

THE POLEMICAL TASK OF FEMINIST SPIRITUALITIES

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Abstract

This essay focuses firstly on how feminist spiritualities deconstruct existing patriarchal spiritualities. Secondly, it offers some recent examples of how such deconstructing activity wrongly stereotypes women as victims of oppression. The complexity of the situation is delineated by discussing how oppressed women develop powerful coping mechanisms, display a liberating capacity to free themselves, take recourse to manipulation, and are assisted by men. The article concludes with some remarks concerning the ethics of this deconstructive activity and the need for a just discourse in our deconstructing activity.

1. The polemical nature of feminist spiritualities

Spirituality as *faith experienced* comprises, *inter alia*, the interior life, contemplation, fasting, prayer, a study of or reflection on Scriptures, liturgy and a practical lifestyle. In this sense, it has to do with the human, inner experience of God. In recent times Feminist spiritualities¹ unmasked the predominantly male character of the spiritual life as it was pursued in ages past. Ruether thus writes,

The Church Fathers seldom can eschew the tendency to speak about women as though they have a lesser capacity for virtue. The female 'nature' is described as though it were peculiarly prone to the vices of pettiness, sensuality, materialism, and maliciousness. The virtues of the mind, such as chastity, patience, wisdom, temperance, fortitude, and justice are equated with masculinity. Consequently when a woman rejects marriage and procreation and aspires to the contemplative life, she is spoken of as if she has transcended not only the bodily nature, but her female nature. This accounts for the peculiar habit in patristic and medieval spirituality of referring to the female ascetic as if she had ceased to be a female. By rejecting the flesh, the female has become 'manly'.²

Many interesting examples are provided. As a result of this deconstructive activity, it has become one of the main tasks of Feminist spiritualities to question spiritualities that regard femininity as inferior or as something that must be transcended. Such criticism will be a necessary first step to develop spiritualities that are nonsexist.

Much more is, however, at stake than a struggle against sexist thinking and categories. More and more attention is being paid to the abuse of power that generates such sexist thought and language. Cady, Ronan, and Taussig commented that patriarchal spirituality is a demonic aspect of classical western spirituality, a system of images, beliefs, and practices which has glorified and entrenched power-over in western culture and in Christianity. By patriarchal

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1. For an introduction to Feminist spiritualities, cf. my paper 'The Rise and Nature of Feminist Spirituality,' forthcoming in *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* (1999). It contains a discussion of attempts to define these spiritualities. Feminist spiritualities are a recent development, a firm part of those spiritualities that avoid a privatized understanding of spirituality and promote its social dimensions.
 2. RR Ruether, 'Patristic Spirituality and the Experience of Women in the Early Church,' in M Fox (ed.), *Western Spirituality. Historical Routes, Ecumenical Roots*. (Santa Fe: Bear, 1981), 140-163. Compare the fascinating article by WW Wright, 'Jane de Chantal's Guidance of Women: The Community of the Visitation and Womanly Values,' in BC Hanson. *Modern Christian Spirituality. Methodological and Historical Essays*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 113-138.

spirituality we mean everything that wars against our realization of connectedness with one another and the rest of reality, and, as a corollary of this, everything that wars against our experiencing and feeling deeply in our own bodies.³

Feminist spiritualities therefore entail more complex matters than liberating women from coercive forms of spirituality. They seek to unmask the ugly face of power in relationships with God, others, and the self. In its quest for experienced, transformative faith, feminist spirituality desires to promote the inherent dignity of all people, liberated from coercion and exploitation.

This polemical task is determined by a particular *experience* that can be described in many ways, but that is clearly linked to an understanding of one's own humanity and inherent value before God. Even in its most mundane struggle against oppressive spiritualities, this movement reflects a deep spirituality. 'Women's attempts to break through the culture of silence and to transform their pain into political power are a deeply spiritual experience.'⁴ This spiritual experience becomes a motivation for a *programme of action* to eliminate such pain by removing its underlying causes. Feminist spiritualities therefore oppose escapism that does not address root causes of exploitation, e.g., where the exploitation and oppression are inherent in ecclesiastical, societal and ideological structures.

The negative task of polemically deconstructing the maleness of most spiritualities is followed or accompanied by establishing the new. This second moment represents the constructive, the replacement of the painful by something new and creative - an enterprise in which Feminist spiritualities are increasingly involved. 'The attempts to draw on creative expressions - dance, drama, poetry, music, art, story-telling, and folklore - to give expression to the new-found consciousness and energy is spirituality... In sisterhood, in communal selfhood, in solidarity with all other oppressed people, in the simplicity of the lifestyle of the movement, and in their commitment to healing a wounded creation and wounded world, women are expressing a new spirituality.'⁵

Much attention is being paid to the *contents* of the debate and the reconstructive work. There is reason to reflect on the nature of the debate, since the polemical task of deconstruction is often impeded by the way in which it is conducted, as will be pointed out below. Deep emotions of anger, frustration and rage influence the debate. The resultant breakdown in communication increases or prolongs suffering. This is true, not only of Feminist spiritualities, but of all deconstructionist activities that aim to unmask the ugly face of power. In the following essay, critical attention will be paid to the nature of polemical debates in feminist spiritualities. The discussion with and within Feminist spiritualities must be diligent and rigorous. It is not a debate between females and males in an unequal relationship. It would be sexist and patronizing to regard Feminist spiritualities as an enterprise by women who, some may argue, should not be exposed to searching criticism or the test of falsification. The debate is so important because it has to do with much more than particular spiritualities. It relates ultimately to the ethics of our communication and our scientific activity. It is precisely because these are the deeper issues, that the debate needs to be rigorous.

3. S Cady, M Ronan and H Taussig, *Sophia. The Future of Feminist Spirituality*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 7.

4. Indian Preparatory Group, 'An Indian Search for a Spirituality of Liberation,' in V Fabella, PKH.Lee, D Kwang-sun Suh (eds.), *Asian Christian Spirituality. Reclaiming traditions*. (New York: Orbis, 1992), 71.

5. Indian Preparatory Group, *op.cit.*, 71 and 72. S Rayan, 'The Search for an Asian Spirituality of Liberation,' in Fabella, Lee & Kwang-sun Suh, *op.cit.*, 25 also refers to this twofold task as 'One denounces, rejects and resists whatever is alienating, death dealing, and dehumanizing. One announces, nurtures, and constructs what makes for a fuller life, for finer humanity, and for a new earth.'

2. The incompleteness of our struggles

Jantzen has recently published a monograph on the topic of Feminist spiritualities that represents one of the most thorough polemical discussions on the issue of gender in spirituality. Writing within the context of postmodern thought, she draws attention to the privatizing of spirituality in popular writings.⁶ These publications provide a private religious way of coping with life, ignoring or avoiding politics and social justice. She is quite critical in her remarks, stating that though people are helped by prayer, meditation, and books to cope with the distresses of life that arise out of unjust social conditions, these coping mechanisms act as a sedative. They do not challenge those conditions themselves and therefore distract attention from the need to dismantle the structures that perpetuate that misery.⁷ The result is that the status quo is left intact and that such a spirituality is incomplete in more than one sense. If we wish to develop the genuine faith experience, we need to be aware of this incompleteness. The experience of faith cannot be complete until it focuses on the real issues.

Even where people are more focused and outspoken about root causes, the struggle for liberation is not always complete. There is often a lack of consistency in struggles, as can be proven from past and present examples. Jantzen observes in a nuanced way, 'It is manifestly not the case that the tradition of Christian spirituality is one which uniformly nurtures wholeness and justice, let alone sexual egalitarianism! There is racism and classism, sexism and homophobia, as deep in the hearts of many of the paradigm mystics of western Christianity as it is deep in the heart of the Christian church itself. And yet, while oppression runs deep, it is also true that from within the mystical tradition, especially (but not only) from some of the women mystics, came creative and courageous efforts at pushing back the boundaries of thought and action so that liberation could be achieved. These were not always unambiguous: often we find the tensions within a single individual, as strength and integrity struggles with deeply internalized misogyny and suspicion of the body and sexuality.'⁸

That one should not overly romanticize struggles is clear from the tensions, inconsistencies, and 'deeply internalized bindings' within individuals themselves. A dedicated fighter for a particular cause may be blind to other forms of oppression and fail to recognize inconsistent positions within her or his own thought. That is why spirituality tends to steer away from messianic thinking.

To illustrate the point with a different example and from another angle: the author of some profound reflections on spirituality in Latin America, Gutierrez, recently came under attack because of his preferential option for liberation theology. For him, liberation of the poor belongs to the heart of the gospel, while the propagation of equality for women in terms of church offices distracts from that struggle.

This position by one of the best known critics of traditional theologies and one of the major figures in the struggle for a just society, is traumatic and inconsistent for women. For them, spirituality cannot be complete and come to full fruition unless the oppressive structures in which women live are removed. In attempting to understand Gutierrez, they analyse his remarks in terms of his own position of power within the church. They point out that his inconsistency is the result of a deeply ingrained confessionalism. Liberation

6. GM Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion 8. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20.

7. Jantzen, *op.cit.*, 20.

8. *Ibid.*, 23.

theology, they argue, is kept within the confines of institutional Catholicism.⁹

This inconsistency is not unique. There are many other examples of such incompleteness in individuals and societies. The struggle for a nonracial society in Africa, for example, is often pursued in a context that is rife with societal and ecclesiastical oppression of women. Such are the inconsistencies that are found in one individual, one society and one world. This illustrates how the best among us are exposed to limitations and restrictions in insight and how contingent the nature of our struggles is.

The insight in the incompleteness of our struggles has many functions, the least of which is to remind us that we need to be humble in our evaluation of history and our opponents. Matters are often far more complex than we think. We are often blinded to such complexities by our perspectives and our causes. At the same time, we overlook the inconsistencies in our own makeup. Added up, these matters influence our analytical competence, the credibility of our pronouncements, and leave us with an incomplete task.

3. Stereotyping

One could discuss the issues addressed in the previous section in more depth with reference to the nature of human cognition and the role of prejudices in deconstructionist activities. The major point, i.e. that our deconstructionist activity is complex, offers some useful lessons, especially when one considers two highly provocative articles on women and spirituality in two South African journals. A discussion of these two articles will provide further insights on the topic of the ethics of our deconstructive activities that is under discussion in this essay.

In the first article, Van Schalkwyk, a licensed woman minister in the still predominantly white Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, attacks the so-called 'moralistic' writings of a bestseller woman author of religious books.¹⁰ She describes herself as a reformed theologian who opposes moralism because of the Reformed teaching of *sola gratia* and *sola Scriptura*. She argues that women are unenlightened victims of a moralistic spirituality. In illustration of her point that only good theology brings true liberation, she records her own history. She writes that she was also a victim of moralistic spirituality before the church permitted her (and women generally) to study theology. Having been trained theologically, she discovered what true, simple Reformed Spirituality is.¹¹ Women theologians have come to realize how, as untrained lay people and women, they were unable to recognize their bondage to moralistic literature. They are now empowered to warn other women that this moralistic literature implicitly supports unacceptable gender roles.¹²

In a second article, written in the popular journal *Insig*, Landman, professor in theology at the University of South Africa, writes in similar vein.¹³ Written after the previous State President of South Africa, FW de Klerk, announced that he is divorcing his spouse of many years, Landman's article takes issue with theologians who were so quick to

9. Cf. remarks by RR Ruether, reported in *National Catholic Reporter*, as recorded in *Inter Nos* 28 3/98.

10. Prop. Carin van Schalkwyk, *Bevry vroue tog van dié al te moralistiese literatuur*, in *Die Kerkbode*, 15 Mei 1998, 10.

11. She writes how their theological training transformed them from loyal Afrikaner girls ('lojale Afrikanermeisies') who read moralistic literature to help them understand the Bible to the theologians who turned away from that literature to become independent readers and interpreters of their Bibles.

12. She adds that these women theologians face denigrating remarks about their 'feminist' theology precisely because of their critical remarks: 'Nou gebeur daar egter 'n interessante ding wanneer hulle hulle mening oor die saak van spiritualiteit lug. Hulle word as feministe uitgekryt.'

13. C Landman. 'Wat FW ons leer.' *Insig*, Maart 1998, 17.

respond moralistically to this sensational event. She encourages his spouse (and, of course, women in similar situations) not to allow the trauma of a divorce to relegate her to the role of self-pitying martyrdom that Afrikaans women claim for themselves when they are abandoned by their husbands. She should not regard herself as a victim of the situation, because she has an own identity. Landman advises married women to befriend their husbands and to communicate with them on the same level as their male friends. She further warns her readers to beware of moralistic theology that promotes a spirituality of total womanhood.¹⁴ Such spirituality is rife in moralistic publications, particularly in those of the author that was asked to help in writing the biography of Mrs. de Klerk after her divorce. This author is disparagingly referred to as the aunty writing 'pink' (read: kitschy) books.¹⁵

A comparison of the two articles reveals the following similarities between them:

1. 'The church' is mentioned as an institution that relegated women to inferior positions in church, society and family.
2. Women should not allow men to allocate a gender identity to them that belies the many other identities they have.
3. Both articles contain criticism of women authors of moralistic publications.¹⁶
4. Both articles polemicize against existing spiritualities.
5. Both articles seem to have been written to a readership of white Afrikaans women on their position in the family and church.¹⁷
6. Both write in the name of feminist theology.

One may agree with many of the assertions found in these articles. They correctly point out how a religious moralism can spiritually degrade women and promote their submission to men. Moralism is unacceptable and the death-knell of religion.¹⁸ Equally acceptable and correct is the statement that women have wrongfully and for too long been denied ecclesiastical and other social positions and privileges because of their gender.

14. Cf. B Caprio, *The Woman Sealed in the Tower. A Psychological Approach to Feminine Spirituality*. (New York / Ramsey: Paulist, 1982), 35, for this term.

15. Idem, 17: 'Ons (d.i. vroue) hardloop na die tannies wat die pienk boekies skryf en ons wil hê hulle moet ons verhaal opskryf sodat ons nog meer na 'n martelaar kan lyk.'

16. I have checked some of the so-called moralistic writings of this author without being able to substantiate the rather snide references to her works in the two articles. It is ironical that this same author was once bitterly attacked by other opponents of her writings because of her perceived ignorance of or unwillingness to write about social issues. This very same author spent an extended period of time in a township to research one of her publications on racial relationships across racial divides. She was yet again criticized by other (conservative) opponents because of her too open discussion of controversial matters like sexual relations between children.

17. Note how De Klerk's wife is contrasted with the 'Griekse vrou wat hy verkies om buite die grense van hierdie land se sedes raak te loop.'

18. I leave aside a major problem here, i.e., that the attack on a moralistic spirituality is contrasted by Van Schalkwyk with a reformed spirituality that emancipates women from their traditional roles. My problem is not the fact that moralism is rejected here. Moralism is indeed often a dangerous and morbid phenomenon in religious life. My problem is that the 'reformed' spirituality promoted here is depressingly individualistic and reminds one of the privatized spirituality that Jantzen criticized in the quotation cited earlier. Landman's view that a woman should not see herself as a victim where her husband experiences a shifting identity, is equally problematic. She is obviously right in asserting that women should avoid self-pity in such a situation, but it is difficult to understand her statement that a relationship can be ended as soon as someone experiences a shift in identity (whatever that may mean). At the same time, I find it ironic that the advice in Landman's article (which the cynic reader could read as patronising advice, i.e., 'do not cry when the cruel man leaves you') is no less moralistic than the moralism she opposes.

Furthermore, it is obvious that personal identity cannot be linked exclusively to gender.¹⁹ These are all valuable insights and need to be stressed time and again.

The problem with the articles is located in the stereotypical assertion that (especially Afrikaans) women are without an identity of their own, uncritical of traditional oppressive gender roles, and content with their own traditional and exploitative familial roles of cooking and bearing children. They are delineated as unable to recognize religious moralism and fundamentalist thinking. They have a totally negative image of God. Even where women have the power to influence others, they still continue the patriarchal and patronising structures - in some case becoming worse (women) masters than the (male) ones they themselves had.

Note, for example, the following quote from Landman's article, 'Afrikaanse vroue het lank gedink dat as hulle so identiteitsloos agter 'n man aan trippel en so glimlag op die regte tyd en mooi lojale dingetjies van hom sê, dat hy ewig aan ons getrou moet bly. Maar kyk nou net hoe het ons die mans verveel.' What is said here, is reinforced by the illustration that appears in the article. Against the background of the eternal love triangle three figures are drawn: FW de Klerk in the middle, with a sexy looking ('Greek') woman close to him, rolling her eyes beguilingly at him. To their side stands a fat, prim and proper figure complete with neat jewelry and a handbag, with a tear running down her cheek. The stereotype cannot be more complete.

It does not take much to point out how skew this picture is. The astute political observer knows that wives of (Afrikaner) politicians had immense power over their political decision-making, despite the outward docility of some of them. Mrs. de Klerk is well known as anything but the traditional wife fulfilling familial roles in the home and in the kitchen. She held high political offices and was known to have influenced her husband quite extensively. Should one choose to believe otherwise in the case of Mrs. de Klerk (and others like her in local politics), another argument may reveal how untenable statements like these are (their generalizing nature is obvious). Hillary Rodham Clinton, the loyal, betrayed wife of a president, always seems to be on his side, to smile at him at the right moments, to hold hands with him, and to applaud him. Is she therefore without identity and a victim of her situation? We know better than that.

Those of us who have lived and worked amongst other language and race groups, know how alive and well stereotypes are and how deeply they have penetrated our society. Stereotypes like 'Afrikaners are racists, authoritarian, and unreasonable disciplinarians,' 'blacks are lazy and incompetent,' 'English are duplicitous and backstabbing,' 'Jews are dishonest,' 'are some of the uglier stereotypes that permeate our daily discussions and then shape and steer our behaviour. They can be dangerous and life threatening precisely because they shape behaviour. History is full of examples of the dangers of stereotypes. The story of anti-Semitism illustrates this quite adequately.

Parents and spouses who verbally abuse their children and partners ('You are always like that...' 'Why can't you be like your sister?') are in no way less guilty because they are not physically destroying their victims. Feminists often stress how violated they feel by sexist language, especially the seemingly innocuous or unrecognized stereotypes. On the surface, they appear so friendly or complimentary. Those who utter them are often unaware of how negative

19. Landman, op.cit., 17, writes, 'Vroue-teoloë sê... hulle hou (nie) van 'n etiek wat sê alles moet altyd dieselfde bly nie. Want dis juis so 'n moraliteit wat vroue hulle laat verbeel dat hulle martelare is. Ek gee my hele lewe aan jou, sê sy vir 'n man, en daarvoor mag ek vir altyd jou identiteit bepaal. En vroue-teoloë sê eintlik nog meer. Hulle sê dat vroue nog steeds dink hulle is net geslag; vroue het net 'n geslagtelike identiteit. En dit beteken dat hulle identiteitsloos is, want hulle het net die identiteit wat 'n man hulle gee.'

their language is experienced. The manager in business, addressing his secretary as 'my darling,' or 'my dear' is more than often unimpressed by the argument that he would not dream of using such language to talk to his male employees. They are uttered, it is thought, 'to be endearing, to help or enlighten.' Similar pronouncements are, 'No one can bake koesisters like Afrikaans women.' 'Afrikaans women are eager to serve their husbands.' 'Afrikaans kids are so obedient and submissive.' 'Lay people need so much assistance.' 'The person in the pew is so moralistic.' 'Priests are prudes.' In many cases these stereotypes reflect deeper attitudes and judgements that are often hurtful and judgemental.

The remarks of Jantzen and the two South African authors polemicize against an oppressive spirituality. Although all three are adversarial, they engage in polemics differently. There is the obvious difference that the work of Jantzen has a more scholarly character and audience than that of the two South African contributions that appeared in popular journals where they had limited space to argue and debate their position. Jantzen portrays a complex picture, allowing for nuances, and being aware of the need to speak critically and debate strongly against opponents. She is aware of the problems created by caricatures.²⁰ She understands complexities and how evil and good can be found in one person, one group, and one society. In the other two cases, the authors are equally critical, but in a different, disappointing way. Opponents are evaluated in terms of an either-or system: you are either in the evil camp, or on our side. Furthermore, their approach is personal, focusing more on people rather than issues, picturing them in a negative and unflattering manner with unmotivated or unproven statements. Generations and groups of (Afrikaans) women are generalised as a miserable, helpless lot. They are presented as weaklings who lack intellectual integrity, candour, and competence.²¹

3.1 Seeking power against power

In open and transparent societies fair representation, especially within a religious context, is becoming a non-negotiable issue. Stereotypical portrayals like those of (Afrikaans) women that are found in these publications fly in the face of this established practice. To some extent, such a portrayal is offensive²² to women who have somehow succeeded in remaining strong and in providing dynamic leadership to other women (and men) – despite the fact that they were excluded from official positions in the church.²³ The

20. Jantzen, op.cit., 346, refers to caricatures that 'are important ways of conveying aspects of reality which may otherwise go unnoticed.' She speaks of her own picture of the provenance of mysticism that may make up a caricature 'rather than a nuanced picture.' The caricature is something other than a stereotype. A caricature is a basic attempt to sketch an existing state of affairs by noting only the most prominent facts. The rest of Jantzen's work indicates how careful she is to avoid stereotypes. To me, this sensitivity reflects her profound insight and is in line with the topic under discussion in her work.

21. 'Wanneer hierdie vroom vroue die teks nie so mooi verstaan het nie, trek hulle die Verklarende Bybel nader en soek na 'n verklaring van die teks' is one of the remarks of Van Schalkwyk, op.cit., 10.

22. It is almost inconceivable that someone can address fellow women believers with the following judgmental remark about their understanding of God: 'Die God wat mense, mans en vroue, so lief gehad het dat Hy sy Seun na die wêreld gestuur het om te sterf vir ons sonde, word verdring deur 'n God wat 'n verterende vuur is, wat net reg sit om ons te straf vir al ons tekortkominge. Van genade en 'n genadige God wat empatie met die menslike toestand het, is daar nie meer sprake nie.' Cf. Van Schalkwyk, *ibid.*, 10.

23. It is hard to overestimate the immense influence of societies like the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging, die VroueSendingbond, die Vrouediens, en die Mede Sendingarbeiders. The history of some Afrikaans churches cannot be understood without these societies. They generated enormous interest in and funds for missionary work, congregational activities, Bible translation, etc. They engaged actively in Bible Study groups, social activities and welfare. Even though these were women's movements, their activities can in no way be restricted to women's issues or to familial roles.

history of the church reveals that many such gifted women existed, so that one is not referring to the occasional charismatic woman leader, here. They include numerous ministers' wives and lay women who became influential leaders or groups in congregations despite the fact that only men were allowed to be the official ministers or priests. They do not fit the stereotype presented in the articles by van Schalkwyk and Landman. These gender-'apartheid' structures may seem ridiculous alternatives in hindsight, but they were indeed viable alternatives to exercising power at that stage. In many cases, these alternatives provided women with exactly those forms of identity that differed from the familiar familial ones (housekeeping, childraising).²⁴

Such alternative grasps for power are in line with what social theory teaches us about disempowered people who do not accept their lot passively, especially if they are people of character. They find alternative ways and means of asserting their power. It is quite striking, for example, that women often emerge as powerful figures precisely in the field of spirituality, where the immediacy of their claim to authority ('God appeared or spoke to me') has often resulted in serious ramifications within the status quo. Jantzen wrote about women's mystical experiences that could be seen as a competing struggle block for domination. These experiences represent creative efforts at pushing back the boundaries of institutional power.²⁵ Building on important recent theories and thinkers,²⁶ she writes, 'Women of spirit (and some men who supported them) were not merely passive victims of a powerful ecclesiastical hierarchy: they offered resistance, pushed back boundaries, forced reconsideration. Although to a large extent the thought and action available to them was defined by the church and society in which they lived, it is also true that their resistance and determination in turn helped to reshape that church and society.'²⁷ Women could become so threatening to the status quo, that the book's thesis remarkably holds that 'spirituality and mystical experience have come to be acknowledged as part of women's religiosity in direct proportion to the perceived decline of mysticism in public and political importance.'²⁸

These observations function to point out how women can take full responsibility for their fate and their religious experiences despite stark oppression and exploitation. Once one develops this perspective, it is not difficult to understand how wrong the stereotyping in the above publications is.

Power plays a seminal role in all human relationships, within marriage, family, churches, and society. The postmodern mind has correctly recognized the corrupting

24. One of the famous images (and stereotype among Afrikaners themselves) of Afrikaner women is that they were the ones who drove the wagons over the mountains during the Groot Trek. In a recent collection of stories on the Boer War, Afrikaans women are portrayed as the ones who displayed character, insisting that the men continue fighting rather than surrender and ordering them back when they fled the battle field. Cf. J Ferreira (ed.). *Boereoorlogstories*. (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1998.) At the same time, the book reveals the stereotype that English soldiers held about fat, smelly, and foul-mouthed Afrikaans women. These perspectives together tell the true story of a people's history. The book itself indicates what happens when these stereotypes meet.

25. Jantzen, *op.cit.*, xii.

26. The intellectual sphere within which Jantzen writes, is impressive. Her insight in postmodernism is especially clear from the last, seminal chapter in her work. For the rest, she often refers to the philosophical roots of publications on mysticism, but for her own discussion she assumes the work of Berger and Luckmann, developed by Foucault into a genealogy of mysticism.

27. Jantzen, *op.cit.*, 16 and also 328, 'Although the women in the Christian tradition were in many respects bounded by male definition and authority, they still found unconventional possibilities of working within those boundaries and indeed pushing them back in ways that remain instructive for contemporary feminists.'

28. *Idem.*, 24.

influence of power. Unmasking power and power games is therefore part of the hermeneutics of suspicion. On a deeper level, and because of the postmodern link, Feminist spiritualities point out that power, more than gender, perverts those who oppress. Someone is often an oppressor not so much because he is a male, but because males, by agreement and convention, assume power over others. This is a matter that affects many societal groups and spheres. Perverted power exploits not only women, but also others like the elderly, children, the physically disadvantaged, and those with differing sexual orientation. That is why Feminist spiritualities, for example, stress that power needs to be under constant surveillance to prevent it from becoming a lording over others.

The problem with power is its deceptive character. Unless one realizes this and consciously seeks to deconstruct it, one may not be aware of how the deeply ingrained human desire for power permeates life. Power is not only exerted by those within the *status quo*, but also by those who are oppressed, as well as by those within the counter-cultural movements.

3.2 The capacity of the poor to liberate themselves

The above stereotype of a pathetic group of oppressed people is not only incompatible with the way in which oppressed people exert power (as discussed in the previous section), but also degrades them to mere objects of action. For all practical purposes they are treated as puppets, unable to take responsibility for their own fate and future. Sobrino's remark that 'It is one thing to work for the poor; it is quite another to believe in their capacity to liberate themselves,'²⁹ displays sensitivity for the oppressed. There is no struggle for (on behalf of) people, only a struggle with them. In other words, one must not underestimate oppressed people's quality of spirituality. We will be surprised to discover how the oppressed reveal the face of God to us and how we, the liberators, are liberated by the oppressed in their struggle for freedom too. During the well-known Rustenburg consultation that took place towards the end of the apartheid era in this country, Archbishop Tutu spoke of his visit to a priest in jail. The priest told his archbishop that he prayed for those who were torturing him during his imprisonment. Pressed for a reason, he explained that he had been praying that God would restore human dignity to those who tortured him and had lost that dignity in the process. The persecuted and oppressed praying for the oppressors and persecutors? We can learn surprising things about the Gospel by listening instead of stereotyping.³⁰

3.3 Manipulation

Criticizing the stereotyping of opponents in debates about the liberation of oppressed groups, and discovering the capacity of the oppressed to liberate themselves, does not necessarily imply romanticizing the oppressed. To do so, would be equally naïve. It is a sad fact that some of the poor (including women) can become violent, drink, steal, cheat, and act in many other negative ways, or, that the poor could simply not care a hoot about their own liberation. This is how some women responded to their situation of oppression. In other words, one needs to be aware of the fact that oppressed people are not just pathetic victims,

29. J Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation. Toward Political Liberation*. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 25.

30. One of the features of postmodernism is its anti-elitist character. Traditional borders are radically questioned. 'High' and 'popular' art are regarded as remnants of bygone times. It is in line with this that the borders between 'high' theology and 'laypeople's' theology need to be re-investigated and are, indeed, beginning to be questioned. There is a huge power struggle operating in this conflict. Van Schalkwyk's article needs such deconstruction.

but that they are often violent or vindictive themselves. This is also true of the scenario regarding women's issues.

In asserting their power against male power structures, women often act manipulatively. An example of this may be found in the enormously influential woman mystic, Hildegard of Bingen. She became upset when monks opposed her decision to move her convent because of potential financial losses to them. She forced her decision on them through aristocratic connections and an illness. Her language reflects her manipulation. She calls herself a 'poor little creature' to highlight her inferior status and her subservience to men. Yet, at the same time, she spoke disparagingly about effeminate men. As a result of such men, God had to make women 'virile.'³¹ This type of language does not appear to be very spiritual or to evoke spirituality. It proves how manipulative people become in their struggle against power. Cady, Ronan, and Taussig write, 'what makes this struggle (for full rights) so difficult - in fact, unthinkable for some women - is that male domination of society appears to be a part of the divine plan ordered and maintained by God. What is it like to live with this kind of subordination? Living on the margins of power can make women experience themselves as shadows, semipersons who lack thoughts, feelings and gifts of their own. Life on the margin is spent smiling, when shouting is more to the point, and learning how to manipulate those with real power. It is a life of rage, expressed sometimes in child abuse, but more often unexpressed, except in depression or psychosis. It is a life of invisibility, a life which accepts battering and sexual abuse as one's due.'³²

This is the sadness of power games. They destroy spirituality when people are desperate to assert themselves and when they take recourse to coping mechanisms such as manipulation.³³ This represents the other side of the nobility and dignity of women that shines through the complex history of our tragic past. It is, however, part of the fuller picture that must be represented in the quest for liberation and that shows us how restricted stereotypes can be in explaining complex phenomena. This part of the history of Feminist spiritualities must still be told, especially in Afrikaans Reformed circles.

3.4 The role of men

An important feature of the stereotype in the above articles is that women are submissive, docile underlings of male masters in the church. This stereotype is used in many contexts and presents itself in many guises. The truth is a bit different. The struggle of Feminist spiritualities is not between 'the' church and 'women.' There were men who, patiently and over a long period of time, resisted sexism in their churches and fought for egalitarian structures. One cannot underestimate the role of men and of substantial parts of the church in this process. Once again, Jantzen writes with credibility, 'The many women and men who were willing to stand against the ecclesiastical structures of authority that were often corrupt and self-serving, and who were defined as heretics or witches because of it, have shown even more radical ways of taking responsibility for what they would count as genuinely religious, whether or not it was approved by those *with the power of the sword*. It is appropriate that the dangerous memory of these women and men should

31. For this, cf. Jantzen, op.cit., 162.

32. Cady, Ronan & Taussig, op.cit., 83.

33. Cady, Ronan & Taussig., op.cit.,7, write, 'For us, however, obstacles to the equality of persons in the political order are precisely those things which obstruct our spiritual development, and this is not meant metaphorically. The same mechanisms that stifle our connectedness with others in this society - drunks, the messy poor (not the ones we admire in El Salvador), rapists, neo-Nazis - stifle our connection with the part of ourselves that is like that person, and ultimately our spirits are diminished.'

be preserved in a study of who counts as a mystic, and that their lives should be included in the parameters of the question of power and gender in the Christian mystical tradition.³⁴ The history of the empowerment of women in Afrikaans churches reveals the important role of well-known male theologians. Whatever the ongoing inferior position of women in individual churches, the point is that the struggle to liberate women was and is as much waged by men as it is by women.

This feature of the stereotype must be highlighted in order to bring out the real power struggle that is taking place. The struggle in Feminist spiritualities is not against 'men' or between genders or between 'the church' and 'women.' It is a struggle by those who understand the liberational character of the gospel (often the powerless), against those who have the power of the sword. This is explained by the italicized phrase in the above quotation.

3.5 A quest for justice

Breaking through the stereotypes of 'men' oppressing women, of Afrikaans women being pathetic, of 'the' church exploiting women, has more to it than simply a quest for credibility, fairplay, nuanced thinking, scientific accountability, and propriety in debate. It ultimately has to do not only with what we debate, but how and why we debate, with the ethics of Spirituality. To seek the spiritual life by struggling against unjust structures, requires an awareness of underlying ethics of our debate.

Feminist spiritualities generally operate within postmodern thinking. The postmodern mind unmask power games in ideologies, but often also thrives on contradictions, differences and oppositions. Does this imply that opposing and exploitative ideologies can all claim validity for themselves? Do right and left wing ideologies like those propagated by Hitler and Stalinism both have legitimacy? Is a 'total woman' spirituality, one in which women tolerate discriminating structures, another legitimate way of experiencing faith?

The issue relates to the ethics of a deconstructionist activity. Deconstructionism itself is 'not a neutral academic exercise or a display of scholarly virtuosity, but rather an effort to show how power and knowledge have been hooked together in oppressive ways, and by that recognition make it possible to see through and resist such hook-ups where they continue.'³⁵ The power behind social structures is unmasked in order to indicate their oppressive and unjust nature. Deconstructionism is not a merely descriptive activity. Feminist spiritualities, as such a deconstructionist activity, have an ethical character, sharing the ethics generally operative in postmodernism. 'Putting it another way, it is precisely the demand of justice which calls forth the efforts of deconstruction: as Derrida insists, 'deconstruction is justice' (1992:15).³⁶

The special status of justice means that it is not reducible or deconstructible, as Jantzen observes correctly. Even if justice is an open notion to some extent and must be questioned in terms of, for example, whose justice it is, it provides one of the parameters within which deconstructionist activity, and then specifically Feminist spiritualities, can and should operate. A 'total woman' approach that tolerates injustice or seeks to legitimize it at the cost of the humanity and dignity of women, is not merely another form of spirituality. It promotes structures of injustice and allows for the exploitation of women.

Meting out suffering is not the exclusive privilege of oppressors. Our struggle and the

34. Jantzen, *op.cit.*, 328.

35. *Idem*, 351.

36. *Ibid.*

language we use in it can cause pain and despondency. That is why Feminist spiritualities need to remain *self-critical*. Postmodernism is characterized by self-awareness and self-criticism. If nothing else, we need to remain faithful to this postmodern self-reflection on our own activities. In so doing, we will distinguish ourselves from those power hungry ideologies that are blind to their own fallibility and mistakes.

The ethics of Feminist spiritualities require fair and just discourse. To refrain from stereotyping has nothing to do with weakness. To be frank and outspoken can often be effective and transformative without, however, being patronizing or superficial. Whilst a confrontational statement brings about change, or as a *cri de coeur* even helps someone to overcome deep inner anger and suffering, a stereotype not only causes injury to those stereotyped, but ultimately reflects negatively on the one who stereotypes and on the discourse involved.

On this score, contributions that claim to speak on behalf of women's theology are disappointing when they stereotype, but exhilarating when they (sometimes mercilessly) deconstruct and unmask with integrity and fairness. In the end we all long for a spirituality that not only liberates the oppressed from their bondage, but that also liberates academic and spiritual discourse from its stereotypes and implicit, unrecognized, violence. The struggle and our deconstructive activity are not only won by what we say, but also by how we speak. The ethics of our deconstructive activity require a just discourse.

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