As one of the organizers of Catharina Halkes’s birthday celebration, I was grateful and proud that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza honored this “festive symposium” by delivering the keynote lecture. To our surprise, she made “celebration,” and especially the political importance of feminist birthday celebrations, the central theme of her lecture. Both her presence and her speech made me all the more aware that this event, this celebratory symposium, was indeed more than “just” a birthday celebration.

The audience welcomed Schüssler Fiorenza’s speech with great enthusiasm. In a way, she put her finger on a sore spot that had not yet attracted public notice: the threat of “kyriachal robbery.” Given that so few of Halkes’s former male university colleagues were present that day and that we had trouble convincing the university to support the symposium financially—because, they said, it was not a strictly academic affair—her lecture was a timely diagnosis of an attempt at a “kyriarchal robbery of women’s intellectual traditions.” Schüssler Fiorenza is correct, however, that this was only an attempt. Given the number of wo/men present, the kyriarchal powers only partially succeeded in dismissing the power of Halkes’s intellectual and leading status. The threat is a serious one, though. More serious, I believe, than matricide is the commercial sellout or intergenerational communication to which Schüssler Fiorenza also refers.

Although I do see problems in intergenerational feminist theological relations, my approach here is somewhat different.

In the present situation at Dutch universities, with ongoing budget cutbacks, constant vigilance and resistance are needed to keep feminist theology and gender studies in the curriculum (even though some men in academia are genuinely supportive). But the threats are subtler and related to feminists’ often-insecure institutional teaching and research positions. Women, let alone feminists, are still a minority in the (Dutch) academy, especially in the fields of theology, philosophy, and religious studies. Great effort is required to maintain at least the status quo, let alone improvement in our position. Recently, funding for the famous Catharina Halkes Chair had to be renewed, and although we managed to “save” the chair, its funding was halved. Internal support notwithstanding, the “higher,” less transparent levels of academic politics are ultimately where decisions are made and where kyriarchal robbery and intellectual trivialization continue to occur. Indeed, public feminist birthday celebrations are important: they recall and foster this part of our struggle. But they also confront administrators with the limits of their own power. They cannot prevent the Dutch “Women and Faith Movement” from appropriating and acknowledging both Halkes and Schüssler Fiorenza as great women theologians and leaders.¹

In her powerful plea for feminist birthday celebrations Schüssler Fiorenza points to other concerns, related to more feminist theological struggles, visions, and most of all, to the future of feminist theology. Her anxiety is focused on an envisioned lack of knowledge of feminist theological history and the importance that knowledge of this history has for the future of the “feminist religious and intellectual past.” Hers is a vision not only of a history of ideas but also of the women who shaped this intellectual history—they are the reason for celebration. On these points, she was most critical of feminist studies in religion and worried about the future of feminist theology and the generational differences in “doing” and “naming” feminist scholarship.

I recognize the institutional problems she mentioned and share her criticism of the disciplinary mechanisms of the academy, the preference for “great men” and disciplinary segregation. However, I worry that her analysis and diagnoses of the next generation are perhaps too simple or too exclusively focused on one—normative—feminist theological model (in aims and name) to offer concrete means for continued feminist change within academia. Let me offer, from the perspective of the Dutch context, some further thoughts on these points in order to develop a more nuanced view of this multifaceted intergen-

¹ The same thing happened with a “national celebrity poll” at the turn of the twentieth century. In this poll, Catharina Halkes (who was not included on a list of “great theologians” composed by theologians) was chosen by the general public to rank among the hundred most influential persons of the twentieth century in the Netherlands—far more influential than almost all her male colleagues.
erational problematic than Schüssler Fiorenza was able to present in her short piece.

With Schüssler Fiorenza and Halkes, I emphasize the necessity and importance of projects that describe and interpret the history of feminist theologies. Such work—including the intended biography of Catharina Halkes—can elucidate rapid and profound changes in religion and theology, thereby explaining changes in the actual feminist theological context since the early days of feminist theology. Developments in theology and religion—and by implication feminist theology and feminist studies in religion—made their study more complex. Such changes also complicated the relation between feminist theology with grassroots religion and churches. At least this has been the case in the Netherlands, because what are “we” talking about? Which churches? What grassroots religion? Which communities? With whom do we want to identify? What kind of transformation and changes do we want, and do we have the same views and visions here? Can we really speak of a “we” and under which conditions?

Religion itself—and the same goes for churches—is in transition. In Western Europe, Christian churches have lost a great deal of their influence in the political, social, and cultural sense as well as in the everyday lives of ordinary women and men. Some historians speak of the “death” or “decline” of Christianity.3 On the one hand, we see at this time an increase in orthodoxy, in more closed systems of Christian self-identification and a reorientation to the “core business” (usually defined as liturgical and aimed at “core believers”) of the churches. Implied in all this is a more or less subtle return to strong gendered religious attitudes and piety, reinforcing traditional gender roles. On the other hand, the decrease in church membership and participation continues, despite some growth within evangelical, immigrant, and Pentecostal churches. One does not have to share the analysis by historian Calum Brown that women are “to blame” for the death of Christianity to acknowledge that the relation of many women with the churches is still, and in a way increasingly, problematic and ambivalent, to say the least. While this ambivalence was and still is a source of critical, creative feminist theology, for many women (and men), the recent tendencies in Christian churches are a reason to leave institutional Christianity behind. This is not the self-conscious exodus of Mary Daly, but a gradual process in which former engagement and critical anger have given way to a perhaps more “deadly” indifference toward churches.

These processes, however, simultaneously expose the “grand narrative of secularization” in Western Europe. Religion and spirituality still play an important role in many women’s lives. Feminists’ critical engagement with the

2 It took years to find funding for the Halkes biography project, the commencement of which we proudly announced at the birthday symposium.
struggle for dignity, justice, and women's empowerment around the world did not end the moment they decided to disinvest themselves from church transformation. Indeed, women have found other places, whether explicitly religious or not, to work for change. This demise of “secularization” was influenced further by the “return of religion” in the public sphere, mostly due to the growing presence of Muslim immigrants, evangelical and Pentecostal Christian immigrants, Hindus, and—although less public—Buddhists and adherents of “alternative spiritualities.” Even renowned, former “militantly secular,” feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti recently “discovered” the European “post-secular turn” and the political impact of “spiritual feminists” (among whom she includes Schüßler Fiorenza).

All of this gave rise to intense and heated public debates on the pros and cons of religion. In this complex situation, feminist theology or, perhaps better, feminist studies in religion is no longer an enterprise that is solely and self-evidently related to Christian theology and Christian churches or to Jewish theology and synagogues, as it was in the early days of a Western monoreligious culture.

It is my impression that Schüßler Fiorenza has in mind the self-evident “institutional” context of the early days, in which we addressed questions of women and women’s leadership in religious communities as the primary and normative context for feminist theologians. The same goes for her emphasis on our self-identification as a “critical feminist (liberation) theologian.” I fully agree with her views on the importance of crossing the boundary between the academy and the community, and the necessary engagement of feminist scholars with women’s actual questions and problems. Feminism is theory and praxis. But at the same time, our contemporary Western European field is much broader than earlier, more “traditional” religious communities, in both theory and praxis.

What about the far more complex relationship between women and religion than the simple oppression/liberation opposition allows? How are we to discover and reflect on, for instance, the “sacred” in its multiple, polysemic, and contested definitions, voices, faces, words, gestures, acts, and symbols if, as Schüßler Fiorenza argues, “religion” is still equated with “traditional religion/Christianity”? The (feminist) study of religion is also still dominated, despite itself, by the concepts and the methods derived from a more classical view of religion, a notion of religion that is itself determined very much by Christianity and therefore needs rethinking. If religion is indeed transformative, how does this influence our theology and our way of doing theology?

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In my reading of Schüssler Fiorenza’s remarks, “textual religion”—be it the critical feminist interpretation of holy scriptures or religious history or doctrinal religion—is privileged, consciously or not, above “lived religion” and is expected to be more successful in change.

I do not intend to minimize the path Schüssler Fiorenza sketches. To the contrary, the importance of this “textual” feminist theological approach, its goals, and its visions cannot be underestimated. Most theologians and religious scholars are trained this way, and from a feminist perspective too, this approach is relevant and successful. It is not for nothing that we proudly and gracefully celebrate this feminist birthday. At the same time, I am convinced that, while we should retain feminist goals and visions, we also need different disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches and aims to understand not only the contemporary situation of religion and all the questions to which it gives rise but also women’s religious agency both within and outside the institutions.

Feminist studies in religion are not only about transformative reinterpretations of “faith” (scriptures, history, dogmas, ethics, and ecclesia) but are also about seeking to understand how women (and men) negotiate power and identity in ordinary life and how they strategically appropriate religious practices to maneuver in everyday encounters, thereby reshaping their own participation in society, culture, and religion. Historians and anthropologists of religion speak of “lived religion” in this respect. In my view, both approaches can and should lead to challenging the still dominant conceptual distinctions between secular and sacred, public and private, elite religion and popular religion (often considered nonreligious) in and outside churches, and so on. As mentioned above, the same goes for other dominant concepts such as divinity/divine, sacred, or sin in theology and religious studies. Both approaches, as well as others, are needed as separate and integrated paths, depending on grassroots and intellectual questions, needs, and context as well as the creative intelligence of scholars.

To call oneself a feminist theologian seems in this respect to be a strategic and political choice, depending more on context and aims than on a fundamental principle. Both accountability and scholarship in the field of gender and religion can and actually do have many forms. The intended Catharina Halkes biography and other historical projects in the works will not only make this clear beyond doubt for the past but also offer helpful insights into how to deal with these everlasting and always changing questions on continuity and discontinuity. We need to celebrate feminist birthdays more often: such celebrations open up new, urgent, and stimulating discussions.


8 I have tried such a “mixed” approach in my article “The Marian Paradox: Marian Practices as a Road to a New Mariology?” Feminist Theology 19, no. 2 (2011): 168–81.