



## Feminism as Meeting Point

31.05.2018 | Helene Egnell\*

**Feminism has indeed been a meeting point for Jewish and Christian women, even though their sisterhood has been as ambiguous as any sisterly relationship. From the beginnings of modern religious feminism, it has been a common project for Jews and Christians – but Christian feminist theology still has not always managed to avoid the pitfalls of classical Christian anti-Judaism. However, the joint efforts of Christian and Jewish feminists can revitalize and offer new perspectives to Jewish-Christian dialogue.**

Judith Plaskow attests to the cooperation between Jewish and Christian feminists:

*We formulated a critique of patriarchal religion together; we argued about the depths of patriarchy in Judaism and Christianity; we discussed together what it means to recover and make visible women's history; and we struggled together with integrating women's experience into our respective traditions.*<sup>[1]</sup>

An example of how feminist approaches can yield new insights is a discussion on the concept of covenant by Annette Daum and Deborah McCauley from 1983.<sup>[2]</sup> They want to rethink the idea of covenant in terms of our experiences of human relations. The traditional understandings of covenant are tainted with the idea of religious triumphalism, and is detrimental both for the relation between men and women, and between Christians and Jews: "Implicit in the symbolism of covenant is that men are more chosen/elect than women, Jews are more elect than Christians, Christians are more elect than Jews."<sup>[3]</sup> A feminist understanding of covenant should avoid ideas of election and exclusiveness, and instead focus on "responsibility and inclusiveness," where responsibility is spelled "response-ability," the ability to respond.

The theology of the cross is another area where Jewish and feminist critique can inform and strengthen each other. Mary C. Boys brings in the feminist and womanist critique of how some theologies of the cross sanction violence against women into her critique of the "toxic effect" which the Christian "sacred story" has had for Jews. Again, the feminist response has been to rethink redemption in terms of right relationships rather than redemptive violence.<sup>[4]</sup>

However, this is not only a story of harmonious collaboration. The discussion on anti-Judaism in feminist theology was started in 1980 by Judith Plaskow and Annette Daum, with two articles, "Blaming Jews for the Birth of Patriarchy" and "Blaming the Jews for the Death of the Goddess," respectively, in *Lilith* No 7. In 1986, *Christian Jewish Relations* devoted an issue to this topic. A comprehensive study on the subject is Katharina von Kellenbach's *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, Oxford: OUP, 1994.

The charge of anti-Judaism in feminist writings can be summarized in three points: (1) making Judaism the anti-thesis of (especially early, woman-friendly) Christianity; (2) subsuming Jewish (feminist) interests under Christian ones; and (3) scapegoating Judaism for the death of the Goddess and the rise of patriarchy.

In the early days of feminist theology, the catchword "Jesus was a feminist," coined by Leonard Swidler in 1971 in a very influential article, tended to set Jesus over and against a thoroughly patriarchal Jewish community. In order to safeguard Jesus' uniqueness, his affirmation of women

was set against a foil of negative sayings about women in contemporary Jewish writings, while neglecting those which show an attitude similar to Jesus'. Often the Jewish sources quoted are written centuries after the gospels, and should rightly be compared with the church fathers. Jesus is especially constructed as un-Jewish in contrast to the Jewishness of Paul.

While it has largely disappeared from scholarly works, thanks to the critique by Judith Plaskow, Susannah Heschel, Katharina von Kellenbach and others, this antithetical rhetoric is still very common in sermons and popular feminist writing. Some kind of "trickle-down effect" seems to be in place, where once groundbreaking feminist insights are now part and parcel of mainstream liberal theology – but unfortunately, the anti-Jewish tendencies remain intact.

When Christian feminists assume that what is liberating for Christian feminists is liberating for everyone else, they subsume Jewish interests under Christian ones. One example is the favourite Christian feminist Bible verse in Gal. 3:28, which, while it asserts that "there is neither male nor female," from a Jewish point of view it appears to deny Judaism the right to exist as an independent religion ("neither Jew nor Greek"). Another example is when Christian feminists, in order to avoid the patriarchal "Lord" instead use the unspeakable Name of God. *The Psalter in Inclusive Language* is an example of this approach. With these examples, sensitivity to Christian feminist concerns is achieved at the expense of sensitivity to Jewish concerns.

As Jews in the Christian tradition were charged with deicide for having killed Jesus, and through history have been scapegoated for disasters like pestilence, in feminist theology, the charge is for killing the Goddess and introducing patriarchy. Feminist scholars researching early matriarchy have read the Hebrew scriptures as evidence of how matriarchal, peaceful, Goddess-worshipping societies of the Near East were transformed into patriarchal, violent war-faring nations through the imposed worship of a single male god. Though this view is primarily embraced by post-Christian feminists, it has also influenced Christian feminist interpretations of the Hebrew scriptures.

To these three feminist guises of classical anti-Judaism, we can add the Christian misuse of internal feminist critique of Jewish theology and practice in anti-Jewish discourse. Jewish feminists have found it problematic that the sign of the covenant, circumcision (*B'rit mila*), is exclusively male. In a recent discussion about circumcision in Swedish media, two (female) priests used this feminist critique as an argument to legislate against circumcision. Unfortunately, this misuse of an internal discussion can contribute to a backlash for Jewish feminism, and its alliance with Christian feminists, as it is always sensitive for members of a minority to voice critique publicly.

However, Jewish and Christian feminists have shared agendas, not only in the general sense of making women's voices heard within patriarchal traditions, but also in the insight that there are parallels between misogyny and anti-Judaism. Women and Jews have been the inferior "Other," upon whom undesirable qualities are projected. Judaism is both described, and slighted, in feminine terms.

Feminist scholarship has detected a parallelism between the persecution of Jews, culminating in the Holocaust, and the medieval witch-hunts. The same scapegoating mechanisms were behind them, as both groups could be constructed as symbols of evil. As women must forever atone for the fall of Eve, Jews must forever atone for the death of Jesus. There is a negative correlation between pogroms and witch-hunts: for instance, it was only when German cities were "Judenrein" in the 15th century that witch-hunts started there. When one scapegoat had disappeared, another had to be found. The witches' pointed hat (now made famous by the Harry Potter movies) is reminiscent of the hat that Jews were forced to wear – it was also put on the heads of "witches" on their way to the stake. The similarities between the persecution of Jews and of witches cannot be explained by any sociological similarities between the actual groups. It was their status as "heretics" and symbols of evil, which were threatening to the church authorities and made them targets for scapegoating.

Exposing the similar structures of anti-Judaism and misogyny helps us to analyze and understand both phenomena. It can also help us to realize the need for intersectional approaches and to appreciate diversity in general. Again, there can be clashes when Jewish feminists encounter not only white Christian feminists, but those from other ethnicities and oppressed groups.

Point three in ICCJ's "Berlin document" *A Time for Recommitment*<sup>[5]</sup> from 2009, urges its readers to ensure "that emerging theological movements from Asia, Africa and Latin America, and feminist, liberationist or other approaches integrate an accurate understanding of Judaism and Christian-Jewish relations into their theological formulations." Many Christian feminists from the global South with postcolonial sensitivities might detect an imperialist agenda and a patronizing attitude in the words "an accurate understanding" – accurate according to whom?

The problems are illustrated in a roundtable discussion on "Anti-Judaism and Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation" in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Spring 2004. Jewish feminist Amy-Jill Levine challenges Christian feminist theologians from the global South about the anti-Judaism she claims has "infected" their biblical interpretation.<sup>[6]</sup>

Levine expresses her disappointment that "feminists conscienciated by colonialism" do not recognize the mechanisms of "othering" of Jews in the New Testament and Christian interpretative tradition.<sup>[7]</sup>

She gives a plethora of examples of how feminist theologians from the developing world reiterate all the anti-Jewish stereotypes in feminist theology described above. Further, she argues, "postcolonial" theologians mistakenly identify practices of their indigenous cultures concerning taboos, purity etc. with corresponding ideas in the Hebrew scriptures, without comprehending that their meanings differ.

Two different issues are at stake in the discussion: is antisemitism a "special case," or just one of the evils that plague humanity, on a par with the atrocities colonialism has wrought on the colonized countries, and the rights Christians have to read the Hebrew scriptures through the lens of their own cultures. On the issue of antisemitism there was a clear divide between the white Western women respondents and the women from the global South who saw it as one of many evils, and one for which they refused to take responsibility.

Kenyan theologian Musimbi Kanyoro, in her response, gives a new "twist" to the question of the ownership of the Hebrew scriptures. She claims that African people identify with the Jewish people through their closeness to the "Old Testament," though admitting that this identification can be a problem, because "[t]his appropriation of another people's culture can implicitly be dangerous if it gives a license to provide critique, which the owners of that culture understand in a different way."<sup>[8]</sup>

Kanyoro nonetheless defends African theologians' right to claim the "Old Testament" as their own scripture, to use it to condone or to condemn African indigenous culture. When the Bible is criticized, it is seen as a Western, not a Jewish product, she states.

In this roundtable, there is a simultaneous intellectual willingness to understand and grapple with the issue of antisemitism in "post-colonial Biblical interpretation," and an emotional resistance against it. This emotional resistance has partly to do with the fact that women from the developing world do not feel the same complicity in anti-Judaism that Western women do, partly because of their experience of being marginalized by Western discourse. In the context of race discourse, they also perceive Jewish women as being white.<sup>[9]</sup>

If handled constructively, Third World feminist theologians' participation in Jewish-Christian dialogue could be seen in terms of a "third space,"<sup>[10]</sup> which could free the dialogue from the

constraints of guilt and defensiveness that so often hamper the European context. Postcolonial theory can expose the intersection of colonialist discourse, Christian triumphalism and anti-Judaism.

It has been a while since the dialogues I have revisited in this article took place. I do not see too much activity in Jewish-Christian feminist dialogue at present. As antisemitism appears to grow all over the world, it is important that the insights of the early Jewish critique of Christian feminism do not get lost, and that the fruits of the constructive project are not wasted. It is urgent to bring feminists from the global South into the dialogue as an important voice, and not only to admonish them to adopt an “accurate understanding” of Jewish-Christian relations.

It is time to rediscover Jewish-Christian sisterhood in all its complexities, for the sake of feminism, for both our religious tradition, and for Jewish-Christian relations.

---

[1] Judith Plaskow, “Feminist Anti-Judaism and the Christian God” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* Vol. 8, No 2 (1991), 99.

[2] Anette Daum and Deborah MacCauley, “Jewish-Christian Feminist Dialogue: A Wholistic Vision” in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol XXXVIII, No. 2 (1983).

[3] *Ibid.*, 163.

[4] Mary Boys, *Redeeming Our Sacred Story* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 19-23.

[5] ICCJ, “A Time for Recommitment: Building New Relationship between Jews and Christians.” *ICCJ (2009) ICCJ Website*. Web. Accessed 24 May 2016.

[6] See roundtable discussion on “Anti-Judaism and Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, No. 1 (2004), 91-132.

[7] Amy Levine, “Roundtable Discussion: Anti-Judaism and Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2004) 92.

[8] Musimbi Kanyoro, “Roundtable Discussion Response” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2004) 108.

[9] During the Apartheid era in South Africa, Jews were classified as whites.

[10] The concept “third space” is attributed to Homi K. Bhabha and refers to the space “in-between” cultures, or in between positions of duality.

Rev Dr Helene Egnell is a priest in The Church of Sweden (Lutheran) and earned her PhD in missiology from the University of Uppsala 2006. She works as Bishop's Adviser at the Centre for Inter Faith Dialogue in the Diocese of Stockholm.

Source: CURRENT DIALOGUE No. 58, 2016, edited by the World Council of Churches and are republished with kind permission.