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A Feminist Dream: Toward a Multicultural, Multireligious Feminist Liberation Theology

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A FEMINIST DREAM
Toward a Multicultural,
Multireligious Feminist Liberation Theology

Lieve Troch

The editors of this journal asked me to present myself and to look at the context in which I live and do my work as a theologian. In doing this I will say something about the developments of which I have been a part in recent years as well as the dreams and desires for the future that come along with it. This is a story of globalization, nomadism, cultural and religious diversity, change and desire for transformation.

Doing Theology and Creating New Homes in the Process

I was born and educated in Belgium, where I went through a classic theological education and taught for some years in a high school. In 1976 I crossed the Dutch border, and since then I have lived in the Netherlands. This deliberate choice was the result of a challenging job as a staff person responsible for adult education in what was at that time the most progressive diocese of the Netherlands. This time also saw the development of a strong feminist movement at the edge of the churches in the Netherlands, a movement that challenged my theological thinking and work. The theoretical methodological frameworks constructed by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza contributed in those days to the identity of the movements and helped many women to analyze their reality, to read in a different key and to ask new questions. It was an exhausting, fruitful time. In the meantime, in the early 1980s feminist theology became an obligatory discipline at the theological centers and universities in the Netherlands, thanks to the struggle of theological students and grassroots women.

At the end of the 1980s I decided to work on two levels: work with the movements for change and transformation and, at the same time, the academic work of doing feminist theology at the university. After some years of teaching specifically feminist theology as a discipline, I am working now as a systematic

theologian at the Catholic University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands, together with three colleagues, also feminist theologians, who are working in different locations at the same university.

In the last five years the context of my theologizing again changed drastically. In 1998 I accepted a part-time job in São Paulo, Brazil. There I am working in the Ecumenical Postgraduate Institute of Religious Studies at the Methodist University. It is until now the only "ecumenical education" in Latin America where women and men can obtain recognized masters and doctoral degrees in religious studies. Women from all over Latin America go there to study, and they have started their own network of Latin American feminist theologians called NETMAL. This new situation means that I commute three times a year to São Paulo and northeast Brazil, besides my teaching work in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. This new situation was preceded by ten years of frequent commuting to Asia, working with women's activist groups in India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. To bring together the richness of these experiences and the new challenges they present for theology is my main objective at the moment.

Shifting Contexts, Changing Cultures, and Exploring a Diversity of Religions

The different contexts in which I place myself during the year open to me new, not yet fully discovered horizons. It is important to realize that until now, in most of the Asian and Latin American countries very few women have the possibility of getting a degree in theology. Most of the theological schools are controlled by church denominations and educate in the first place their male clergy. Remarkably, many women in countries of the South are deans of faculty, but mostly they are not theologically educated themselves. In particular, Catholic women hardly get a chance to study theology, as the seminaries are restricted to the education of priests. There are many informal attempts at the education of sisters and laypeople, even from a feminist perspective, but they leave the women without degrees and without formal recognition of their academic and intellectual work. Whereas access to theology is almost taken for granted by women in the West, for women in many countries of the South the chance for theological education and critical intellectual reflection on spirituality, religious institutions, and texts is merely a dream.

Three Different Contexts

In northeast Brazil, in the city of Salvador in the black state of Bahia, for the last three years Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and I have been challenged by a group of black women to help them start their own theological school. The

women belong to different Christian denominations and some of them also to the Afro-Brazilian religion called Candomble. As leaders of social movements for change between poor black and Indian people of Bahia, they started to dream of their own theological university. Earlier they had started a school system on the primary and secondary level for poor people who could not afford education in the normal school system. The next step for these women activists is to become theologians and give women and men in Bahia the possibility of doing theology from the socio-political and religious reality of the Northeast, a neglected area of Brazil. The women are preparing now for a university organized by women, with very low tuition so that women who do not have access to normal education can obtain their degree. During the last three years we have been working with this energizing group in exploring a feminist methodology for liberation and change, looking at sacred texts and at existing christologies, and analyzing religious identities and institutions from a feminist perspective. The women taught us especially about their strong bonds: they support each other's families while some are studying in São Paulo, and they use the tradition and experience of female leadership in the Candomble religion as a resource for present negotiations with the government. They teach their survival wisdom to groups and individuals and develop programs to prevent violence in their communities. Next year we will work together on the actual establishment of the institute, hopefully with recognition by the Brazilian state. The first black women who will be teachers there are now getting their recognized degrees in São Paulo. It will be a theological school fully in the hands of black women, built in their own rights and their own authority, and grounded in the socio-political context of black Bahia.

In Indonesia during the last three years a parallel process happened. The Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung and I have worked together with a group of more than thirty-five young women in an intensive process. The women live on the island of Sulawesi, where they are confronted daily with the consequences of religious war, poverty, refugees, etc. Most of them are in their early thirties and are ministers in the Protestant churches, eager to know more about feminist theological methods, yearning for tools to reflect on their own suspicions, and full of creativity to become free feminist theologians.

A path similar to the one in Bahia has been set out: a methodological framework to look critically at the political, economic, social and religious situations and the functioning of "sacred texts" within them; critical reflection on christology; and analysis of religious identity and religious institutions in a context where Christianity is a minority religion in relation to Islam. Some women are looking for opportunities now to go on with their feminist studies to obtain masters and Ph.D. degrees.

For the last ten years I have been a regular visitor to Sri Lanka. I have gotten to know many women from different religious backgrounds: Hinduism,

Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. They are feminist activists with whom I worked on methodological and theological issues and who have taught me a lot about culture, religious diversity, and ethnicity in their own struggle for survival in a country full of war and injustice. Currently we are attempting to develop a Sri Lankan feminist theology beyond the boundaries of religion and ethnicity.

In these different contexts I try to do my theological work. In Europe, where I still regularly teach at the university, I try to put together and record the puzzle pieces of these multicultural and multireligious experiences. Slowly the first stones in the next path become visible.

Searching for a Global Space for Theologians: Beyond Cultures, Religious Institutions, and Identities

During these processes in very diverse cultures and situations, it became clear to me how diverse and how similar the situations and desires of most of these women are. They share the reality of poverty, the negative remnants of colonization and slavery, the present negative effects of globalisation, the dividing forces of ethnicity and racism, the experience of living with several religions at the same time. Most of them experience violence or war daily. Their relatives have to migrate to survive or to support their families. They go to find work in the Middle East or in the cities in the south of Brazil, and they all long and work for a better world, for change in their communities and countries. At the same time, the women theologians in these countries are part of particular cultures with diverse eating and clothing habits, family patterns, and structures of power and domination that they try to transform or consolidate.

Going through a similar process of critical-methodological feminist theology of liberation in each context, it became clear that connecting the desires and work of these groups of women could add a new perspective to their own struggles and to their own theological projects. A dream is taking shape. In the beginning of 2004, I hope that at least five women from each place can be brought together—five women from Bahia, five from Indonesia, five from Europe and five from Sri Lanka—to share for a month each other's lives, theological reflections and critical analyses, and to make a qualitative leap that can enhance and deepen their own commitments and theologies in the process of developing global alternatives.

Many recognized theologians have the opportunity to travel to international conferences. Those meetings are mostly held in closed venues such as hotels and conference centers, with perhaps one day's exposure or tourist visit to the host city. The women I envision bringing together are not used to travel; they have no means to travel and they are committed to grassroots activism, even though they read about women in other cultures and continents. The aim,

then, is to have a different encounter from those at regular international conferences.

Encounter in Sri Lanka— A Prototype of Today's Reality, a Microcosm

At the moment my dream as a feminist theologian and scholar is an encounter with between twenty and twenty-five women on the island of Sri Lanka.

Why Sri Lanka? Sri Lanka is a beautiful island, a pearl hanging from the south coast of India. Sri Lankan mythology says that after they were expelled from paradise, Adam and Eve went to Sri Lanka because this place most resembled the lost paradise. The island is as large as Belgium and the Netherlands put together, and approximately eighteen million people live in the country. Besides all the beauty, all the problems and possibilities of the countries of the South and all the complicated and diverse relationships of the world are concentrated on the island.

Health care and education are rather well developed in Sri Lanka compared to some other countries, but the negative effects of a neo-liberal global economy are visible and tangible in each corner. Women are the ones who suffer most from the negative consequences.

The foreign money (the dollars) that comes into Sri Lanka and is important for the country comes from three main sources: profits from the tea plantations, migrant workers in the Middle East, and the garment industry in the free trade zones. More than 90 percent of the workers in these three sectors are women who live in the most terrible circumstances and bad working conditions. The irony of this kyriarchal society is that the foreign exchange value of the country is based on the slave work of millions of women. They are the servants of globalization and as such guarantee the future of the country. On the tea plantations the women pick eighteen to twenty-two kilos of tea per day for a salary of \$1.50 a day, which is about the price of a cup of tea in a teahouse using a teabag of two grams. In the international garment industry in the free trade zones young girls ruin their eyes and their health, living in tiny quarters with no protection against gang rape or robbery. The women who migrate to the Middle East take care of wealthy families in order to earn money for the survival of their own families left behind on the island. The suicide rate in Sri Lanka is at the moment one of the highest in the world.

From 1983 until just recently, a terrible ethnic war combined with a destructive political conflict in the South caused more than eighty thousand deaths, leaving many young women widows. To be a widow in Sri Lanka is very difficult due to cultural and religious beliefs. Additionally, the tourist industry together with new housing schemes has eroded many places.

On this island of four religions—Buddhism (70 percent), Hinduism (15 percent), Islam (6 percent), and Christianity (6 percent)—the feminist movement is diverse, organized beyond the cultural, ethnic and religious boundaries, and very much alive.

An Alternative Global Theology: Beyond Existing Boundaries of Violence, Culture, and Religion

What will we do during one month's encounter in Sri Lanka? My dream is to bring the group together in 2004 in a simple rural context, close to the city of Colombo, on the premises where a group of forty street children live together. We will share our hopes and dreams, embedded in the analysis and context of each culture and continent. The process in the first week will make us aware of primary similarities and differences on political, religious, ethnic, and economic levels. We will share histories of colonialism and globalization, all of us having taken part in it, until now, from different perspectives and with different interests.

For another one to two weeks we will immerse ourselves in the island itself: we will travel around on the small island to get to know the patterns and situations of poverty, domination and violence but also the groups of resistance that work for change and transformation. This common experience in what will be for most of the participants a new but recognizable context will certainly bring about forms of new critical analysis.

Our common training in a critical feminist theology of transformation will provide enough confidence for us to bring our contextual puzzle pieces together with this new experience and to work for global alternatives. In the last ten days of our intercontinental meeting we will try to reflect and write, and work hard to challenge each other in new theological thinking beyond our contextual situations.

Will new feminist theology arise from this? I am sure of it. The feminist liberation theologians who will meet each other are working hard right now on their own continents, with confidence and perseverance, in resistance and struggle against the grain, and most of them are young women in their thirties. They are training themselves in critical analysis with suspicion and pride, taking seriously their lived experiences, living as multireligious and multicultural subjects, and ready for new challenges. They know the daily reality of dislocation due to globalization and neo-liberal economics. They are open to seeing a *deliberate change of location* in a challenging feminist encounter as a path to alternative solutions for our global society.

The dream of the encounter is slowly taking shape. It is no longer just a dream. The plans are becoming concrete and the women are preparing themselves; there is only still some money lacking for the traveling.

As a member of *JFSR*'s international board I hope to continue to bring diverse voices together and to stimulate the development of diverse forms of theology.