaism have to a large extent already realized this improvement of the status of the Jewish woman with regard to her equality with the man."[9]

A Christian feminist theology that is not anti-Jewish requires, on the one hand, a sensitization to Christian anti-Judaism in general and to its feminist variant in particular. The "hermeneutics of suspicion" involves facing one's own prejudices and thinking patterns, which view Judaism as the evil patriarchy. On the other hand it requires the acceptance of Jewish research, paying attention to what Jewish women themselves

tell us and a perception of pluralism within Judaism.

**Footnotes**

1. "Einander ins Sprechen hören. Feministische Theologie im jüdisch-christlichen Gespräch. Standortbestimmung und Ausblick" (Listening into Each Other's Speaking: Feminist Theology in the Jewish-Christian Dialogue. Determination of present positions and a look into the future). This was the topic of a conference of the "alumni" of *Studies in Israel,* which took place in Reinhardsbrunn near Gotha/Thuringia/Germany January 2-4, 1997. Keynote speakers were Marianne Wallach-Faller, Graduate in Germanic Studies, active member of die Jewish Reform Congregation in Zurich, Switzerland, and Marie-Theres Wacker, Catholic Old Testament scholar in Cologne, Germany.
2. In German-speaking countries the debate was triggered in the *BThZ* 1986 by Katharina von Kellenbach's review of Gerda Weiler's book, *Ich verwerfe im Lande die Kriege. Das Verborgene Matriarchat im Alten Testament,* München, 1986. (I reject wars in the country: The hidden matriarchy in the Old Testament). The criticism concerning anti-Judaism in Christian feminist theology was discussed mainly in the magazine *Schlangenbrut* 1987 and is since then taken into account in most areas of feminist research. Summaries of the discussion have been presented by Kohn-Ley, Charlotte und Ilse Korotin (Hg.): *Der feministische "Sündenfall"? Antisemitische Vorurteile in der Frauenbewegung,* Wien, 1994. (The Feminist "Fall"? Antisemitic Prejudices in the Women's Movement). Schaumberger, Christine (Hg.): *Weil wir nicht vergessen wollen ... zu einer Feministischen Theologie im deutschen Kontext,* Münster, 1987. (Because We Don't Want to Forget ... Towards a Feminist Theology in the German Context). Siegele-Wenschkewitz, Leonore (Hg.): *Verdrängte Vergangenheit, die uns bedrängt. Feministische Theologie in der Verantwortung für die Geschichte,* München, 1988. (Suppressed Past that Oppresses Us: Feminist Theology In Responsibility for History).
3. Compare, for example, Mulack, Christa: *Die Weiblichkeit Gottes. Matriarchale Voraussetzungen des Gottesbildes,* Stuttgart, 1986. (The Femininity of God: Matriarchal Preconditions of the Divine Image).
4. Compare, for example, Wolff, Hanna: *Jesus der Mann. Die Gestalt Jesu in tiefenpsychologischer Sicht,* Stuttgart, 1979 (Jesus the Man: The Person of Jesus Viewed From a Depth Psychological Perspective) and: *Neuer Wein - Alte Schläuche. Das Identitätsproblem des Christentums im Lichte der Tiefenpsychologie,* Stuttgart, 1981 (New Wine - Old Skins: The Identity Problem of Christendom in the Light of Depth Psychology).
5. Examples that stand for this re-thinking within feminist theology are: Jüngst, Britta: *Auf der Seite des Todes das Leben. Auf dem Weg zu einer christlich feministischen Theologie nach der Shoah,* Gütersloh, 1996 (On Death's Side - Life: On the Path towards a Christian Feminist Theology after the Shoah); Wacker, Marie-Theres und Luise Schottroff (Hg.): *Von der Wurzel getragen. Christlich feministische Exegese in Auseinandersetzung mit Antijudaismus,* Leiden, 1996 (Sustained by the Root: Christian Feminist Exegesis Struggling With Anti-Judaism); Plaskow, Judith: *Und wieder stehen wir am Sinai. Eine jüdisch feministische Theologie,* Luzern, 1992 (And Again We Stand at Sinai: A Jewish Feminist Theology). Of the extensive literature that exists mainly in the USA only a few "classics" shall be mentioned here: Heschel, Susannah (Ed.): "On Being a Jewish Feminist." *A Reader,* New York, 1983.
6. Koltun, Elizabeth (Ed.): *The Jewish Woman. New Perspectives,* New York 1976.

Copyright JCRelations

7. Wallach-Faller, Marianne: "Veränderungen im Status der jüdischen Frau. Ein geschichtlicher Überblick," in: *Judaica* 41/1985, S. 152-172, zit S. 152. (Changes in the Status of the Jewish Woman: A Historical Survey).
8. Compare Rudnick, Ursula: "Miriam wird mit uns tanzen!" Jüdisch-feministische Diskussionen, in: *Schlangenbrut* Nr. 51, 13. Jg /1995, S. 14-18. (Miriam Will Dance With Us...).
9. Wallach-Faller: S. 168

Marianne Grohmann, Univ.Ass. Mag., Institute for Systematic Theology, Evang.-theol.

Faculty of the University of Vienna.

(*Translation from the German: Astrid Foster*)

© Copyright 1998 Koordinierungsausschuss für christlich-jüdische Zusammenarbeit