Helene Egnell

OTHER VOICES

A Study of Christian Feminist Approaches
to Religious Plurality East and West

Uppsala 2006
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Abstract

This dissertation explores the contribution of feminist theology and feminist dialogue praxis to interfaith dialogue and theology of religions. Feminist dialogue praxis is studied through interviews and documentation from women’s interfaith projects; and feminist approaches to religious plurality through the works of a number of Christian feminist theologians, with special attention to Asian theologians, who in their theologizing consciously make use of their multireligious context.

Just as feminist theology is a critical and a constructive project, so are feminist approaches to religious plurality. Women meet in interfaith dialogue in the shared experience of being marginalized in their respective religious traditions. But they also meet in a shared commitment to reshaping those traditions. There is a “common we” which is a starting point for dialogue.

The dissertation argues that this “common we” is created through a methodology inspired by the women’s movement, where a central feature is creating a “safe space” for telling life stories and building relations. This safe space enables conflicts to be handled in a constructive manner, and differences to be respected.

Marginalization, otherness, difference, relation and change, are themes that occur in feminist theological works on religious plurality. How to meet and understand “the other” is the crucial question in interfaith dialogue. Feminist theology starts in the experience of being “the other”, which gives a different approach to the question. The feminist discourse on difference can also provide an opening where religious difference is seen not as a problem but as a possibility.

Interfaith dialogue among women is a discourse on the margins, and makes conscious use of its marginality. The margins offer a different perspective compared with the centre. The dissertation discusses whether this stance reifies women’s marginality in interfaith dialogue, or has the potential to bring about a shift, where the margins become the centre.

Keywords: feminism, feminist theology, interfaith dialogue, intercultural theology, theology of religions, theology of religious difference, the Other, change, relation, margins, anti-Judaism, Women's Interfaith Journey, Gabriele Dietrich, Chung Hyun Kyung, Kwok Pui-lan, Wong Wai-ching, Diana L. Eck, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Rita M. Gross, Maura O'Neill, Michael Barnes

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# Contents

1 Introduction .............................................................................................................11
  1.1 An Asian Prelude .............................................................................................11
  1.2 Problem .............................................................................................................12
  1.3 A Contribution to Intercultural Theology ......................................................14
  1.4 Material and Method ......................................................................................16
    1.4.1 Material .....................................................................................................16
    1.4.2 Method .....................................................................................................20
  1.5 Limitations and Terminology .........................................................................24
    1.5.1 Limitations ...............................................................................................24
    1.5.2 Terminology .............................................................................................25
  1.6 Theoretical Considerations ............................................................................29
    1.6.1 Feminist Theory .......................................................................................30
    1.6.2 A Discussion on Religion .........................................................................38
    1.6.3 A Discussion on “Asianness” ................................................................48
  1.7 Previous Research ..........................................................................................50
  1.8 Outline ..............................................................................................................51

PART I POSSIBILITIES OF PRAXIS .........................................................................53

2 A Case Study: The Women’s Interfaith Journey .................................................55
  2.1 Introduction to the Project ...............................................................................55
    2.1.1 Outline of the Project ..............................................................................56
    2.1.2 The Indian Context ..................................................................................59
    2.1.3 Is the Women’s Interfaith Journey a Feminist Project? .........................60
  2.2 Prominent Themes in the Journey ..................................................................62
    2.2.1 “The Messiness of Actual Existence” ......................................................62
    2.2.2 Emphasis on Relationships ....................................................................64
    2.2.3 Dealing with Conflict ..............................................................................65
    2.2.4 The Ambiguity of Religion ......................................................................70
    2.2.5 Communal Violence and Women as Peacemakers ..............................73
    2.2.6 Women and Interfaith Dialogue .............................................................76
    2.2.7 Aims of Interfaith Dialogue ....................................................................81
    2.2.8 Individual Experiences – Collective Aims .............................................83
  2.3 Conclusions: A Journey into Each Others’ Lives ........................................87
6.1.3 “People’s Religion”: Religion as Practiced .............................................216
6.1.4 Scriptures and Storytelling ......................................................................219
6.1.5 Christology ..............................................................................................222
6.1.6 Asian Feminist Spirituality ......................................................................224
6.1.7 Mealtable and Marriage as Metaphors for Interfaith Dialogue ......................226
6.1.8 Male Responses to the Feminist Challenge .........................................................228
6.2 Gabriele Dietrich – a Materialist Analyst ..........................................................231
   6.2.1 Communalism and Religious Reform .........................................................232
   6.2.2 A Materialist Understanding of Motherhood ..............................................234
   6.2.3 Goddesses and the Feminine Principle .........................................................236
   6.2.4 Struggle for Life ..........................................................................................237
   6.2.5 Summary .....................................................................................................238
6.3 Chung Hyun Kyung – A Theological Artist ..........................................................239
   6.3.1 Canberra 1991 ............................................................................................240
   6.3.2 Syncretism ....................................................................................................242
   6.3.3 Shamanism, People’s Religions and Salimism ..............................................245
   6.3.4 Beauty ............................................................................................................249
   6.3.5 Conflict ..........................................................................................................250
   6.3.6 Summary .......................................................................................................251
6.4 Kwok Pui-lan: A Postcolonial Theologian ..........................................................252
   6.4.1 On Being an Asian Woman Critic .................................................................253
   6.4.2 Discovering the Bible .....................................................................................254
   6.4.3 “Who Do You Say That I Am?” ..................................................................258
   6.4.4 A Postcolonial Theology of Religious Difference .........................................260
   6.4.5 Summary .......................................................................................................262
6.5 Wong Wai-ching – a Post-modern Critic ............................................................262
   6.5.1 “The Poor Woman” .......................................................................................263
   6.5.2 Multiplicity of Women’s Experience .............................................................264
   6.5.3 Critique of Asian Feminist Christology .........................................................266
   6.5.4 Intercultural and Interreligious Interaction ....................................................267
   6.5.5 Reception of Wong’s Critique .........................................................................268
   6.5.6 Summary .......................................................................................................269
6.6 Conclusion: An Audacious Enterprise ................................................................270

7 Western Feminist Challenges to Malestream Theologies of Religion ..............273
7.1 Feminist Critique of Malestream Theology of Religions .....................................273
   7.1.1 Critique of Androcentrism in Theologies of Religion ....................................274
   7.1.2 Difference, Hybridity and Identity .................................................................276
7.2 Connections between Sexism and Religious Exclusivism ..................................279
7.3 Enriching Theology of Religions and Feminist Theology through Interaction .........................................................282
7.3.1 The Other..................................................................................283
7.3.2 Change ......................................................................................286
7.3.3 Difference/Diversity .................................................................288
7.3.4 Experience ................................................................................288
7.3.5 Relationality and Interconnectedness .......................................295
7.2.6 Christology ...............................................................................300
7.3 Conclusions: An-Other Discourse..................................................305

8 Malestream Responses to the Feminist Challenge.................................307
  8.1 An Overview .................................................................................307
  8.2 A Test Case: Michael Barnes S. J. ..................................................310
  8.3 Conclusions: Still a Long Way to Go.............................................316

PART III SYNTHESIS..........................................................................319

9 Conclusions: A Discourse on the Margins...........................................321
  9.1 “The Margins is a Good Place for Dialogue”.................................321
  9.2 Can the Margins Become the Centre?.........................................324

10 Towards Intercultural Feminist Theologies of Religious Difference ...327
  10.1 The Construction of Gender and Religion ................................327
  10.2 Allowing Different Agendas.........................................................328
  10.3 Engagement with Muslim Thought .............................................329
  10.4 Ethics and Dialogue ....................................................................330
  10.5 “Religion As Practiced”...............................................................331
  10.6 “Religion As Prescribed”............................................................333
  10.7 Towards an Intercultural Future..................................................334

Appendix Interview questions for Case Studies ....................................336

Bibliography ..........................................................................................337

Index ......................................................................................................363
**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>AWRC</td>
<td>Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCA</td>
<td>Christian Conference of Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CATS</td>
<td>Conference of Asian Theologians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EATWOT</td>
<td>Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EEWC</td>
<td>Evangelical &amp; Ecumenical Women’s Caucus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EWA</td>
<td>Ecclesia of Women in Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JFSR</td>
<td>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMI</td>
<td>Henry Martyn Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>WCC</td>
<td>World Council of Churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRSC</td>
<td>Women, Religion and Social Change</td>
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Staff at the library of Missio in Aachen and the library and archive of the Centre Œcuménique in Geneva, as well as the team of interreligious relations of the WCC, and of course staff at the University Library in Uppsala, patiently helped me to find the material I needed. I am also grateful to Priscilla Singh, Elizabeth Tapia and Aruna Gnanadason, who engaged in conversation and helped me along in Geneva. Antje Röckemann provided
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Uppsala, December 2005
Helene Egnell
1 Introduction

1.1 An Asian Prelude

In 1986 I took part in a field study in South East Asia, arranged by the department of Mission Studies, Uppsala University. We were a group of ten undergraduates, five women and five men, studying Christianity’s encounter with the world religions. On one occasion, we visited a Hindu temple in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. At the end of the *puja*, the priest invited us to come forward and receive ashes on our foreheads along with the worshippers. Four of us – all women – stepped forward, while the others retreated. Afterwards, one of the women – the only one of us who was not heading for a Lutheran church career – exclaimed: “I thought I was the only syncretist in this group!”

Later that evening – incidentally it was 8th March – we had an animated discussion, first among the women, then with the whole group, about the significance of gender in this incident. The women discovered that we had all on several occasions felt alienated and uncomfortable in the meetings with diverse (male) religious leaders, we felt we could not come up with relevant questions – or, rather, that the questions discussed by the men were not our questions.

Further, we discovered that while the women had appreciated the atmosphere of the Hindu temple, the men had all felt very uncomfortable with the colourful statues and general “messiness” of the place. On the other hand, the men had admired the serene beauty of the great mosque, where the women, having to cover from head to heel in warm black cloth, felt very alienated.

It would be easy to draw a range of premature conclusions about gender and religion from this story, such as: “Women are more prone to be ‘syncretistic’ than men”; “Women react emotionally (I feel like responding to this invitation), whereas men react intellectually (I’ll have to think about this)”; “Women value relations (accepting an invitation) over dogmatic purity (it is not in accordance with Lutheran standards to take part in Hindu worship)”; “Hinduism is a more women-friendly religion than Islam”.

However, matters are more complicated. The statements above could be problematized in a number of ways, such as: Can we draw any generalized
conclusions about “women” from the behaviour of four women out of five? What do we do with the fifth woman, who behaved “like the men”? Is it more emotional to respond positively to an invitation than to shy away from it? Is it possible or even meaningful to compare religions on a “women-friendliness scale”? While the Hindu ritual appealed to the women, it is still the case that it is created and performed by male priests.

Nevertheless, the experiences of exclusion and inclusion, of attraction and repulsion, of identification and alienation along gender lines that we articulated on that 8th March evening have served as an impetus for me to investigate whether women’s experiences of and responses to religious plurality can be theologized into feminist contributions to the theology of religions. That is the aim of this dissertation.

1.2 Problem

According to Ursula King, feminism is “the missing dimension in the dialogue of religions”.¹ Interfaith dialogue is mostly, at least on the official level, carried out by men, and gender issues have rarely been on the agenda.

On the other hand, interfaith dialogue has not played a great part in the development of feminist theology. Feminist theology has not dealt explicitly with interfaith issues to a great extent, and though feminist theology in a sense has been multireligious from the outset, none the less there has been a lack of awareness of the importance of dialogue between Christian feminists and feminists of other faiths.

There have, however, been some attempts to arrange women’s interfaith conferences from the 1980s onward. Increasingly, regional associations of women theologians are multireligious, as for example the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and the European Society for Women in Theological Research (ESWTR). There is a small but growing body of feminist contributions to the theology of religions.

What, then, has been learned from these women’s interfaith enterprises? What difference would it make if the “missing dimension” of feminism were to enter interfaith dialogue?

This dissertation is an attempt to map the intersection of feminism and interfaith dialogue, identifying the contributions of feminist dialogue praxis and theology to the arena of interfaith dialogue and a Christian theology of religions. The task is twofold:

1. To summarize experiences of women in interfaith dialogue. What issues have been brought up? How have they been dealt with? Which

1 King, Ursula 1998
methodologies have been used? Which features have struck the participants as salient?

2. To investigate how Christian feminist theologians have dealt with religious plurality and interfaith issues. Which are their specific approaches? Are there themes and methodologies in feminist theologies that could be especially useful for the development of theologies of religions and interfaith dialogue praxis?

In addition to presenting and analyzing this material – in itself an important task, because the material is not readily available and has not yet been assembled – I hope to make constructive contributions towards developing feminist dialogue praxis and Christian feminist theologies of religions.

Thus, the investigation operates in two spheres: a praxis sphere and a theoretical sphere. Feminist theology takes its starting point in praxis, and also aims at creating liberative praxis, and that is the rationale for this dissertation. The two spheres interact and overlap, as there are already theoretical assumptions behind an interfaith dialogue enterprise, and theologizing goes on in the dialogue.

My basic hypothesis is, that as feminist theology is a critical as well as a constructive project, so are feminist approaches to religious plurality. This would mean that women’s shared experiences of oppression within their religious traditions are a common denominator, which gives a different basis for the dialogue. Together, they seek to identify the sources of oppression, as well as the means to change the traditions. At the same time, they share what they find liberating and life-giving in their religious traditions, things that might not be counted as central to the traditional interpretations.

With some notable exceptions, women are not among the leaders of religious communities. Consequently, I conjecture that women in interfaith dialogue might have less of “vested interests” in their religious institutions, and thus be able to articulate more freely their personal feelings and opinions than men who see themselves as, or are indeed selected to be, representatives of their religions.

I also conjecture that there are themes prominent in feminist theology which could be helpful in developing a theology of religions, such as difference, otherness and relatedness. There are also issues where both feminist theology and theology of religions pose a challenge to theology, such as Christology.

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2 There is a growing number of women pastors and bishops within Protestant churches, as well as rabbis within all Jewish denominations; the order of Buddhist nuns (the bikkhuni sangha) is being revived, increasingly women are put forward as spokespersons for Islam, and there is a growing movement of women priests in Hinduism. There are also small religious traditions which are dominated by women, cf. Sered 1994. On the global scale, however, these developments are marginal.
I have chosen to pay special attention to the development of Asian feminist theology, which is to a great extent influenced by being created in a context of religious plurality, and is in the vanguard of feminist theological development in the Third World. Thus, my “case study”, The Women’s Interfaith Journey, is taken from the Asian context, I have included Asian regional conferences in the chapter on major women’s interfaith events, and one chapter is devoted to the theme of religious plurality in Asian feminist theology.

This focus on Asian theology does not imply that Latin American, African and African-American feminists do not also make important contributions to theology of religions. Mercy Amba Oduyoye emphasizes that African women’s quest for wholeness, connectedness and alafia, well-being, leads them to “respect multicultural and inter-religious approaches to life in community”, that “[r]eligion is a means to the end of fullness” and “all viable alternatives to securing alafia are deemed legitimate”. Musa W. Dube claims that her postcolonial feminist hermeneutics are informed by African Independent Churches, where women had a strong position and were not afraid to incorporate African religion in their theology and praxis.

Among Latin American mujerista theologians there is an increasing interest in female aspects of indigenous religions, as well as the pre-history of “black madonnas” like the Virgin of Guadalupe. Ivone Gebara, in her eco-feminist theology, talks of the “biodiversity” of religion, and claims that the doctrine of the Trinity must not be limited to its Christian meaning, but connect to the Trinitarian symbols of other religions.

1.3 A Contribution to Intercultural Theology

This dissertation belongs to the field of intercultural theology within Mission Studies. Intercultural theology was first introduced by Walter J. Hollenweger in the 1980s, and is now especially developed in the Netherlands, by Frans Wijsen at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, and by Volker Küster at the Theological University in Kampen.

As intercultural theology works from the presupposition that all theologies, including European theologies, are contextual, and strives to move away from Euro-centrism, I pay special attention to Asian feminist

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3 King, Ursula 1996, p 13 f
4 Oduyoye 2001, p 34-35
5 Dube 2003, p 55
6 Moody 1996, pp 129-131
7 Gebara 1999, pp 143, 205
8 Hollenweger 1986, p 29
9 Wijsen 2005
theology, and, while recognizing its contextuality, explore how it interacts with, and can enrich Western theology. As Frans Wijsen points out, European theologians now have to face cultural and religious pluralism, and can learn from churches that have had to face such pluralism from the beginning.\textsuperscript{10}

According to Wijsen, intercultural theology is about developing intercultural hermeneutics, which “deals with the question to what extent ‘the others’ really differ from ‘us’, whether and under what conditions the understanding of ‘the others’ as ‘others’ is possible”.\textsuperscript{11} Intercultural hermeneutics has a communitarian approach, recognizes differentiation, is relational, and based upon existential understanding of truth. Intercultural hermeneutics should also be “subaltern hermeneutics”, that is, based on an analysis of cultural change from below and from within.\textsuperscript{12} Otherness, difference, relationality and the perspective from below are important themes in this dissertation.

Volker Küster defines intercultural theology as follows:

Inter-cultural theology explores the inter-confessional, inter-cultural and inter-religious dimensions of the Christian faith. An interdisciplinary approach and the use of multimedia are significant. Inter-cultural theology therefore has a broader scope than its competitors, such as the pluralistic theology of religions, global ethics or comparative theology.\textsuperscript{13}

Further, Küster says, intercultural theology has four functions: the \textit{heuristic function}, developing methodical instruments for intercultural communication processes; the \textit{anamnestic function}, collecting and preserving the contextual knowledge; it is \textit{foundational theology}, reflecting on the definition of the relationship between Christian faith and culture or on a theology of religions; and finally the \textit{ethical function}, cultivating a habit of respect and dealing with intercultural conflicts.\textsuperscript{14} All these functions are discernible in this dissertation, with an emphasis on the first two: the experiences from feminist dialogue projects need to be documented, especially as they provide a methodology for facilitating dialogue processes. It also highlights feminist reflection on religious plurality and suggests a feminist ethics for dealing with intercultural conflicts.

\textsuperscript{10} Wijsen 2005
\textsuperscript{11} Wijsen 2005
\textsuperscript{12} Wijsen 2005
\textsuperscript{13} Küster 2005, p 429
\textsuperscript{14} Küster 2005, p 429-30
1.4 Material and Method

As stated by Volker Küster above, intercultural theology is broad in its scope, and takes an interdisciplinary approach. Consequently, many different kinds of material comprise the sources for this dissertation, and they call for diverse methods.

1.4.1 Material

The material can be broadly divided into the following three categories: oral sources (interviews and conversations), conference materials and theological publications. They correspond broadly, but not entirely, to the three parts of the investigation.

The “Grass Roots” Praxis Level

I have chosen *The Women’s Interfaith Journey*, arranged by the Henry Martyn Institute (HMI) in Hyderabad, India, as my “case study”. This project is interesting because it explicitly aims at exploring “women’s ways of doing interfaith dialogue” besides developing methods for engaging women in interfaith dialogue. I have interviewed five of the participants in this project, as well as the project coordinator. I have also read articles and reports by the project leader, Diane D’Souza, reports written by my interviewees and other participants and various working papers from the project that are kept in the HMI archives.

Conference Praxis Level

I have chosen a few international conferences, that had a global selection of participants, and regional Asian conferences. These conferences were not solely about religious issues, they also had a political content. The participants included social scientists and activists as well as scholars of religion. Two of the international conferences were arranged by the WCC, two, entitled *Women, Religion and Social Change*, by Harvard University. In the Asian context, five Asian Christian women’s conferences were arranged by the Asian Women’s Resource Center for Culture and Theology (AWRC). Two of them were interfaith conferences, but I have looked into the material of all the conferences, to see how interfaith issues also featured in the Christian-only conferences as well. Then there are two Catholic women’s conferences, arranged by Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA).

The material from the 1988 WCC conference in Toronto consists of reports by the organizers, records such as evaluations, lists of participants etc. that are kept in the archives of the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, and video films that were broadcast by Canadian television. The video
documentation consists of seven one-hour programmes, which are produced in an “observing” mode of representation, documenting the plenary sessions, group discussions, rituals and interactions in the breaks during the conference, with a “fly-on-the wall” perspective, without much intervention from the speaker’s voice. The intention appears to be to give the viewer a sense of being present at the conference. The films capture the conference process, but, compared with other conferences there is not as much documentation of the content of presented papers. I have also interviewed a few persons who were involved with the conference. The 1999 WCC conference in Mulheim is documented by a special issue of *Current Dialogue*, in which the conference papers are published.

The first Women, Religion and Social Change conference arranged by Harvard University, is documented by the book *Speaking of Faith: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change*. I have also had access to various articles and working papers. The second conference is documented by transcripts of panels on the Pluralism Project’s website. I have also interviewed some of the participants from both conferences.

The Asian conferences are documented in books published by AWRC. The material from the EWA conferences is published on EWA’s website, and in the volume *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the voices of the Silenced*.

The “Interviews” section in the Bibliography refers to tape-recorded semi-structured interviews, “conversations” to more informal interviews, where I have taken notes. Some interviews with specific questions have been carried out via e-mail.

**Theological Writings**

I have endeavoured to cover the bulk of what is written in English on women/feminism and interfaith dialogue/religious plurality. Most of the material consists of articles and essays mainly from *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, Feminist Theology*, and other journals. So far there are only three monographs that attempt to outline what could be labelled as “feminist theologies of religions”, Maura O’Neill’s *Women Speaking, Women Listening*; Pamela Dickey Young’s *Christ In A Post-Christian Worl*; and Jeannine Hill Fletcher’s *Monopoly on Salvation: A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism*; there is also one book with the format of a dialogue: Rosemary Radford Reuther’s and Rita M Gross’ *Religious

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15 Eck & Jain 1986
16 Monteiro & Gutzler 2004
17 O’Neill 1990
18 Young, Pamela Dickey 1995
19 Fletcher 2005
Feminism and the Future of the Planet: a Buddhist-Christian Conversation\textsuperscript{20}. Diana Eck’s and Devaki Jain’s Speaking of Faith and Virginia Mollenkott’s Women of Faith in Dialogue\textsuperscript{21}, consisting of material from women’s dialogue conferences, fall between the categories of conference materials and theological writings.

Apart from the authors mentioned above, Ursula King, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki and Paula Cooey have published more extensively on theology of religions. Various feminist Christian journals have also published thematic issues about feminism in other religious traditions and interfaith dialogue.

In the Asian part, I have surveyed the journal In God’s Image from the first volumes up to the early 2000s to get a general picture of how Asian feminist theologians deal with these issues. I then focus on four theologians: Chung Hyun Kyung from Korea, Gabriele Dietrich from India, Kwok Pui-lan and Wong Wai-ching from Hong Kong. They are the Asian feminist theologians who have published most extensively in English, they are widely read and influential, they represent three “generations” of Asian feminist theologians, and religious plurality is a recurring theme in their texts, even though it can not be labelled “theology of religions”. That is, other religions are present in their writings, even though they, with a few exceptions, do not set out to write “theology of religions”.

This entails a difference between the Western and Asian material: while I have picked Western material that can be labelled as “theology of religions”, in the Asian material I look at the whole production of my four chosen theologians, to deduce from it their theologies of religions.

A Discussion on Representativity

The fact that these Asian theologians have not only obtained their degrees in the West, but that Kwok and Chung now also live and work there, raises questions of representativity. Who is the more “Asian” – Gabriele Dietrich who was born and educated in Germany, but is now a naturalised Indian citizen, having lived more than half her life in India, or Chung Hyun Kyung, who was born and did her undergraduate studies in Korea, draws extensively on Korean religious traditions in her theology, but now lives and works in New York?

Volker Küster points out that “contexts and cultures are nowadays increasingly deterritorialized”.\textsuperscript{22} There are substantial Asian minorities in the big cities of the US as well as England and other European countries. Living in the West should thus not disqualify someone from identifying as Asian.

\textsuperscript{20} Gross & Ruether 2001
\textsuperscript{21} Mollenkott 1987
\textsuperscript{22} Küster 2005, p 431
Representativity is an issue with which Asian feminist theologians have constantly been struggling. Chung Hyun Kyung touched on it already in *Struggling To Be the Sun Again*:

What is the relationship between the educated middle-class women theologians who *write* theology and the illiterate, poor women theologians who *live* theology in their everyday lives? This is a great problem for Asian women theologians.

The specific problem involved in working as an Asian feminist in universities in the West is discussed by Ranjini Rebera in an article in *In God’s Image*. On the one hand, Rebera says, working in the West means that Asian feminist theologians are accepted as equals in, and can exert influence on, the First World academy. It also gives them the resources for academic work that they lack at home. On the other hand, it is difficult to interpret and be an authority on a context of which one no longer has firsthand experience. There is also a brain-drain problem in the “bidding” for the best Third World scholars within the Western academy. Asian women theologians find it hard to negotiate being “people in the middle” even when they return home.

Under the influence of post-modernism, the idea of representativity is increasingly questioned. In an interview, Chung Hyun Kyung disavowed any pretensions to be “representative” and, while admitting that “there was a good innocent time when I thought I could be the voice of Korean women”, claimed that “this representativity thing does not work anymore. We live in an increasingly globalized world, where geopolitical location does not matter, and the diversity is too big for anybody to be able to represent anything.”

In the same vein, Trinh T. Minh-ha claims that “categories always leak,” and points out that

the Third World representative the modern sophisticated public ideally seeks is the *unspoiled* African, Asian, or Native American, who remains more preoccupied with her/his image of the *real* native – the *truly different* – than with the issues of hegemony, racism, feminism, and social change.

Finally, there is reason to ask whether the demand on Third World women theologians to be “representative” is greater than that on men. The concluding words in Marianne Katoppo’s *Compassionate and Free* indicate

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23 Chung 1991, p 102  
24 Rebera 1997, pp 29-30  
25 Interview Hyun Kyung 2004-12-12  
26 Trinh 1989, p 94  
27 Trinh 1989, p 88 (italics in original)
this. She tells of how a male colleague commented on the peculiarity that she, who he perceived as “more Western than Asian” should write “an Asian woman’s theology”. She retorted that he himself was very “Western” in his appearance, whereupon he replied in genuine surprise “Well, of course, it’s different for men”. 28

Kang Nam Soon has pointed out that Third World women theologians often are homogenized and overgeneralized, and thereby othered, in Western feminist theological discourse. 29 My aim is not to present them as “representatives” but as individuals, theologians interesting in their own right. Similarities and differences will be noted, between themselves and in relation to the overall picture of Asian feminist theology.

More than representativity, accountability is an issue for the Asian academic theologians. They are committed to not distancing themselves from the grass roots theology. They seek to take ordinary women’s theologizing through storytelling, dance and ritual seriously, and let it criticize academic theology; and to create a theology that will be useful to these women’s contexts. The theme of accountability on the part of Third World women will be apparent throughout the dissertation.

Having cautioned about the relevance of “representativity”, I do not hesitate to label Chung, Dietrich, Kwok and Wong as “Asian”, in that they consciously make use of the Asian context – socio-political and religious – in their theology, use resources from Asian religious traditions and/or enter into dialogue with Asian religions. For a discussion of the concept “Asianness”, see below.

All my four chosen theologians are Protestants. I have not found any Asian Catholic feminist theologian who has published as extensively as these four Protestants. I considered including Sr. Mary John Mananzan, but found that though she has lately taken an interest in interfaith dialogue, and especially indigenous religious traditions in the Philippines, there is not much in her production which deals with topics relevant for this dissertation. However, Sr. Mary John is important as an activist, enabler and source of inspiration to Asian feminist theologians, as we shall see in Chapter Six.

1.4.2 Method

Feminist scholarship is at pains to avoid doing “epistemological violence” to the objects of research, but rather achieve empathy, turning objects into subjects and co-researchers. 30 Being a white European woman researching feminist theology from the Third World, I am well aware of this

28 Katoppo 1980, p 84
29 Kang 2004, p 110
30 Cf. Bong 2004, p 241-242
commitment. This being a dissertation about dialogue, I also want it to be a
dialogue, in which I listen to my dialogue partners’ voices on their own
terms, aiming for the analysis “from within” of subaltern hermeneutics.

I use an explorative method, in order to make the voices that speak in the
material audible. There is necessarily an interpretation involved already
when I establish a “text” out of interviews, conference reports, video tapes
e tc., but my aim is to listen to the voices in this material in order to discern
themes in the material rather than craft themes out of preconceived theories.
This approximates “grounded theory” in anthropology, though I also employ
feminist and postcolonial theories to interpret the material.

This is an empirical investigation, and I have chosen to stay close to the
empirical material. I have endeavoured to be guided, but not governed, by
my material. This method could be described as a patchwork method, or a
bricolage. In a patchwork, many different bits and pieces are combined into
a whole. The colour and pattern of the pieces decide which belong together,
the total pattern can not be decided before you have all the pieces – it is,
however, not a random pattern, but a deliberate design. Bricolage is a term
frequently used in cultural studies, and connotes collecting information or
things and putting them together in a way they were not originally designed
for, or working with what is at hand rather than out of theories.

The “case study” is conducted through semi-structured, qualitative
interviews. I have chosen to quote extensively from the interviews, in order
to make the women’s voices heard. This also applies to the video tapes and
interviews with conference participants. As this is material that is not
accessible to the public, I have deemed it appropriate to present large
portions of it in my text.

The voices I listen to, and strive to make heard, are marginalized voices,
in that they are women’s voices, some of them Third World women’s voices.
Privileging these voices entails some kind of standpoint epistemology.
Standpoint epistemologies have been increasingly questioned within feminist
theology, and especially post-modern thought has pointed out that the
assumption of a single centre where power is located is problematic. Bat-
Ami Bar On has suggested that the project of authorizing the speech of
marginal subjects should not be based on epistemic privilege but on demands
of justice.31

However, as I understand standpoint epistemology, it does not necessarily
claim that the perspective of the marginalized is a “truer” or “better”
perspective, but only that knowledge is situated, that is, from the margins
you see different things than from the centre(s). We need different

31 Bar On 1993
perspectives in order to acquire a fuller knowledge, and the marginalized perspectives need to be “privileged” to be heard.

Furthermore, marginality and power relations are perspectives which need to be taken into account in interfaith dialogue. There are claims in my material that “the margin is a good place for dialogue”. This could be sustained by understanding how cultural identity is shaped in cultural studies, which stresses the interaction precisely at the boundaries of cultures. Kathryn Tanner, reflecting on the significance of cultural studies in Christian theology, argues that “the distinctiveness of a Christian way of life is not so much formed by the boundary as at it; Christian distinctiveness is something that emerges in the very cultural processes occurring at the boundaries”\(^{32}\) (italics in original).

“Boundaries” and “margins” are not interchangeable concepts. “Boundaries” does not presume a centre, as “margins” does. I find, however, that both concepts are needed: “margins” to connote the power relations and different perspectives, “boundaries” to connote the activity going on at the edges. I will return to this theme, and the significance of Tanner’s ideas in the discussion on religion below.

I have also chosen to make the explorative method visible in the presentation. Especially in Chapters Two and Three, the material is first presented without much comment, and after that it is interpreted through theoretical lenses. Furthermore, finding themes in the material, rather than pressing the material into given themes, means that though some themes recur in different chapters, others do not. Thus, the different chapters do not follow the same pattern of headings.

Many ideas are mentioned in this dissertation, which I do not develop fully. Delores Williams argues that womanist theologians “must get as many ideas ‘out there’ as possible when we have the chance”\(^{33}\) so that they “get abroad” and can be developed later by whoever wants to pick up the thread, and I think that applies to white feminists as well who get the opportunity of a public voice.

Feminist research also entails “recognizing that locating oneself in one’s research is an exercise in accountability and transparency”\(^ {34}\). Like most feminist researchers, I have embarked upon this research project out of an engagement in the issues involved, and as part of the feminist movement. While I have not taken part in the conferences and projects in the dissertation, I have taken part in other women’s conferences, and can recognize much of what is described. My own experiences affirm what I find in the material. Is this good or bad from the research point of view? It

\(^{32}\) Tanner 1997, p 115
\(^{33}\) Williams 1993, p 11
\(^{34}\) Bong 2004, p 240
provides me with an empathic knowledge, which cannot be objectively verified, but enhances my understanding. On the other hand, I might just read my own experiences into what others say. The best I can do is to state that my experiences are part of my understanding.

Locating myself is especially important when I, as a white Western woman, embark on the precarious project of analyzing texts by Asian women. Precarious, because Third World women have rightly accused Western feminists of universalizing their own agendas, while on the other hand, Kang Nam Soon has criticized Western feminist theologians for applying different academic standards when evaluating Asian feminist theology.35

I try to balance between these Scylla and Charybdis, while also maintaining that while there certainly is an orientalist fallacy in Western philosophy including feminism, there is, as Kang also has pointed out, an occidentalist fallacy that essentializes “Western” into a unified concept. Furthermore, “Western” more often than not equates with “American”. As a Swedish feminist, I am keenly aware that there are substantial differences in the development of feminism between European countries and the US. While American second wave feminists are – rightly or wrongly – accused of universalizing white middle class women’s experiences, the early Swedish second wave feminist movement in which I took part, had as heroines women like black civil rights activist Angela Davis and Madame Binh of the Vietnamese negotiation team, and we rallied for striking cleaners. Focusing on white middle class women was viewed with suspicion and contested at length.

The phenomenon of “Scandinavian state feminism”, that is the equality policies of Scandinavian governments including child care, generous maternity and paternity leaves etc., also colours my outlook. However, while there is in Sweden a general – if superficial – consensus that women and men should have equal opportunities and share work and household duties, the term “feminism” is not uncontested. It is not, as Asian feminists seem to assume, a specifically Asian phenomenon that feminists are derided as unwomanly man-haters. The main difference is that Western anti-feminists do not normally use the argument that feminism is bad because it is Western.

35 Kang 1995, p 21
36 Kang 2004, p 110
1.5 Limitations and Terminology

1.5.1 Limitations

The scope of this dissertation is broad, as is the range of material. There are, however, some limitations.

First, I confine myself, with some exceptions, to Christian theologians. The dissertation is intended primarily as a contribution to the intra-Christian discussion on religious plurality, though I hope it will be of interest to the adherents of other religious traditions as well. But a dissertation on interfaith dialogue must necessarily itself contain an element of dialogue, so there is room for some dialogue partners like Rita M. Gross (Buddhist), Judith Plaskow (Jewish) and others.

When it comes to the praxis level, the contributions of all conference participants, regardless of religious belonging, is of course relevant. Likewise, to get a comprehensive picture of The Women’s Interfaith Journey, it was important to include the voices of Hindu participants.

Secondly, with the exception of German material concerning the debate on anti-Judaism in feminist theology in the German context, and a couple of texts in Norwegian and Swedish, I use material in English. Given the dominance of English in feminist theology, this limitation is not too severe. With regard to the Asian focus it might appear to be a bigger obstacle to comprehensiveness. However, Asian theologians, unlike Latin American theologians who have Spanish as a common language, mainly use English as their lingua franca. The problem of using the colonizer’s language is a topic for discussion among Asian feminist theologians. The fact is, however, that the major works of the theologians highlighted here are written in English.

Thirdly, the focus is on Western and Asian material. To include African and Latin American material would have been unmanageable within the scope of one dissertation. My lack of knowledge of Spanish excludes the Latin American theologians, as not much of their work is translated into English. I have chosen to focus on Asia, or more accurately, South and South East Asia, because Asian theologians have been in the vanguard of promoting interfaith dialogue, and insisting that a relevant Christian theology cannot be done without taking other religious traditions into account, within the WCC as well as the EATWOT. Other religious traditions are unavoidably a significant part of the context where theology is created in a minority situation as that of the Asian churches, and this is apparent in Asian feminist theology as well.

Fourthly, while this dissertation covers women’s interfaith dialogue praxis on the level of conferences and smaller ongoing projects, one level is

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37 Cf Rebera 1997
missing. That is the “dialogue of life” that occurs when women meet across religious boundaries in everyday life. That would require a long term field study, which could not be contained within this project. The feminist analysis of what goes on in the “dialogue of life” remains as an important task for theological research.

1.5.2 Terminology

**Interfaith, Interreligious, Dialogue**

There is some confusion about terms like interfaith dialogue, interreligious dialogue, dialogue of religions. They are sometimes used interchangeably, but certain differences in meaning can also be perceived. The word “interfaith” stresses the subjective dimension: that the dialogue is between persons who exchange personal beliefs, and that each person has her/his version of a religious tradition. “Interreligious dialogue” or “dialogue of religions” has a more institutional connotation, where the participants are seen as representatives of a religious tradition.

Especially in the British context, some theologians prefer to write “inter faith” in two words, to avoid the impression that it is a new religion called “interfaith”.

I find the term “interfaith” most appropriate for the projects I study, because the subjective element is central in all of them. I also generally share the view that interfaith dialogue is (or should be) an encounter on the personal level rather than an exchange between representatives. The term “interreligious”, and even more “dialogue of religions” also begs a discussion of the term “religion” to which we will return below.

The word “dialogue” also needs clarification, especially as it is questioned in much of my material. The participants of the conferences and projects I have studied are reluctant to use the word “interfaith dialogue” because they sense that it connotes an intellectual comparison of religious doctrines.

I use the term “dialogue” in a very broad sense, which comes close to “encounter” or “communication”. The word “dialogue”, from the Greek words *dia*, through, and *logos*, word, literally means “through words” or “through talking” (not, as a widespread misunderstanding has it “two persons talking”). This literal meaning conveys a sense of intellectual sharing, but as the word is commonly used in the interfaith context, it is broader than that.

Interfaith dialogue is often said to have four dimensions: doctrinal, ethical, contemplative and “dialogue of life”. Of these dimensions, it is the first that is concerned with concepts and centred on words and an element of comparison. The ethical dimension is concerned with finding resources in
religious traditions for joint action to promote peace and justice. The contemplative dialogue is basically wordless, focused on sharing meditation practices – though reflection on experiences of meditation also plays a part. The “dialogue of life” is what goes on in everyday life, when people of different religious traditions interact.

Following Lissi Rasmussen, David Kerr suggests the word *diapraxis* for the joint action by religious communities to deal with problems in society, emphasizing that action rather than talking is the way forward in interfaith relations. This also indicates that the subject of dialogue/diapraxis” does not have to be “religion” in a strict sense. Lieve Troch says: “dialogue of committed women across ethnicity, culture, religion and class is always a multireligious dialogue even if religion is not the issue”.

Ruth N.M. Tetlow uses the word “interfaith encounter” in her study of women’s interfaith dialogue, because it “conveys a more wholistic engagement with each other”, but I find that “encounter” also connotes something more casual than the deliberate, structured dialogue projects I study. I will argue that, in order to be taken seriously, women need to claim the term dialogue for what they are doing.

To sum up, I will use the term “interfaith dialogue” for encounters between people from different religious traditions, whether they take the form of intellectual discourse, storytelling, action, meditation, dancing, crying, laughing, hugging or any means of communication available to human beings.

**The “Tripartite Paradigm”**

The terms “exclusivism”, ”inclusivism” and “pluralism”, connoting different approaches to religious plurality, are contested today. By “exclusivism” is meant the position that while other religions can be expressions of peoples’ search for God, they are neither revelatory nor salvatory. “Inclusivism” claims that while there is revelation in other religions, and their adherents might be saved without converting to Christianity, the full revelation is only to be found in the Christian gospel, and salvation is realised only through Christ, who might be “hidden” in other religions. “Pluralism” claims that both revelation and salvation can be found in other religions, and does not give Christianity priority over other religions. (The concepts are developed within Christian theology but can be applied also to other religious traditions).

The critics of this typology point out that there are few “pure” adherents to any of these positions, and that the paradigm itself is limiting. The
paradigm is attributed to Alan Race, who himself espouses the pluralist position; another critique is that it privileges the pluralist position. Those who find themselves labelled “exclusivists” perceive a pejorative nuance in the term, but neither are all “pluralists” are happy with the term.

Whatever the criticisms, the typology appears to have stuck for the time being. I still find the categories useful for a broad characterisation of a standpoint, as long as you are aware that they are simplifications, and I employ them occasionally, though they are not an important part of my analysis.

**Plurality, Pluralism, Diversity, Difference…**

The terms plurality and pluralism, and especially diversity and difference, are central in my material. The nuances are not always clear, but I will try to clarify how I understand these terms.

I use the term “religious plurality” to connote the objective fact that there are many religions. The term “religious pluralism”, is part of the “tripartite paradigm” and thereby more value-laden, connoting an affirmative attitude to the existing plurality.

“Difference” and “diversity” have become central terms in feminist discourse, especially as it is influenced by postmodernism. As I understand them, “difference” is used to counteract universalism, to point out that differences are real, and that they matter. Audre Lorde states: “It is not our differences that separate women but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions that have resulted from ignoring and misnaming those differences”.

“Diversity” on the other hand, like “pluralism” has a more affirmative nuance, presupposing a “unity-in-diversity”. As we shall see, Third World feminists and womanists are sometimes suspicious of white feminists’ use of “diversity”, which they interpret as glossing over the implications of difference.

**Woman, Women, Feminine, Feminism…**

The aim of this dissertation is to study feminist approaches to interfaith dialogue and theology of religions, not to study women in interfaith dialogue. Though the former can be said to include the latter, the distinction is important. I do not purport to explore “women’s ways of dialoguing” or “the feminine dimension in religion”, but to study feminist praxis and theology on the interfaith scene.

Thus, feminism is my analytical term when I approach my material. Most of the theological material uses this terminology, and so do parts of the

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41 Lorde 1991, p 379
praxis material. But parts of the material avoid the term “feminism” and prefer “woman’s” or “women’s” experiences/ways of knowing/doing things, for reasons that will be discussed in the text. The term “feminine” also occurs.

Definitions of feminism abound, and there are many kinds of feminisms, but I will not go into them here.42 For my purposes, I define feminism as “an analysis of society that acknowledges that men as a group have more economic, political, religious and cultural power than women as a group, and seeks to find the mechanisms behind this situation in order to change it.” Important elements are that it is a question of power relations; and that feminism is not only a theory, but also a programme for action.

When I find that such an analysis is the rationale for a women’s project, even if the women behind the project don’t explicitly label it as such, I define it as feminist for my purposes. I don’t consider that to be an encroachment on their integrity, as long as they are not explicitly anti-feminist. That is to say, not every activity that involves women is necessarily feminist. There are many women’s activities that have no feminist purpose at all, or even aim at preserving status quo in the relations between men and women.

I oscillate between using feminist theology in the singular, connoting feminist theology as an umbrella concept for a research field, and feminist theologies in the plural for the various enterprises with different emphases and theoretical underpinnings that are contained under this umbrella. (The same goes for “theology of religions”.) The terms “womanist” and “mujerista” for African-American and Latin-American women’s theology respectively, also occur when appropriate.

I have borrowed the terms “kyriarchy” and “malestream” from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. “Kyriarchy”, the rule of a lord, more than “patriarchy”, the rule of a father, implies that women’s subordination is one feature in a structure of dominance based not only on gender, but also on ethnicity, class and economic status.43 “Malestream” exposes the fact that in a kyriarchal society, what is considered mainstream is male dominated, and that what is considered universal is in reality particular.

Praxis

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term praxis denotes “the willed action by which a theory or philosophy becomes social actuality”.44 I use this term for the conferences and projects, because I want to stress that

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42 A few examples of definitions of feminism/feminist theology can be found in Gemzöe 2002; Beckman 2001, p 26; Eriksson 1995, p 12; Cooke 2002, p 143; King, Ursula 1989, p 4
43 Fiorenza 1994, p 14
44 Oxford English Dictionary Online
although the feminist theory behind the projects is not always defined very
clearly, what the women do in the dialogue is an actualization of feminist
theory. It is not just “what women do when they come together”: a
methodology is involved, based on feminist theory in a broad sense.

Third World, West, North and South
“Third World” is a concept which has stuck, though the circumstances under
which it was forged have disappeared. Originally, it denoted those countries
which were not allies of either the “First”, industrialized western world, or of
the “Second” world in the “east” under Soviet influence. It has, however,
come to be a term for countries with a low UN Human Development Index,
mostly formerly colonized countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.
Other designations for this part of the world are “the (global) South”, which
is sometimes used in my material, “the two-thirds world” or “developing
world”.

All of these terms are contested, but since “Third World” is the term most
frequently used by “Third World Theologians” (cf. the names of the
organization Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, and the
journal *Voices from the Third World*), this is the term I will use, with “the
West” as its counterpart, connoting Europe, North America, Australia and
New Zealand.

Asian Name Conventions
The names of Korean and Chinese authors appear in different versions in
different publications. Normally, in these languages, the family name comes
first, but in some publications, it is converted into the Western order, with
the family name last. For those whose names are given in various versions I
use the original form, where the family name comes first. For persons whose
names always appear in the Western order, such as C. S. Song and Sun Ai
Lee Park, I will retain that order.

1.6 Theoretical Considerations
“Women”, “religion” and “Asia” are crucial concepts in this dissertation,
and their meanings are not straightforward. Each of these concepts has many
understandings, and their usefulness has been questioned. Each has
frequently been understood in an essentialist manner, which is increasingly
questioned under the influence of postmodernism and postcolonialism.
These concepts also interact in intricate ways.

Ursula King points out that the terms “gender” and “religion” are
“definitional minefields”, the shifting understanding of which entail “a
shaking of foundations, a radical remapping of our intellectual and academic landscape, and with a complete repositioning of bodies of knowledge that relate to religion”.45

To elaborate my understandings of these concepts I will use feminist theory, and postcolonial theory, as well as theories from cultural studies and anthropology.

1.6.1 Feminist Theory

“Women’s experience(s)” is a concept which occurs frequently in my material. So does the idea that women have a relational view of reality, to a large extent inspired by Carol Gilligan’s theories.46 Both these themes are related to the essentialism-constructivism debate within feminist theory.

**Women’s Experience**

While “women’s experience” was a key concept in early feminist theology, it was first challenged by womanist theologians who pointed out that white middle class women had universalized their experiences, which did not include the different experiences of black or working class women. Moreover, its usefulness has been contested by many post-modern theorists. It has been pointed out that there is no universal “women’s experience”. It has even been claimed that the analytical category of “woman” has no meaning.47

While I agree that a universalized notion of “women’s experience” is untenable, I still think “women’s experience” can be a useful category in feminist theology. Linda Hogan, in *From Women’s Experience to Feminist Theology* (1995), argues for interpreting “women’s experience” through a hermeneutics of difference.

Women’s experiences of oppression under patriarchy, and women’s praxis of action for change are the bases for feminist theological reflection, says Hogan. But instead of being universalized, “women’s experience” must be understood as radically diverse and plural.

With Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, Hogan distinguishes between women’s “feminist experience” – recognition of, and struggle against, oppression – and women’s “traditional experience” – connected to motherhood, menstruation etc.48 Both these kind of experience, she argues, have informed, and should continue to inform feminist theology.

45 King, Ursula 2004, p 4
47 Henrietta Moore, quoted in Hogan 1997, p 60
48 Hogan 1997, p 42
Hogan suggests that “an appreciation of embodied thinking, regard for the centrality of community in feminist theory and praxis, appeals to the pragmatic rather than the ontological” will enable feminist theologians to deal with the ambiguities of using women’s experiences as a resource in a theology which will be modest in its claims and renounce universalism.49

With Hogan, I understand “women’s experiences” as a category which embraces a vast diversity. A number of experiences are peculiar to women, even though not all women share every one of them: “traditional experiences” related to biological functions such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth; and to the cultural construction of these functions. No two women’s experiences are identical – pregnancy can be experienced as a blessing or a curse, childbirth can be a wonderful or a terrible experience, the cultural expectations which influence the experiences vary, the experience of not conforming to these expectations is a “feminist experience” etc. Experiences are coloured by class, ethnicity, cultural context and individual predispositions. But there is still a common basis in that these experiences are shared by women as an oppressed group in a patriarchal society, making them silenced experiences that have not been allowed to colour the dominant discourse. Understood through such a hermeneutics of difference, I find “women’s experiences” (in the plural) useful.

Moreover, I think the critics of the concept of “women’s experiences” in feminist theology tend to overlook that the stress is on “experiences” as much as on “women’s”. That is, feminist theology privileges experience, or “real life”, over doctrine: when life experience contradicts doctrine, feminist theologians claim that doctrine must be changed. And from this emphasis on experience it can be concluded that when women’s experiences do not conform to doctrine, it is because women’s experiences have not been able to inform doctrine. There is in feminist theology a certain scepticism against theoretical activity that is “disengaged from lived lives”.50

**Essentialism and Constructivism**

Closely tied to the discussion of “women’s experiences” is the essentialism-constructivism debate in feminism. This debate has certain resemblances to the discussion about the “tripartite paradigm” in the theology of religions, in that there are few absolute adherents to either position, and in that “essentialist” is often used in a pejorative sense by those who claim to be constructivists.

“Essentialism” in a feminist context connotes “the view that femininity is determined in central respects by nature, and is not merely the product of

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49 Hogan 1997, p 176
50 Harris, Harriet 2004, p 52

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contingent social customs and conventions”, 51 while constructivism sees gender differences as constructed through such customs and conventions.

Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman has highlighted hierarchy and dichotomy as the two ruling logics in the construction of the “gender system” 52. Through a dichotomy where “male” and “female” are kept separate and associated with properties such as reason, strength, activity, and soul on the male side and emotion, weakness, passivity and body on the female side, and where the male is valued as superior and as the norm, a system of male dominance and female subordination is constructed and preserved. 53

Diana Fuss, in Essentially Speaking. Feminism, Nature & Difference (1989), problematizes the essence/construct opposition, asking whether social constructivism can entirely dispense with the idea of essence. 54 Is it legitimate, she asks, “to call oneself an anti-essentialist feminist when feminism seems to take for granted among its members a shared identity, some essential point of commonality?” 55

With John Locke, Fuss distinguishes between “real” and “nominal” essence, the former being discovered by empirical observation, the latter assigned or produced by language. The category of nominal essence is useful, Fuss claims, for “anti-essentialist feminists who want to hold onto the notion of women as a group without submitting to the idea that it is ‘nature’ which categorizes them as such”. 56 The radicality or conservatism of essentialism depends on who is utilizing it, how it is deployed, and where its effects are concentrated, says Fuss, 57 and leans toward allowing for what Gayatri Spivak has called “strategic essentialism”.

Fuss criticizes constructivists for avoiding all discussion of the body for fear of sounding essentialist and for, though being materialist, lacking a materialist analysis of the body as matter. Biology will not go away, it has to be theorized, Fuss states. 58

The debate on essentialism and constructivism is connected to the terminology of “sex” versus “gender”. Originally, “gender” was used to connote the construction of sexual identity, which was seen as contextual and subject to change, while “sex” connoted the biological facts of genitalia and chromosomes. This distinction, however, turned out to be less clear-cut

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52 Hirdman 1990, p 9
53 Hirdman 1990, p 12-13
54 Fuss 1990, p 23
55 Fuss 1990, p 24
56 Fuss 1990, pp 4-5
57 Fuss 1990, p 20
58 Fuss 1990, pp 50-52

than it had seemed at first, and Judith Butler argues that not only gender, but also biological sex, is a construct.

With Fuss, I find it fruitless to deny that there is a biological basis for the construction of gender differences. I do not think the statements that it is a biological fact that women have wombs, and hence can give birth to children, and that reproduction is an important feature of human existence, amount to essentialism. It is not by chance that virtually all societies are divided along sexual/gender lines, rather than according to the colour of hair or eyes.

As Swedish theologian Annika Borg points out in her doctoral dissertation *Kön och bibeltolkning* (Gender and Biblical Interpretation, 2005), women’s bodies are sites of oppression. It is the body which can be raped, sold, and is surrounded by religiously motivated purity regulations around childbirth and menstruation. 59 Borg argues that “a feminist analysis that shies away from questions surrounding biological bodily functions in the last instance becomes uninteresting and harmless” (author’s translation).60

Women’s bodies have, however, not only been sites of oppression, but also of creativity. Women have, as an extension of their biological functions of birthing and breastfeeding, been the primary caretakers of children in most human societies, creating cultural expressions tied to nurture, healing and the strengthening of communal ties. This is not least apparent when it comes to religion, where, as we shall see below, women have been the custodians of “religion as practiced”.61

If we cannot acknowledge this for fear of being called “essentialists”, it might be time to abolish the concept. I am not sure that calling it “nominal essentialism” is a solution, as “essentialism” has become such a loaded word.

Having immersed myself in Asian feminist theology, I have also become aware that the essentialism-constructivism debate is culturally specific, and might not be relevant in contexts other than the Western modern culture.62 In the end, in feminist discourse the question of “essentialism” is not so much an ontological issue as a strategic or pragmatic one: which understanding of gender contributes best to women’s liberation?

Swedish theologian Anne-Louise Eriksson, who finds that gender in postmodern theory “has become a category so far removed from ordinary life

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59 Borg 2005, p 41
60 Borg 2005, p 41, ”En feministisk analys som värjer sig mot frågor kring den biologiska kroppens funktioner blir i slutänden ointressant och ofarlig.”
61 Cf. section 1.6.2
that it runs the risk of being counter-productive in feminist politics suggests “gender pragmatism” as a solution to the dilemma of the sex-gender distinction. Gender pragmatism entails “negotiating” how to express one’s sex, and understanding gender as the “practice” of one’s biological sex. In this way, the connection between biological sex/physical gender and constructed gender identity is not severed, and the category “woman” can be rendered useful, without being reified.

The question for a gender pragmatist is, according to Eriksson, “How should I present myself as a woman in order to challenge male power over us? How should I practice my physical gender in order to contribute to women’s liberation from all the different kinds of oppression we face?”

Gender pragmatism moves beyond Fuss’ and Spivak’s strategic essentialism in that it “points away from ontology and essence and steers our thinking in the direction of purpose, work and function.”

I understand “gender pragmatism” as a concept which can be used both descriptively and normatively. While there are in every society cultural norms for what a woman “is”, there is also a greater or lesser variety within this norm, with room to choose in what ways one wants to conform to this norm. Some kind of conscious or unconscious choice is always involved, a pragmatic choice about what way of being woman contributes best to your survival. Using gender pragmatism as a feminist strategy, on the other hand, involves a conscious choice which aims not only at personal survival, but also conforms to or defies societal norms in a way that benefits women’s liberation.

This means that “gender pragmatism” can be understood within the framework of postcolonialism, as negotiation and “practices of physical gender” must necessarily be contextual and culturally specific. There are limits to what practices are possible. Each woman must decide which way of practicing physical gender contributes best to women’s liberation in her context. The Muslim veil is a case in point: if wearing the veil is understood in terms of gender pragmatism, Muslim women become agents and not victims.

I find that though much in my material could be labelled as “essentialist”, it is not grounded in ontological presuppositions about a feminine nature, but more on a “practice of physical gender” that works in their context or for their purposes.

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63 Eriksson 2002, p 16
64 Eriksson 2002, p 18
65 Eriksson 2002, p 19
66 Eriksson 2002, p 20
Women as Relational

A recurring theme in my material is that women’s ability to build and sustain relations is an asset in interfaith dialogue. Relationality and interconnectedness are prominent characteristics of feminist theology. Two influential books on this theme were published in 1982: Carter Heyward’s *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation*, and Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*. A great deal of feminist writing is based on this assumption. Since then, many feminist theologians have rethought ontology, anthropology and Christology in relational terms, among them Rita Nakashima Brock and Catherine Keller, but this stress on relationality has also been contested.67

The influence from Carol Gilligan is strong in much of my material, and it is not a coincidence that *In a Different Voice* was published the year before the first of the studied conferences took place.

Carol Gilligan’s theory about women’s moral development has had an enormous influence on feminist theory and theology, and on the women’s movement. But her theories have also been contested by those who find that they promote an essentialist understanding of gender. Her work is frequently read as saying that women are inherently relational, performing an “ethic of care” which is better than men’s ethic of rights based on separation.

In her foreword to the new edition of *In a Different Voice* (1993), Gilligan refutes such an interpretation, saying:

> When I hear my work being cast in terms of whether women and men are really (essentially) different or who is better than whom, I know that I have lost my voice, because these are not my questions. Instead, my questions are [...] about psychological processes and theory, particularly theories in which men’s experience stands for all of human experience – theories which eclipse the lives of women and shut out women’s voices.68

Gilligan in effect says that if people read essentialism into her writing, it is because they are themselves stuck in that mode of thinking. She purports to have discovered “something new, a different way of speaking” and then found “how quickly this difference gets assimilated into old categories of thinking so that it loses its novelty.”69

As I read Gilligan, she is basically challenging the androcentric view of moral development in studies by Lawrence Kohlberg and others, where women’s moral maturity was seen as deviant, and therefore inferior to the male norm. She found that in studies based on interviews with girls/women

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68 Gilligan 2003, p xiii
69 Gilligan 2003, p xii
and boys/men, girls construct the moral problem differently to boys: whereas boys constructed agents in a moral dilemma as “opponents in a contest of rights”, girls constructed them as “members of a network of relationships on whose continuation they all depend”. That is, for the girls the overarching value was that relations should be sustained, for boys it was the application of abstract rights.

To explain this difference, Gilligan draws on Nancy Chodorow’s analysis of the role of mother-child relationship in individuation, where girls identify with the female caretaker, sustaining the attachment to her, while boys separate themselves from their mothers as they identify as male. This difference, says Gilligan, leads to two different kinds of ethics: an ethic of care/responsibility typical of women’s moral development, and an ethic of rights/justice, typical of men’s moral development.

The questions in studies of moral development were based on an ethic of rights, that is the male norm, and therefore girls were seen as morally deficient. Gilligan’s work aimed at showing that girls’ moral development could just as well be taken as normative, and the boys’ as deviant.

However, and I think this is where Gilligan is often misunderstood, in *A Different Voice* she stresses that this is a feature of girls’ and boys’ development, not two distinct and unchangeable modes of ethical behaviour where one is superior to the other. Both an ethic of care and an ethic of justice have their flaws, and the morally mature person integrates them.

Read as I have indicated above, I still find Gilligan’s insights useful. She points out that in an androcentric society, women speak in a “different” voice, which is often subdued; they ask, and answer, “different” questions, and thus are not understood in the prevailing discourse. She points to a number of matters, which correspond to recurring themes in my material, such as the interdependency of self and other, insistence on the concrete and the particular, and not least the importance of listening, to bring out the “different voice”.

However, while Gilligan does not herself identify as an “essentialist”, and while I maintain that she must not necessarily be read in that light, it is true that her theory does lend itself to essentialist interpretations and has taken on a life of its own. In a BA dissertation in psychology at Copenhagen university, Louise Kampmark takes Gilligan’s theory as an example of how theories over time are constructed as facts, or “black boxes” in the terminology of Bruno Latour, through being incorporated in the writings of others. She criticizes Gilligan for not only holding essentialist views on gender, but also for accepting the idea of universal psychological

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70 Gilligan 2003, p 30
71 Gilligan 2003, p 167
72 Kampmark 1999
development patterns, having a static concept of “truth”.73 She finds that while Gilligan successfully challenges the “truth” of previous psychological theories, she then endeavours to establish a new “truth” instead of discussing how truth is constructed.

Kampmark views discourses as praxis which constitute what they signify. Theories will eventually function as assumptions for further research, and as “common knowledge”.74 Gilligan’s work has been immensely influential (a measure of her influence is that she was named one of the 25 most influential Americans by the New York Times) and it is fair to say that twenty years after the publication of In a Different Voice, it is “common knowledge” that women value relations and men value rules and rights.

It is apparent that much of my material is influenced by Gilligan, while the discussion about her theories among feminist theorists and ethicists has not really made an impact, and I will treat Gilligan’s writings as a theory upon which the women in my material build their praxis. They are then part of a cycle, where their praxis affirms Gilligan’s theories and contributes to new theories around women and relationality.

**Feminist Ethics and the Care/Justice Debate**

Much of the critique against Gilligan’s theories has concerned how the theories have been used as the basis for normative “ethic of care” by feminist ethicists such as Nel Noddings, Virginia Held and Sara Ruddick. They have been criticized for being essentialist, universalist, individualist and lacking an analysis of power relations, by ethicists who advocate “the irreplaceability of justice as a fundamental moral norm” because “no other norm, including ‘caring,’ adequately incorporate the structural-relational dimensions of life that justice illustrates”.75

In the 1990s there was a tendency in feminist ethics to move beyond the gendered dualism of the ethic of care and justice, stressing that care and justice are not mutually exclusive but complementary, that the binary thinking which puts justice in the public sphere and care in the private sphere must be challenged, and that factors such as race and class must be brought into the study of moral agency.76

Swedish ethicist Anna T. Höglund prefers to leave the concept of care, and develops a “narrative feminist ethic of justice”. She sees the ethics of care as “a constitutive activity through which women in certain contexts construct their femininity, and against which men construct their

73 Kampmark 1999, pp 22-24
74 Kampmark 1999, p 36
75 Harrison 1985, p 300, footnote 21. For a thorough exposition on the discussion on feminist ethics of care, see Höglund 2001
76 Cf. Tanner 1996
masculinity”. Therefore, Höglund prefers to integrate values derived from an ethic of care into an ethic of justice. Such an ethic, she argues, “takes into account the importance of care as a social practice and the need to acknowledge the values it embodies”, while transcending “the public/private dichotomy that relegates care to the private sphere and justice to the public sphere”.

Höglund, who used the narratives of women war victims from former Yugoslavia as empirical material for her doctoral dissertation Krig och kön (War and Gender) 2001, claims that the narrative approach is crucial because it transcends the border between public and private and between reason and emotion; and contributes to the contextualizing of the theory.

I do not think it is necessary to downplay the concept “care” to transcend the public/private dichotomy, but will borrow Höglund’s concept “a narrative feminist ethic of justice”, adding the word “care” when describing the ethics practiced in the interfaith projects I have studied.

1.6.2 A Discussion on Religion

We live in a time when the understanding of concepts like “religion”, “spirituality” and “syncretism” is changing, and “multiple religious belonging”, “hybridized religion” and “the turn to subjectivity” are parts of a rapidly changing religious landscape.

Already in 1962, Wilfred Cantwell Smith in The Meaning and End of Religion, suggested that the term “religion” should be abolished. However, by using the term in the title of his book, he inadvertently indicated that it is not so easily done away with.

Smith’s arguments were basically that “religion” is used in many different senses that are confusing and distorting; it is the outsider who conceptualizes beliefs and practices of others into “a religion”; that “religions” are not static and finite, but in constant flux. It is a Western concept, based on Christianity, and cannot be applied to other traditions, except possibly Islam.
Smith proposed that the concept “religion” should be replaced by a pair of concepts: “cumulative tradition” and “faith”. “Cumulative tradition” then refers to beliefs and practices visible to the outsider, stressing its fluid and evolving character; “faith” to the personal response to the transcendent.

The term “religion” has stuck, but today most scholars qualify the term according to Smith’s theses: there are no “religions” in the sense of easily defined entities. Postcolonial studies have stressed that the “outsider” who defined “religion” was the colonizer, and that the construction of a category called “religion” was part of the Enlightenment project to separate “religion” from “the secular”. “Religion” is not a neutral term. Kwok Pui-lan uses the term “wisdom traditions” to connote non-Western religious traditions.85

I will in the following use the term “religious traditions”, which more than “religions” opens up for multiplicity and fluidity. The concept “religion” will then be used as a generic term for the phenomenon which, for want of a concise definition, historian of religion Ninian Smart has described through six “dimensions” which can be found within religious traditions. These dimensions are: rituals and practices; experiences and sentiments; institutions; doctrines; myths; and ethical and social beliefs, with the additional category of symbolism, expressing myths in rituals through art, music and poetry.86

This understanding of “religion” entails that there is neither an essence, or “core”, of “religion” in general, nor of particular religious traditions. This also pertains to the understanding of Christianity. Feminist theology, influenced by post-modern thinking stresses the fluid and plural nature of religious traditions. American feminist theologian Sheila Greeve Davaney has analyzed feminist theology’s tendency to essentialize not only women’s experience, but also religious traditions. When claiming that there is a normative “liberative core” of the Christian tradition, “feminist theology pleaded its case on the felicitous coincidence of female nature or experience, tradition and divine purpose”87 But as women’s experiences are diverse, so is any religious tradition “internally pluralistic, conflictual and unstable”.88 Recognizing this, feminist theology must develop theories of traditions that point to their pluralistic and dynamic nature.89 While we do inherit values, visions and interpretations of reality, those inheritances are multiple and historically contingent. They tell us where we come from, but not where we have to go, claims Davaney.

85 Kwok 2005, pp 5-6
86 Smart 1978, p 45
87 Davaney 1997, p 202
88 Davaney 1997, p 204
89 Davaney 1997, p 209
As Davaney rejects both “feminist experience” and “the liberative core of Christianity” as norms for what is authentically Christian, the only norms she can embrace are of a pragmatic kind, like “what difference does this way of thinking make to real lives?”. Such norms can only be worked out in open debate in community, or rather, in a larger web of communities:

These debates around the pragmatic adequacy of our visions will certainly take place within the boundaries of particular communities. However, I do not think that this should be the only locale for such discussion. The recognition that humans are multitraditioned and, hence, don’t reside neatly within those confines, that traditions are not utterly impermeable to each other, and finally the growing awareness that our more local judgements reverberate for good or ill across an interconnected world – all suggest that wider debate, with all its problems, must also be developed.90

In this quotation I find a good starting point for a feminist theology of religions.

Sheila Greeve Davaney draws on Kathryn Tanner’s work on cultural theory, which I also find useful for dealing with the relationship between different religious traditions. Understanding religion as a cultural system is basic in intercultural theology. As we have seen, Tanner takes her starting point in post-modern theories of culture, which stress that cultures are not unified wholes, but rather contradictory and fissured, subject to constant change. A culture is a common focus for engagement, that is, debate over beliefs and interpretations, rather than a focus of agreement. Cultures take in new elements from surrounding cultures, and what creates cultural identity are not the elements in themselves, but the way cultural elements from elsewhere work in the culture. This leads to an interrelational model of identity.

This has consequences for Christian theology, says Tanner. Also Christian identity is relational, shaped by interchanges at the boundaries: “Christian identity simply cannot be secured by a sharp cultural boundary”.91 Thus, “Christianity is a hybrid formation through and through; nothing need be exempted out of fear that the distinctiveness of Christianity must otherwise be lost”.92 These ideas have a direct bearing on the parts of my material that question the notion of religious boundaries and wrestle with the concept “syncretism”.

90 Davaney 1997, pp 213-214
91 Tanner 1997, p 108
92 Tanner 1997, pp 114-115
Syncretism

Not only is there an increasing recognition that religious traditions change internally over time and in different contexts; the fact that religious traditions interact and are “syncretistic” is also acknowledged by theologians and scholars of religion. The term “syncretism” is, however, contested, and is often used pejoratively in much the same way as “exclusivism” or “essentialism”. In the context of interfaith dialogue, warnings against syncretism are often issued. But, as we shall see, Chung Hyun Kyung and other feminist theologians now try to reclaim the term.

The word first appears in Plutarch, who links it to the Cretan habit of making up their differences and uniting against outside enemies, though probably the word derives from the Greek words *syn*, with, and *krasis*, mixture.\(^3\) When used about religion, it was first used in a positive sense, as a term for Christianity’s absorption of classical philosophy, viewed favourably by Renaissance theologians. However, the pejorative meaning arose when the term was used to condemn reconciliation between different Protestant denominations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and was later established by nineteenth century scholars of comparative religion. As Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw point out in *Syncretism/Anti-syncretism: The Politics of Religious synthesis* (1995), syncretism became an “othering” term.\(^4\)

Again, syncretism is a problem in the Western context, because in Western religious discourse authenticity is strongly linked to purity.\(^5\) Syncretism is a power issue, in that it can be seen as an expression of protest against clerical and secular authorities.\(^6\) However, cultural hegemony can be not only subverted but also promoted through syncretism – there is a syncretism “from above” and a syncretism “from below”.\(^7\) Hendrik Kraemer’s and Karl Barth’s critique of syncretism are examples of a reaction against the “syncretism from above” of the Nazi merging of “Germanic” myth and Christianity; whereas Chung Hyun Kyung’s endorsement of syncretism is part of a postcolonial discourse emphasizing the agency of the colonized subjects.

While syncretism has been seen as an inner force in religious traditions,\(^8\) the agency of religious participants is increasingly stressed. According to Dutch anthropologist André Droogers,

\(^3\) Stewart & Shaw 1994, p 3
\(^4\) Stewart & Shaw 1994, p 4, Droogers 1989, p 16
\(^5\) Stewart & Shaw 1994, p 7
\(^6\) Droogers 1989, p 16
\(^7\) Stewart & Shaw 1994, p 21
\(^8\) Stewart & Shaw 1994, p 18
Syncretism may be viewed as a way in which people play, though in a serious way, with symbols and meanings, and with the patterns in which these symbols are arranged.99

Droogers claims that in the context of interfaith dialogue, the question of syncretism must be seen as a power issue:

To what extent do relations of power within religious traditions influence the dialogue and possible accusations of syncretism? Who represents a religion in the dialogue? Is there participation of the laity? Is syncretism an issue in the discussion, and do so-called syncretists have any participation in the dialogue?100

These very pertinent questions are explicitly and implicitly addressed in my material.

Religion as Prescribed and Religion as Practiced

The question of what we mean by the word “religion”, and also the discussion of “syncretism”, must also take account of what has been termed the “great” and the “little” tradition. The observation that there is a “great” and a “little” tradition in all religions was first made by Robert Redfield in *Peasant Society and Culture*. The “great” tradition is characterized as “literate, reflective, cultivated by specialists working in cities, schools, temples, monasteries etc”, while the “little” tradition “is typically illiterate, customary, embodied in common beliefs and practices of the mass of ordinary villagers”.101

While Redfield argued that the “little tradition” was a tradition in its own right, and not an aberration of the “great tradition”, and that the two traditions are interconnected, he has not escaped criticism from feminist anthropologists for reifying a value-laden stratification between “high” and “low” religion,102 and from scholars of Indian religion like C. J. Fuller for inaccurately treating the traditions as separable, if not separate.103 To avoid the value-laden terms “great” and “little”, I will principally use the terms “religion as prescribed” (great tradition) and “religion as practiced” (little tradition), which have been suggested by anthropologists,104 though in some instances “great” and “little” traditions are more appropriate.

American historian of religion Richard King in *Orientalism and Religion* (1999) criticizes the textualist bias in the Western study of religion. It gives

99 Droogers 1989, p 18
100 Droogers 1989, p 21
101 Redfield: *Society and Culture* (Chicago 1956), cited in Ahlstrand 2001, p 71
102 Cf. Gemzöe 2000, pp14-15
103 Fuller 1992, p 24-28
104 Gemzöe 2000, p 15
prominence to “great traditions” over “little” ones. Quite often, scholars ignore popular practices within traditions, or pronounce them “not Hindu/Christian” etc. But King asks:

Whose religion do idealized doctrinal systems, labelled “Hinduism” and “Christianity” represent if they can be said to exist in separation from and, in some instances, in direct opposition to what actual Hindus and Christians believe?\(^{105}\)

The question in the context of interfaith dialogue is, which kind of religion is the subject of the dialogue: “religion as practised” or “religion as prescribed”. In my material, it is to a great extent the former which is in focus.

To a large extent, women have been the custodians of “religion as practiced”. These traditions have been investigated by feminist anthropologists and scholars of religion. One prominent scholar in this field is Israeli anthropologist Susan Starr Sered, who has researched the relationship between religion as practiced by women and as prescribed by men within Judaism; and patterns in religions dominated by women.\(^{106}\)

Sered found that patterns in women-dominated religions were similar to those of women’s religious activities in male-dominated religions, only that in the former they were the norm, and in the latter seen as superstition, syncretism, or heresy.\(^{107}\) She found that women’s religious activities are functions of their social role as mothers, but not centred on bodily functions such as lactating, or rites of passage connected to giving birth etc. They are geared toward strengthening communal, interpersonal and familial bonds through food and ancestor rituals; stress the particular rather than codify moral behaviour; provide support for sick or otherwise suffering women;\(^{108}\) and are basically embedded in everyday life, where the sacred and the profane are intertwined.\(^{109}\) She also points out that, as it is the social rather than the biological side of mothering that is crucial, it is an open question whether these patterns should be linked to gender or to role and status.\(^{110}\)

The distinction between the “great” and “little” tradition corresponds to, but is not identical with, what Sri Lankan Jesuit scholar Aloysius Pieris calls “metacosmic” and “cosmic” religion. Metacosmic religion evolves out of cosmic religion, and Pieris’ explanation of Christianity’s relative failure to spread in Asia is that, unlike in Africa and Latin America, there were already

\(^{105}\) King, Richard 1999, p 69  
\(^{106}\) Sered 1992, 1994  
\(^{107}\) Sered 1994, p 286  
\(^{108}\) Sered 1994, pp 283-286  
\(^{109}\) Sered 1994, p 152  
\(^{110}\) Sered 1994, p 283
metacosmic religions in place when the missionaries arrived there: there was no “pure” cosmic religion upon which Christianity could graft itself.\textsuperscript{111}

In my material there is a strong bias towards cosmic religion and “religion as practiced”, which are seen as less patriarchal and more women-friendly. While this is to a certain extent true, it is also important to bear in mind that those religious practices most often condemned by feminists, such as female genital mutilation, are part of “religion as practiced”. We should also not expect these traditions to be egalitarian: Susan Sered observed that women-dominated religions tend to stress gender differences, and privilege the female sphere as a strategy for empowering women,\textsuperscript{112} an example of gender pragmatism which might appear counter-productive to the Western feminist observer, but works in its context.

**Multiple Religious Belonging**

In the context of interfaith dialogue, the importance of being firmly anchored in one’s religious tradition is an axiom. In a world increasingly characterized by “multiple religious belonging”, this is somewhat problematic.

Sociologist of religion Peter Berger has pointed out that in the modern world, characterized as it is by choice, uncertainty of identity – including religious identity – is fundamental. Even a person who claims to be orthodox has made a choice to be that.\textsuperscript{113} Further, Berger argues, there is “a blurring of boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’”,\textsuperscript{114} most people do not fully belong to one religious tradition, and so interfaith encounters are not “a meeting between certainties but between uncertainties”.\textsuperscript{115} This is not a fact to bemoan, says Berger, because such a meeting, though it can be quite superficial, can also be profound. Instead of pushing each other into identifying with a tradition in interfaith dialogue, we should “admit our nakedness”\textsuperscript{116} and interfaith dialogue should be “the common search for truth by people who are not safely grounded in any tradition”, who do not “represent” anything but themselves.\textsuperscript{117}

Not only are people uncertain of their religious identity, more and more people in the West also confess to belonging to two or more religious traditions. While Berger’s stance might be perceived as based on a Western, modern, individualist situation, Catherine Cornille, associate professor of comparative theology at Boston College, argues that through the phenomenon of multiple religious belonging, “religion in Europe, America

\textsuperscript{111} Pieris 1988a, pp 87-110
\textsuperscript{112} Sered 1994, p 210
\textsuperscript{113} Berger 1991, p 3
\textsuperscript{114} Berger 1991, p 3
\textsuperscript{115} Berger 1991, p 4
\textsuperscript{116} Berger 1991, p 4
\textsuperscript{117} Berger 1991, p 6
and Australia is just coming to terms with a practice or a form of religiosity that has been prevalent for ages in most of the rest of the world”.  
Furthermore, in a globalized world, people form “hybridized religious identities” when they migrate to new contexts.  
Multiple religious belonging is a problem mainly for monotheistic religions, but Cornille points out that even in religious traditions which accept that the majority of their followers adhere to multiple religious traditions, the specialists or spiritual elite is expected to have a unique commitment to one tradition.  
We could say that multiple religious belonging is a phenomenon that belongs in the “little traditions”, while the “great traditions” show a varying degree of acceptance of this behaviour.

Multiple religious belonging is a strong feature in my material, and it also provides examples of the kind of dialogue Berger advocates, where the participants speak for themselves and refuse to be “representatives”, and where it is not altogether clear who is “outside” or “inside” a tradition.

The “Subjective Turn” and (Feminist) Spirituality

The choice of belonging partly or fully to one or more religious traditions, implies subjectivity. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead employ Charles Taylor’s term “the subjective turn of modern culture” to develop their “subjectivization thesis” of contemporary religious development. They describe the subjective turn as a turn away from “life-as” a member of a community or tradition which serves as an authority, to “subjective-life”, that is a life where personal experiences are primary, and the goal is to have the courage to become one’s own authority.

Heelas and Woodhead tie the concept “religion” to “life-as” and “spirituality” to “subjective-life”. Increasingly, they observe, people prefer to call themselves “spiritual” rather than “religious”. This phenomenon has been observed by many sociologists of religion in the English-speaking West. Through a study of “patterns of the sacred” in the context of the northern English town Kendal, Heelas and Woodhead wanted to explore how different religious arenas, on the one hand the “congregational domain”, that is churches, on the other the “holistic milieu”, that is “New Age” spirituality, responded to the consequences for people’s religious/spiritual lives of the turn to subjectivity.

The subjectivization thesis states that

118 Cornille 2002, p 1
119 Kwok 2005, p 206
120 Cornille 2002, p 3
121 Heelas & Woodhead 2005, p 2-3
‘the massive subjective turn of modern culture’ favours and reinforces those subjective-life forms of spirituality which resource unique subjectivities and treat them as a primary source of significance, and undermines those life-as forms of religion which do not.\textsuperscript{122}

However, Heelas and Woodhead also found a significant gender difference in the subjective turn. They found that women comprised 80\% of the participants and practitioners in the holistic milieus in Kendal, which were growing due to their catering to “subjective-life”. Their explanation of this gender-imbalance was that there are two modes of subjectivism: individuated subjectivism, characterized by external solutions, atomized agency and competition; and relational subjectivism, characterized by interiority, subjective well-being and interdependence; which are to be seen as poles on a scale, with men tending towards the individuated pole and women toward the relational one. (Carol Gilligan is among the references for this part of the study.) The “holistic milieus” were apparently geared towards the relational mode of subjectivism.\textsuperscript{123}

The women in my material fit well into the subjective-life spirituality. They prefer the word “spirituality” to “religion”, and the words “women’s spirituality” and “feminist spirituality” occur in the material. What do those terms connote? When Heelas and Woodhead use the word “spirituality”, it is more as a distinction from “religion” – they do not discuss the form or content of this spirituality. “Spirituality”, however, can also connote specific spiritual traditions, such as “Ignatian spirituality”. New such “spiritual traditions” are cropping up within the “subjective turn”.

Ewart Cousins claims that during the latter half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century a phenomenon he calls “global spirituality” emerged. Drawing on Jaspers’ concept “the Axial Period”, that is the era when the “world religions” took shape, and when individual consciousness emerged, Cousins claims that we are now in a Second Axial period, characterized by global consciousness. This consciousness is “highly pluralistic, capable of encompassing a broad spectrum of diversity without collapsing into an abstract unity.”\textsuperscript{124} While First Axial consciousness separated itself from the earth, “[t]he earth itself has become the prophet of the Second Axial Period”.\textsuperscript{125} Cousins views this as a process where humanity recovers, transforms and integrates the dimension of archaic consciousness (cosmic religion in Pieris’ terms) which was lost during the First Axial Period.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{122} Heelas & Woodhead 2005, p 78
\textsuperscript{123} Heelas & Woodhead 2005, pp 94-107
\textsuperscript{124} Cousins 1987, p 330
\textsuperscript{125} Cousins 1987, p 330
\textsuperscript{126} Cousins 1987, p 331
Feminist spirituality can be seen as part of this global spirituality, and Cousins mentions the women’s movement as “a sign of the re-emergence of the feminine principle and feminine consciousness which had been suppressed by the patriarchal consciousness of the First Axial period”.127

“Feminist spirituality” or “women’s spirituality” is a broad movement which is not easily defined, but has some distinctive features. It is interreligious and manifests itself in many forms: in a psychological-spiritual quest among non-religious feminists128, elaborate rituals of goddess-worshippers and transformation of Jewish and Christian forms of worship such as Rosh Hodesh129 groups and Women-Church. There are, of course, many feminist spiritualities within this movement, but using the word in the singular in the following, I intend to describe some common traits.130

The seed of feminist spirituality was sown in the early consciousness-raising groups: small, unstructured, non-hierarchical groups, where women “heard each other into speech”131 through story-telling, sharing their own personal story. The aim of these groups was a transformed consciousness, where women found their own voice and their true self – a spiritual quest in itself, where the reciprocity of hearing and speaking takes on an epiphanic quality.132

Feminist spirituality groups are a development of the consciousness-raising groups, where ritual is an important part of the gathering. Rituals are creative and often take place in a circle, using physical objects such as sand, water, rocks, wood, feathers, flowers, dough, bread, milk, or water, connecting to women’s traditional experiences and to the earth. Dancing is often part of the ritual. Groups can be denominational but there is also a blurring of denominational boundaries. Group meetings are characterized by flexible agendas, shared leadership, full participation and freedom of expression.133 Women’s spirituality groups aim to empower women to “change ritual practices, as well as their own lives”.134

Feminist spirituality is a quest for “wholeness and integration, the attempt to heal deep divisions and overcome all dualisms”.135 It seeks to recover the spiritual heritage of women, from supposedly matriarchal religions of the past, over medieval women mystics, to women’s practices in the “little

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127 Cousins 1987, p 333
128 King, Ursula 1989, p 16
129 Rosh Hodesh, the new moon, is celebrated by Jewish women’s groups
130 Ursula King raises the question whether “spirituality”, in contrast to “theologies”, is approached in an essentialist perspective in feminist writings, King, Ursula 1999, p 106
131 This term was coined by Nelle Morton, cf. Keller 1988
132 Keller 1988, p 53
133 Winter 1994, pp 146-153
134 Keshgegian & Baer 2000, p 142
135 King, Ursula 1989, p 88
traditions”. It seeks to “find the Ultimate within the midst of life” is life-affirming, including affirmation of the body and the goodness of sexuality. It also extends the statement “the personal is political” into “the spiritual is personal and political”, it is engaged in justice, peace and ecology and stresses the unity of politics and spirituality.

Finally, while feminism can be seen as a spiritual quest as stated above, it is also set in a secular framework, and there is within the feminist movement as a whole a profound suspicion of religion. This puts feminists of faith in a doubly marginalized position: as feminists, they are looked upon with suspicion in their religious communities, and as women of faith, they considered suspect in the feminist movement. This fact also provides common ground for the women who meet in the dialogue projects described in this study.

1.6.3 A Discussion on “Asianness”

Before embarking on a dissertation paying special attention to Asian feminist theology, we must ask whether it is at all meaningful to talk of “Asian theology”. Does “Asia” exist or is it merely a colonial/orientalist construct? While there was in early Asian theology a tendency to “reduce ‘Asia’ to a monolithic entity”, since the 1990s the concept of “Asia” and “Asianness” has been increasingly problematized. The geographical entity called Asia consists of several subcontinents and contains at least seven major linguistic zones. It is the birthplace of such vastly different religions as not only Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Shinto, but also Judaism, Islam and Christianity. However, though it is not spelled out, Asian theologians’ definition of Asia tends to be East Asia, and not include the Middle East, Turkey or Iran. In the Asian women’s conferences described in Chapter Three, none of the participants came from a country west of Thailand – but Australian participants were included.

Aloysius Pieris has coined the term “the many poor and the many religions” as characteristics of Asia. On account of the former characteristic, Japanese theologian Hisako Kinukawa was once excluded from the Asian group at a meeting of feminist theologians, as Japan was not considered a “Third World” country, and Chinese theologian C.S. Song has argued that

136 King, Ursula 1989, pp 94 ff
137 King, Ursula 1989, pp 198-199
138 King, Ursula 1989, p 206
139 Yeung 2002, p 136
140 An exception was the participation of an Israeli woman in the first Faith Renewed conference – but she was there as a representative of Judaism, which could not be found in other Asian countries.
141 Kinukawa 1998, p 1
the poor Asia is “betrayed by the prosperous Hong Kong, the orderly Singapore the industrialized Japan”.\textsuperscript{142} Hence, “Asia” to some extent is not seen as a geographical, but an ideological entity. Pluralism is acknowledged when it comes to religion, but not to socio-economic realities.

Though Vietnamese theologian Peter C. Phan argues that “there exist throughout Asia, despite genuine differences, a common religio-cultural heritage and a similar socio-political context”,\textsuperscript{143} writers influenced by post-colonialism tend to emphasize that “until the latter half of the twentieth century, this notion of ‘Asia’ was hitherto unknown to itself”\textsuperscript{144}, and that the emergence of an Asian identity is a result of the rise of nationalist resistance to the colonial powers.

The difficulties involved in forging an identity in opposition to a colonialist, orientalist discourse are discussed by Richard King in\textit{ Orientalism and Religion}. Here he demonstrates how orientalist discourse constructed a binary opposition between the modern, rational, philosophical, secular and masculine West and traditional, mystical, religious and feminine East, as well as how nationalist movements picked up this dualism but reversed the values, so that the East was idealized as setting a spiritual example to the materialistic West.

Thus Asian nationalist movements remain trapped in western dualistic thought patterns, instead of breaking down and transcending these stereotypical dichotomies. Only a firm anti-essentialist position that allows for heterogeneity can break free from this dilemma, Richard King argues.

Drawing on feminist postcolonial theorists such as Rosalind O’Hanlon and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, King analyzes the connection between “asianness” and “femininity”. Associated with the differentiation of the West that possesses philosophy (secular rationality) from the Orient that is characteristically mystical (religious irrationality) there is a variety of attendant dichotomies, among them “the association of India with the female (and thus the West with the male).”\textsuperscript{145}

The Westermer, presupposed as the normative paradigm in such analysis, tends to be idealized as modern, egalitarian, civilized, secular, rational and male. In contrast, the Indian is often represented as tied to tradition, primitive, hierarchical, uncivilized, religious, irrational and effeminate.\textsuperscript{146}

There are a few Asian theologians who have picked up on this post-colonial critique and pointed out the dangers of theology being moulded on

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{142} C. S. Song: \textit{Jesus, the Crucified People}, p 8, cited in Kang 2004, p 105
\item \textsuperscript{143} Phan 1996, p 400
\item \textsuperscript{144} Wong 2002, p 15
\item \textsuperscript{145} King, Richard 1999, p 32
\item \textsuperscript{146} King, Richard 1999, p 112
\end{itemize}
the nationalist discourse. Chinese theologian Yeung Kwong-keung claims that “the search for an identity distinct and as great as the Western has already placed an impasse in the Asian theological enterprise,” and suggests that “Asian theologians should continue to recover and defend the plural ‘Asia’ without the intention to claim back the ‘Asianness’”. Kang Nam Soon proposes Homi K. Bhabha’s concept hybrid identity as a fruitful approach to theological construction in Asia. Wong Wai-ching is one of the most articulate critics of this notion of “Asianness”, especially its consequences for Asian feminist theology, as we shall see in Chapter Six.

With these discussions and qualifications in mind, I will use “Asian theology” in the sense of theology produced by theologians born and raised and/or living in Asia, who grapple with the religious and socio-political realities in Asia. I understand this to be the meaning that those who label themselves “Asian theologians” ascribe to the concept. According to this definition, “Asian” is understood as “contextually Asian”.

1.7 Previous Research

As I have stated above, not much has been written in the field of feminism and religious plurality. To a certain extent previous research coincides with my sources. Maura O’Neill’s Women Speaking, Women Listening. Women in Interreligious Dialogue (1990) builds on observations/evaluations of women’s dialogue projects, among them one of the conferences in my empirical material, while also being a theological work. Virginia Mollenkott’s Women of Faith in Dialogue (1987) and Diana Eck and Devaki Jain’s Speaking of Faith (1986) are collections of papers from, and comments upon, women’s interfaith conferences. They are, however, compiled by the people involved in arranging the conferences, and are more subjective accounts that objective research.

Gé Speelman’s doctoral dissertation Keeping Faith: Muslim-Christian Couples and Interreligious Dialogue (1998), uses interviews with partners in interreligious marriages in the Netherlands, to find models for communication in interfaith dialogue, and extract theological issues from their stories. While it is not presented as a “feminist” work, her theoretical framework includes feminist theory and theology.

Academic work on women/feminism and interfaith dialogue includes a D. Min. dissertation by Diana Reed Jackson: The Creativity of Difference.
To my knowledge, no one has so far endeavoured to present a comprehensive view of the research field, taking both praxis and theory into account. However, this is a rapidly expanding field of research, and during the last phase of my work new contributions kept appearing, which I have not been able to take into account.

1.8 Outline

This dissertation proceeds from praxis to theory. I start in praxis, because, as stated above, praxis/experience is the starting point for feminist theology.

Part I, consequently, is titled “Possibilities of Praxis”. Chapter Two is a “case study” of “The Women’s Interfaith Journey”, a project of the Henry Martyn Institute in India. Mainly through interviews with participants, the dialogue process and themes actualized in the dialogue are analyzed. Chapter Three deals with conferences, which have more participants but last for less time than the Journey project. Also here, both process and content are in focus.

Part II deals with feminist writings on religious plurality. Are there feminist theologies of religion? What tools do feminist theologians use to deal with religious plurality? What themes appear in their writings? Are there any connections between these theologies and the praxis described in Chapters Two and Three? Who are their conversation partners – women engaged in dialogue, other feminist theologians or theologians of religion?

Part II has the title “Theoretical Challenges. Christian feminists are challenged by feminists of other faiths, especially by Jewish feminists. Western feminist and malestream theologians are challenged by Asian feminists. Malestream theologians of religion are challenged by feminist theology. Chapter Four gives an account of the challenge issued by non-Christian feminist theologians to make feminist theology more pluralistic. Chapter Five deals with the special case of Jewish-Christian dialogue. There has been a lively debate on anti-Judaism in feminist theological writings, but also a joint constructive theological work between Jewish and Christian feminists. The focus of this chapter is on how acknowledgement of difference can facilitate dialogue and enhance theological creativity. Chapter
Six is devoted to Asian feminist theology, which poses a challenge to mainstream theology, but also to Western feminist theology, which can learn to broaden its perspective through impulses from other religious traditions and cultures. Chapter Seven deals with Western feminist approaches to theology of religions. Chapter Eight briefly surveys what kind of imprint feminist thinking has made on mainstream theology of religions, with Michael Barnes’ *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*\(^{150}\) as a test case.

Part III, Synthesis, comprises two chapters. In Chapter Nine, I synthesize my findings under the over-arching theme “the margins”. Chapter Ten gives pointers to the development of feminist dialogue praxis and theologies of religions through the concept “difference”.

\(^{150}\) Barnes 2002
PART I
POSSIBILITIES OF PRAXIS
This chapter is a “case study” of a particular interfaith dialogue project for women, namely Women’s Interfaith Journey, organized by Henry Martyn Institute in Hyderabad, India. Through interviews with participants, as well as written material, published and unpublished, which have come out of the project, I want to capture a “grass-roots perspective” on dialogue.

What are the dynamics that emerge in a women’s dialogue group? What themes emerge in this dialogue? What insights have the participants gained?

2.1 Introduction to the Project

The Women’s Interfaith Journey is a project run by the Henry Martyn Institute (HMI), an international centre for research, interfaith relations and reconciliation in Hyderabad, India. HMI started as an institute for Islamic Studies for missionaries. In recent decades, however, it has reoriented from evangelisation to interfaith relations and reconciliation. HMI has an academic department as well as a praxis department, but the thrust of the Institute’s work is very much on practical work in the Indian context of religious communalism which often manifests itself in violence.

The Women’s Interfaith Journey consists of a series of journeys with women participants, belonging to different religions, from two different countries, who travel together for three weeks at a time in each of the countries involved, meeting women engaged in various NGOs, grassroots projects and women’s organizations. A first journey was arranged in 1999, and its positive outcome led to a project of two more journeys 2002-2003.

The first journey, in 1999, was between India and Canada. It focused on interfaith dialogue, but involved interaction with women involved in development work, human rights, Dalit1 and tribal rights etc. This journey

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1 Dalit is the preferred name for the group in Indian society formerly referred to as “outcasts”, “untouchables” or by Gandhi’s epithet Harijans. The word literally means someone who is broken, oppressed, crushed (Rayan 1991, p 118)
will be referred to below as “the original journey”. The methodology of the journey was then used for bringing together women from tribes being in conflict in North-East India in 2000. Finally, a three-year project was devised, which would focus more on conflict resolution and peace building, but still with interfaith as a component. The countries involved were chosen for specific conflicts that would be the focus of the journey.

The 2002 journey involved India and Kenya, focusing on caste-conflict and tribal conflicts respectively. The 2003 journey involved Sri Lanka and South Africa, focusing on armed conflict and racism. Another journey was originally planned for 2004, but the Advisory Group found that the goals of the project would be more likely to be met by a thorough analysis of the journeys already carried out. A conference with journey participants and researchers in the fields of dialogue, peace building and reconciliation, is to take place at the HMI in April 2006, the papers from which are to be published.

2.1.1 Outline of the Project

The format of the journeys was as follows. Four women from each country took part in the journey, together with a facilitator, making a team of nine. They first travelled for three weeks in one country, and then six months later, for three weeks in the other. Workshops were held at the end of each journey at which the participants summarized what they had learned. There were also “closing events” where, besides the participants, representatives of HMI and other organizations took part.

The women should as far as possible come from different faith traditions as well as from different areas, racial/ethnic communities etc. The selection of participants was done by HMI for the Indian participants and for the other countries by a “partner organization” in that country. The criteria for participation were:

- sensitivity to and involvement with women’s issues/feminism
- to be a leader in one’s own right, attached to an established organization and being able to spread the insights from the journey in wider circles
- to be flexible and not have a rigid mindset
- to be able to analyze and conceptualize and express oneself in writing
- to speak English fluently

The participants are not required to pay anything themselves, the project is financed by HMI and various supportive churches and organizations.

2 Interview with and e-mail from Homera Ansari
The aims of the project are to:

- identify underlying issues in existing violent conflicts from the perspective of women in the global south
- explore alternative models of peace-building arising from women’s experiences and collaborations
- discern the contribution – positive or negative – of religious and spiritual identities to such conflicts

The impetus for the Women’s Interfaith Journey was that women are absent from, or marginalized in, interfaith dialogue. The end of the Churches’ Decade in Solidarity with Women provided an occasion for trying out what women’s ways of doing interfaith might be:

The idea for the Women’s Interfaith Journey started as a dream among colleagues and friends. Diane and Andreas D’Souza of the Henry Martin Institute, India, and Bruce Gregersen of the United Church of Canada, sat with a cup of coffee and asked the question: “What if…?” What if…a journey might mark the end of the Church’s decade in solidarity with women? An interfaith journey. A journey of women. Cross-cultural. Multi-religious. Bringing new learnings from new experiences. The discussion moved to interfaith dialogue: the dead ends, the frustrations, the exciting cutting edges, the need for fresh thinking, new ideas and transforming action.

The project has not only aimed to include women, but also to create a space where women can explore their own way of doing interfaith dialogue. This has entailed a critique of conventional conceptions and styles of dialogue. New ways of learning were explored:

This especially comes into focus when we contrast the Journey with conference models of “interfaith dialogue” where giving papers and holding discussions are the main tools being used. Here we communicated and learned by singing, praying, listening, talking, reading poetry or prose – our own and others; by painting, drawing, and creating; listening, crying, reaching out and comforting; by witnessing, massaging, getting angry, acknowledging feelings, visiting a sick mother, sharing stories of our lives; by writing, listening, thinking together, listening, thinking apart for oneself, listening; by performing rituals; by dreaming, visioning, sharing our visions; and, of course, by listening.

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3 D’Souza, Diane 2003
4 In 1988 the World Council of Churches launched a “Decade for Churches in Solidarity with Women”, to raise awareness of the role of women in the churches.
5 Henry Martyn Institute 2000, p 1
6 Diane D’Souza 1999, p 10
The journeys were praxis-oriented from the start. The team did not primarily visit temples or sites of learning, but places where women of different faiths worked at the grassroots level for a better life for women. After the first journey, the interfaith motive was more in the background, the focus being on specific conflicts, in which religion was only one component.

One important feature is that this is a project initiated by a Third World country and carried out mainly in the Third World. Though it is in some sense an “elitist” project in that the participants must be in a leadership position and be English-speaking, the thrust was on meeting engaged women at the “grass-roots level”.

The Participants
During a visit to India in March 2003 I had the opportunity to interview five women who have taken part in the Women’s Interfaith Journey. The interviews were semi-structured and the questionnaire is reproduced in appendix I. In the quotations from the interviews my questions/comments are in italics.

Three of the women took part in the original India-Canada journey, two in the India-Kenya journey. Three of them are Christians, two are Hindus. None of them hold any kind of office within their religious communities. Two have married across religious or caste boundaries. All except one agreed to appear under their own names.

Annie Namala is a Christian social worker and Dalit activist. She is from a high-caste background, but her husband is a Dalit. She took part in the original journey between India and Canada.

Deepthi Sukumar is a Christian, and General Secretary of the YWCA in Chennai. She is a Dalit and very engaged in Dalit issues. She took part in the journey between India and Kenya.

Diane D’Souza is a Christian, originally from Canada, a scholar of religion working at the Henry Martyn Institute, and the initiator of the Women’s Interfaith Journey. She took part in the original journey, as the group’s facilitator.

Lalitha Iyer is a high-caste Hindu, working as a free-lance bank consultant mainly for development organisations. She took part in the India-Kenya journey.

L. is a high-caste Hindu, working as a consultant in gender issues for the Indian government as well as for NGOs. She took part in the original journey.

I further interviewed Homera Ansari, who is the project coordinator. I have also consulted written reports from the participants in HMI’s archives.
2.1.2 The Indian Context

The Women’s Interfaith Journey should be seen not as an isolated project, but as a part of the HMI’s entire programme, where it belongs to the “praxis activities”. In particular, there is a connection between the Journey and the two community development projects in Sultan Shahi and Shankarnagar, two poor districts in Hyderabad Old City. The projects aim primarily at reaching the women in the areas. The short-term goal is to teach the women skills that will help them to manage daily life and to earn some income, through tailoring classes, self help groups and credit programmes. There are also a primary school and health facilities.

The over-arching goal, however, is to bring people from different faith communities together in order to prevent the communal violence, that has been prone to break out in Hyderabad Old City, especially in the Sultan Shahi area. The project has proved successful: the women, who had got to know each other through the various activities of the community centres, have come up with schemes that prevented violence from spreading into the area during the Gujarat riots in 2002.7

As I will be touching upon the contemporary situation in India in this chapter and also in Chapter Five, a short background is appropriate here. Recent decades have seen rising communalism, that is tension between different religious communities in India, leading to violence. Communalism has risen as a result of the so-called Hindutva movement. The word hindutva was coined in the 1920’s, meaning “hinduness”. Hindutva goes beyond Hinduism as a religion, and is a nationalist movement, claiming that not only Hindus, but adherents of other religions with their roots in India – Sikhs, Buddhists and Jainists – are the true Indians, whereas Muslims and Christians are alien to Indian society. There are many organizations that promote hindutva, and their political wing is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). BJP led a national coalition government until the 2004 election, when it suffered serious setbacks, but still rules a number of states.

The most spectacular communal violence has occurred around the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya. The Hindutva movement claims that the mosque, which stems from the 16th century, was built on the site of a Hindu temple, which was also the birthplace of the Ramayana hero Rama. In 1992, in order to rebuild the Rama temple, Hindutva activists razed the mosque to the ground. This sparked nationwide riots between Hindus and Muslims, in which more than 2000 people were killed.

Communalist riots reached the state of Gujarat in 2002, when Muslim activists attacked a train carrying Hindutva activists returning from

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7 Henry Martyn Institute Annual Report 2001-2002
construction work on the temple in Ahyodya. The ensuing riots claimed over 1000 lives.

There are several women’s organizations within the Hindutva movement, which have been very successful in mobilizing women, not least in connection with the riots in Ayodhya and Gujarat. These organizations appeal to belief in Hindu goddesses, especially the aggressive *Durga*, and target Islam as a religion that denigrates women.8

Violence is the extreme expression of the Hindutva movement, which mainly works through legislation. It advocates a Uniform Civil Code, which would remove special religion-based provisions for Muslims and Christians. The main target of the Hindutva movement is Muslims, but Christians are affected too, not least by anti-conversion laws, which are passed in states where BJP rules, severely restricting church activities.

2.1.3 Is the Women’s Interfaith Journey a Feminist Project?

Is the Women's Interfaith Journey a feminist project? The organizers do not label it as feminist, though the term does appear occasionally in the written material.9 This reluctance to use the term “feminism” is part of a general suspicion of labels, a theme we shall return to below. Diane D’Souza, however shares with some Asian women theologians10 the view that feminism is a “Western” term:

In Asia […] the word feminism is a loaded word, because it is very much associated with Western dominant models of feminism […] and I think it is right when in Asia women challenge and question it. […] and I’m aware of the nuances about it, and if I’m going to call myself a feminist, then people will also make assumptions about who I am.11

Diane expressed that though she feels indebted to what the feminist movement has achieved, and is especially inspired by Carol Gilligan, she is more at home with the term “woman” than with “feminist”:

I prefer to keep the label aside and do the thinking I do and to draw on what I feel is important in my thinking, and leave it at that, and if people want to call me a feminist it’s fine, and if they don’t call me a feminist that’s also fine. It’s not a word like... which feels primary to my identity. Being a woman

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8 Jeffery 1998 and Basu 1998
10 Cf. section 6.1
11 Interview Diane D’Souza
feels primary to my identity, you know, I feel that strongly, the fact that I’m a woman shapes how I think, the fact that I’m a mother shapes how I think.12

When asked if they would identify themselves as feminists, Lalitha and L. affirmed this without hesitation. Annie had no problem with the term, but stated that she identified herself primarily as a Dalit activist, and that feminism was of second importance to her. Deepthi expressed a certain ambiguity about it:

I don’t know really what a feminist is, because I have never been able to grasp the meaning of what a feminist is. And I think basically I am not comfortable with the word feminist, it’s not because I understand the meaning of the word, but it is the kind of implications that has been put on it by men. Men have always thrown that word around. To prove something against women. […] The men have made a feminist sound like an unfeeling person, very hard and unfeeling you know, a person with no sentiments. Whereas if a feminist means that it is fighting for a woman who has a violent husband, who has been battered, to stand by her side, then I would definitely like to identify with that person. […] if it means that a feminist is somebody who doesn’t cook for her family, I don’t think that I would ever be able to call myself a feminist.13

So it appears that even the women who hesitate to call themselves feminists are aware that the term has been vilified by men who are opposed to women’s liberation, and that is why they want to avoid it, though they perceive that there could be a definition of feminism that they could embrace.

It is interesting that the only person who mentions the “un-Asianness” of the term is Diane, who is of Western origin, whereas the Indian women do not tend to essentialize “Indianness” or Asianness.

If there is a certain ambiguity about the label feminism, all my informants clearly perceive that women are marginalized and disadvantaged in religion and society, that women have developed their own ways of thinking and acting, and that women’s voices should be heard and their ways of doing things attended to. This also appears to be the general thrust of the Women's Interfaith Journey as a whole. The project aims at bringing women into areas where they have been absent: interfaith dialogue, conflict resolution and peace building, at providing women with a space to find their own voices, at making women’s ways of doing things visible.

Apparently, the theoretical underpinnings of the project are that women do things differently and consequently that women’s involvement in religion and society will make a difference. Diane D’Souza refers to Carol Gilligan’s

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12 Interview Diane D’Souza
13 Interview Deepthi Sukumar
thinking about gender differences, but it is not entirely clear whether she believes that there are essential differences, or whether it is assumptions about differences which decide how we act:

Under-girding my thinking here and elsewhere are assumptions about differences – especially gender and culture – which significantly influence how we see and act in the world.\(^{14}\)

To sum up, even if the word “feminism” does not appear frequently in the material, I feel justified in calling it a feminist project, according to my earlier definition.\(^{15}\)

2.2. Prominent Themes in the Journey

What, then, characterizes the Women’s Interfaith Journey, and what insights do the participants express? In the following, we will look at some themes that emerge in the material.

2.2.1 “The Messiness of Actual Existence”

As mentioned above, suspicion of labels and “boxes” is a significant trait in the Women's Interfaith Journey. Especially in the original journey, there was a great deal of discussion about the meaningfulness of putting people into religious “boxes” as well as of the term “interfaith dialogue”.

The issue had already surfaced when the teams for the original journey were been assembled:

Reviewing candidates for the Indian team, a small group consciously striving for diversity: in ages, regions and cultures, experiences. But was she… “Hindu” enough?…”Muslim” enough?…”Christian” enough?…We quickly realized the absurdity of such thinking. People’s lives, thoughts and relationships were so much more complex than a singular descriptive. But still, it was hard to let it go, given the terms of reference for the Journey. Considering a particular Christian candidate, I paused to wonder whether her embracing of Hindu ways of thought (she herself admitted to being more at home in Hinduism than in Christianity) made her somehow … less representative. “Of what?” a voice within me wondered. The search for the Hindu, the Muslim, the Christian, the Native […] was a search for someone who fit “the box”, the category, the definitions.\(^{16}\)

\(^{14}\) Diane D’Souza 2002, p 13  
\(^{15}\) Cf. section 1.5.2  
\(^{16}\) D’Souza 1999 p 2-3
During the journey itself, this questioning of boundaries was a central theme in the group discussions:

We wondered who set the boundaries. […] We saw building interfaith relationships as “crossing boundaries audaciously”. And as we struggled I couldn’t help but reflect that in four decades of dialogue meetings organized by men, no one had spent time questioning, challenging, or expressing their discomfort with the founding categories themselves; most accepted them as the very entry point of interfaith dialogue. It was here that I began to catch a glimpse of the new insights women would bring through their very way of being and knowing and doing.17

“Messy” is a term which recurs in my material. As we shall see in chapters Six and Seven, a central theme in feminist theologies of religion is the realization of how the “messiness” of real life defies the categories imposed on it by theology. The word “messiness” also appears in Diane D’Souza’s account of the journey:

If part of what women bring to life is the flow, the space, the “messiness” of actual existence, there is, some of us felt, a place for lines too. Some of us wanted no boundaries, no boxes. Some wanted boxes with holes or doors or windows. Or lower walls which curved or you could step over. Most of us felt comfortable with the flow which takes place despite lines and boundaries.18

Women, Diane observes, “tend to be much more aware that things do not fit”.19 Not only did the women question the “boxes” of religious affiliation, they were not comfortable with the term “interfaith/inter-religious dialogue” either. It seemed to suggest something verbal going on between entities sitting neatly in their religious “boxes”, and did not capture the process in the travelling group. They tried to find other words:

Searching together, multiple faith

Stretching, crossing boundaries

Enlarging limits, creating and allowing space20

However, the experience of the journey was not to be captured in any one phrase. There is a strong feeling in all the reports from the journeys that they were a unique experience, a different way of doing interfaith dialogue that

17 D’Souza 1999, p 3
18 D’Souza 1999 p 3
19 Interview Diane D’Souza
20 Namala 2002, p 2
had never been tried before. While interfaith dialogue was perceived as talking on a theoretical level, the Women's Interfaith Journey was living, doing, journeying, feeling and experiencing interfaith.\textsuperscript{21} Annie Namala expressed it like this in her written report:

Interfaith is most of all a journey together. That is what made the women’s interfaith journey so meaningful and unique – ours was a journey into each other’s lives.\textsuperscript{22}

The Women's Interfaith Journey was a process, where the starting point was the lived lives of the women of the travelling team, and of the women they met on the journey. They told, and listened to, the stories of their lives. This telling and listening to stories was facilitated by the “Talking Circle”, a Native American method of reaching consensus and gaining wisdom. In the Talking Circle, a topic is introduced, someone starts to speak and then everyone has the opportunity to speak, clock-wise around the circle. This method made the participants refer to themselves as “the Circle of Nine”.

While the Talking Circle is part of Native traditions, and the participation of a Native Elder in the first journey contributed to the implementation of the method, sharing life stories in a circle has also been central to the Second Wave women’s movement, and is not unique for the Journey.

\subsubsection*{2.2.2 Emphasis on Relationships}

To take one’s starting point in life experiences, the sharing of stories, the space the talking circle provides for letting all voices be heard also means that building relationships is at the heart of the methodology of the Women's Interfaith Journey. In a project inspired by Carol Gilligan’s thinking, this is not surprising. The emphasis on relationships is, according to Diane D’Souza, the most important aspect of the journey:

An emphasis on relationship means that I as a person, in this case as a woman, am encountering another person and it is about getting to know who is this person. So it’s more and it’s less than knowing what is this person’s religion. [...] I think it just broadens the canvas of what we bring into a dialogue, so the word, you know, “holistic” kind of comes to mind, that we’re talking not of an encounter of religious beliefs, not just encounter of particular defined circumstances, but encounter of people, and trying to understand who is this person and how does faith…shape or not shape this

\textsuperscript{21} Namala 2002, p 2
\textsuperscript{22} Namala 2002, p 5
person’s thoughts, so I think that is definitely the biggest…shift…for interfaith dialogue that I have taken from the Women’s Journey.  

That women’s “method” of dialogue consists in the building of relationships was also something that the participants observed among the women they met along the journey. Zohra Husaini, from the Canadian group in the original journey, reflects:

Unlike the dialogue situation, when women meet and talk they form relationships on a far more personal level than would be found in any objective dialogue. Relationships bring with them a sense of connectedness to one another within the relationship. [...] Women take time to be with other women and to know one another as persons in a holistic way, not merely as bearers of a particular faith or ideology. The experience of relationship is total, it lasts and carries commitment and bonds with it.

It appears that they almost perceive that there is an opposition between dialogue and relationship, dialogue being understood as something very theoretical and formal. They hesitate to define what they did on the journey as interfaith dialogue:

[The journey] wasn’t really a dialogue, it was more of a process, where we came together to find out our conflicts between each other and try to build relationships, heal ourselves, that was the kind of thing. [...] 

*Perhaps interfaith dialogue should be the process that you described?*

Yes. The journey we went on, it was a kind of interfaith dialogue also, it was a process, it started as a process, and later on we were able to talk with each other about the bad and the good of religion.

### 2.2.3 Dealing with Conflict

In the quotation above, Deepthi makes a connection between building relationships and conflict solution and healing. On the original journey, conflicts arose unintentionally, due to the interaction in the group. One incident involved a visitor to the group, a woman who talked about the situation in Sri Lanka in a way that the participants felt derided Christianity. Neither glossing over nor confronting in an aggressive manner, the group managed to challenge the woman’s opinions. Diane reflects on the process:

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23 Interview Diane D’Souza  
24 Husaini, p 2-3  
25 Interview Deepthi Sukumar
“My God”, I thought, “they just won’t let her go”. Not letting someone go doesn’t mean effectively pinning a person to their seat so that you can make sure they understand your point of view. Not letting someone go, as I saw my sisters do both within and outside of the circle on a number of occasions, was to resist giving up on the human spirit – on this human being here and now. I don’t see it as particularly a woman’s quality, but one of our finest human qualities. It is an extension of a commitment to relationship.26

The other conflict involved one of the participants. There had been a discussion on the situation in India, with caste conflict in focus. One member of the Indian team, a Brahmin Hindu, was deeply hurt by what was being said, feeling that she, as an upper-caste Hindu was assigned to a “box” with which she would not identify. This conflict could be dealt with in the circle, with anger and tears. Diane D’Souza again:

The journey meant time to share not just the positive in our lives, our selves, our traditions. This is, I think, a weakness of some of the “interfaith” events which strive primarily to highlight unity and celebrate religious diversity. On the other hand, there are other gatherings which focus so unerringly on the divisions between people of two or more traditions that, as a man once told me, “At the end, we really couldn’t see a way in which we could go forward together.” The Journey, in contrast, created an environment where relationships could grow and deepen enough that when tough issues surfaced – apparent conflicts of ideologies, for example – we could struggle through them painfully, and using tremendous emotional energy, to come out changed on the other side. […] It seems to me that it is precisely because we grew into relationship that we came to a point where we could share our own deep hurts and convictions27

The following journeys focused more consciously on conflict and conflict resolution. The “Tribal” journey nearly broke down, because the facilitator couldn’t handle the conflict. Homera Ansari, the coordinator of the project, stepped in and “locked them in a room and said you have to give me your reflection before you go”, and eventually, she says, something good came out of it:

Some of the [tribal] women have formed an organisation where they are training women, they have done some workshops. So one of the women who was a member of that team, she has formed an organisation near the border of Myanmar, and they are working on that.28

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26 D’Souza 1999, p 5  
27 D’Souza 1999, p 9  
28 Interview Homera Ansari
The Kenya-India journey focused on caste conflict in India and tribe-based land dispute in Kenya. This made it “a very hard journey” 29 and prompted the reflection: ”women’s path to peace building is sown with tears”. 30 The caste conflict was acted out very forcefully in the Indian team, which consisted of two Dalit and two high-caste women. The latter came to the journey with an intention of acknowledging and grappling with their legacy of belonging to the oppressors, but were still taken aback by the accusations directed at them by the Dalits:

I was never able to bridge the divide between one of the Dalit women and… it didn’t really happen, so there is no point in pretending that it did happen, it hasn’t happened. I think both of us tried, but it was as if we were prisoners of our legacies.31

Even here, it was a question of “not letting go”. Deepthi gave a very vivid description of how the argument “went on and on” during the Indian part of the journey:

So what happened was… we were more and more targeting them with our accusations. Because it was so much more oppressing for us to see our own people… we identified us with them, me and my Dalit sister, because we realised we are one of them, if it was not for education and everything we would be back there. So it was only natural that we kept targeting them: this is because of the caste system, you are the upper-caste people who are doing this to us, but they kept saying “no, we are not those people”, we said so what, you are still upper-caste people, whether you like it or not, you did not accuse that system, that’s what we were telling them, you did not point your finger at that system and say don’t do it, you just kept quiet and allowed things to happen.32

However, during the second part of the journey, in Kenya, things changed:

Then we thought no, this is not going to get us anywhere, because you know when we started in India we were all new to each other, but there we knew who we were already […] and we had lived together for three weeks, so basically we knew they are good people, they are not going to hurt us in any way. It is just by accident that they are born into the families that they were born into. So we got on all right. But we can not say that it was harmony, what we had […] but there were moments of togetherness, more moments than we had in India. We were able to laugh together, talk together, you

29 Ansari 2002
30 Iyer 2001, p 12
31 Interview Lalitha Iyer
32 Interview Deepthi Sukumar
There is a remarkable realism and lack of any glossing over in these accounts of the conflict: the conflict was there, it was dealt with but not completely resolved, there was good will and a growing of understanding, but no harmony or complete bridging of the divide. According to Homera Ansari, the conflict was aggravated because it was not only a caste conflict, but also a conflict between (Dalit) activists and (high-caste) “conceptualizers”: two different ways of dealing with reality.34

This is also confirmed by the report of one of the Kenyan participants. Having stated that the journey for her burst “the myth of ‘a’ women’s movement” seeing diversity of issues confronting women in diverse parts of the world, she writes:

One of the greatest source [sic] of differences within the circle of nine was due to our different understanding of what need to be done to further the women’s cause. Initially it was so hard to validate each other’s point of view in regard to the question of strategies. Coming from different backgrounds – some as activists, others as teachers/scholars, from the grassroots as well as from the urban areas, from different faith traditions was a test to the ultimate. At the end we learnt to “weave” all the different strands of our different strategies into a spiral and a web for women’s advancement, we learnt to connect the different corners of our triangles into one large triangle for women’s empowerment.35

As we shall see in Chapter Three, there are many examples showing that women doing interfaith dialogue are not afraid of facing and acting out conflict. My informants also support this observation. Deepthi thinks that, had it not been a women-only group, the conflict would not have come out, and would not have been healed in the same way:

I don’t think if men were around it would have come out. It might have come out but… in a very different way.

In what way do you think?

In a more intellectual way, or… in a more analytical way. Not from the heart but from the mind. But here it came from the heart. If men were there I do believe it would have come more from the mind.

And that would not have been as healing as…?

33 Interview Deepthi Sukumar
34 Interview Homera Ansari
35 Musyoni
No, it would not. Because here we let our emotions rule over us and I think that did… that really healed. And if men had been present… women, especially in India, would not have felt that freedom of space… or the freedom even to enter into a conflict… with another woman.36

Reacting emotionally is a better way of dealing with conflict than an intellectual approach, according to Deepthi, but it is a way that is possible only for women:

It is a better way, because… when it is from the heart you have no ulterior motives. That’s what I think. Because… if it is from the mind you are only doing it as a strategy, […] you say “let’s say this and get into this conflict so that we heal it” but when it is not coming from the heart, the entire conflict is not coming out, from the mind you keep parts of it behind, and only allow part of it […] it is not something which bursts out of you, but I think that is important to heal. Everything should come out. And… if a man, if it happens like that, there would be violence.37

It is not that women never resort to violence, Deepthi explains, whereas if two women have a violent conflict, they fight it out between themselves, but if two men fight, the violence easily develops into communal riots.

L. agrees that women get emotional about conflict, and also affirms that it is because women value relationships and “try to retain it at such tremendous costs to ourselves. But because we value relationships, I think there is, it’s like a basis for a bridge to be built any time you want to”.38

Lalitha, however, does not agree that women are better at dealing with conflict than men. She felt that because it was an all-women group, the conflicts did not come out in the open:

So maybe the conflicts that were there in the group remained you know, subtle and an undercurrent rather than a head-on… you know, eye-ball to eye-ball kind of confrontation. Maybe an eye-ball to eye-ball would have cleared the air (laughter).

So you think men are better at confronting?

Yes, we like to do it very artistically. (Laughter)39

Considering that Lalitha was one of the women “targeted” by Deepthi and her “Dalit sister”, their accounts of what happened during the journey seem to be diametrically opposed. But maybe Lalitha’s comment should, at least

36 Interview Deepthi Sukumar
37 Interview Deepthi Sukumar
38 Interview L.
39 Interview Lalitha Iyer
partially, be understood as referring to the contribution of the facilitator, who according to Deepthi couldn’t handle the conflict very well. In that case, the women were able to grapple with the conflict among themselves, but it was not consciously dealt with as part of the group process. This, on the other hand, happened in the original journey, where it, according to Annie, was in large part due to Diane D’Souza’s facilitating skills that the conflict was processed in a way that led to a profound bonding within the group.40

This indicates that among a group of women there may indeed be a readiness to acknowledge and deal with conflict, but that this does not come naturally, but needs to be conscientized to be used in a constructive manner.

2.2.4 The Ambiguity of Religion

Besides handling personal conflicts arising during the journeys, and a focus on structural/societal conflicts, a recurring theme was the ambiguity of religion itself, its potential for both oppression and liberation. Lalitha explained how the journey had deepened her insight in these mechanisms of religion:

What struck me was that though faith may start a religion, very soon there is disjunct, religion becomes a social construct and… a system. […] And if you want to be part of any religious system there is always the danger that your spirituality or your faith is damaged (laughter). So, the trick is to go beyond religion, while in the initial part of your spiritual journey it may be useful as a signpost or… an indicator of direction… at every point you have to pinch yourself and say but what is my desire, what is my drive to be in this place. OK, so I saw lots of indicators as to how religion can cause so much of agony and distrust. And I saw how faith gives people to bear the brunt of these things… with dignity. You know… so while I would like to imagine that faith is a vehicle that unites, which brings joy, which builds relationships, which makes us you know exalted as a group, … the reality is that what faith seems to give is the dignity to bear the grief and the troubles which come to be by organised religion or by organised economies or whatever. So when there are tough times it is faith which helps people to hold themselves together and not go to pieces and remain human. So grounding in faith is important, it’s like preparing for a rainy day. And… the sad part is that religion should be, you know, allowing you the freedom to practice your faith with harmony, but does the opposite.41

In her written report, Annie Namala in a similar vein complains that faith often gets “truncated as a one way path”, whereas she envisions it as a

40 Interview Annie Namala
41 Interview Lalitha Iyer
“three-pronged journey”, going inward, relating to other people and relating to the cosmic. She writes:

Here are the problems – it starts with the religious teachings/precepts one gets, and the end is to see that our “self” is set right and comfortable. It does not plan to flow in any other directions. So how do we enlarge, deepen our understanding of faith? One essential part is to relate to and understand people around us – in today’s context it is people who do not have the same origin as ourselves, do not come from the same place as we do. […] A second part is to critically assess the structures and systems around us to see – how they contribute to or negate life processes. […] The basis of this would be to critically look at our understandings and teachings about the self, the other, world and life itself.42

To make a distinction between religion and faith, or between the religion and the believers, was important for all my informants. Annie wrote further:

The environment [of the journey] had snatches of a time before the formalisation of religion, before the time of doctrines and theologies – where there were only people […] the nine of us were not burdened by the weight of religion but were free to make this journey our own. […] Most problems arise from vested interests who want to accommodate people for religion, than religion for people.43

Suspicion of “institutionalised religion” is a theme we shall encounter in Chapter Three as well. The criterion of true religion is that it brings about good relations and is life-affirming:

Any religion/faith of the individual or community that does not have a practical programme to reach out to, relate to, love and support another person/other groups has no real religion/faith. […] So can we then claim what religion ought to be – Life was before religion and religion is meant to strengthen this life.44

Deepthi is adamant that for interfaith dialogue to be relevant, it must deal with the bad sides of religion:

Like we have a Hindu woman and a Muslim woman, why don’t we come out, why does not the Hindu woman say, to tell the Muslim woman, to ask her, what is this purdah system all about, and why doesn’t the Christian woman ask the Hindu woman what is this caste system all about? […] Let’s talk about the bad things in our religions for a change. And… realise that we are not responsible… for these bad concepts in our religions. And try to help

42 Namala, pp 3-4
43 Namala, p 7
44 Namala, pp 9-10
each other to understand… you know… get over the… the shock or the trauma that we [experience] when we realise that there is something bad in our own religion. I think that’s the dialogue that we need.45

On the journey there had been a controversy with one of the Kenyan women, a Muslim wearing a headscarf and criticized by one of the Indians for that. Deepthi had tried to mediate:

I always try to tell her, don’t do it, because maybe she likes wearing the purdah. […] So we know the purdah system is […] kind of oppressive system on women, it is recognised as that, but still let’s hear what the woman has to say about it and accept it, if she feels good about it, leave it at that…46

In the Indian context of the Women’s Interfaith Journey, it is obvious that you cannot talk about interfaith dialogue without touching upon caste issues, because the caste system permeates Indian society through and through. Attempts at interfaith dialogue in India that ignore caste are not going to lead anywhere, according to Annie:

Otherwise you can feel very happy that you are addressing interfaith issues, you may not be addressing interfaith issues – you may be bringing together upper caste Christians and upper caste Hindus and dominant caste Muslims, they don’t have very difficulties getting along with each other.

*Could that be why some Indian Christians are not very keen on interfaith dialogue – because they see it as high caste people coming together?*

It could be, it could be something behind our mind, you know, that we don’t feel it is possible to… Because Christians are identified by their lower caste in India very strongly. […] So in that sense, it is easy to not really address the critical issues.47

But this does not only apply to India. Annie believes every society has certain key issues, interfaith could be a key issue, but it could also be caste, class or colour, which interfaith dialogue must be seen against:

So that particular thing takes the dominance over everything else. So we need to understand also interfaith from that dominant conflict that is working within that society. […] So this main contradiction I think influences interfaith contradictions so much so we should look at the interaction between these two. Just like gender would cut across interfaith issues, I think

45 Interview Deepthi Sukumar. *Purdah* is the Indian term for the seclusion of women, through veiling or through confinement to the home.
46 Interview Deepthi Sukumar
47 Interview Annie Namala
the main conflict which is there in a society has to be looked at and addressed and understood.\textsuperscript{48}

The journey made Deepthi realize that caste conflict in India, unlike tribal-based land conflict in Kenya, is not recognized as a conflict, which is a problem, with implications for interfaith dialogue.

But if it is a Hindu and a Muslim fighting, then it becomes an interfaith conflict, if it is an upper-caste you know, trying to inflict some pressure on a lower-caste, then they don’t see it as a conflict. So maybe it is time that we saw this as… people recognised it as a conflict. Because today in the YWCA, when we talk of interfaith, they only see it from the point of view of religion, Hindu, Muslim, Christian. But they don’t realise that among Christians themselves, there are so many differences because… based on caste. And among the Hindus themselves, there are so many differences based on caste.\textsuperscript{49}

\subsection{2.2.5 Communal Violence and Women as Peacemakers}

One cannot talk about interfaith dialogue in India without mentioning sinister background of “communal violence”. I asked my informants for their opinions about why this violence has broken out in India, a country where people of different religions seem to have lived together in peace and harmony for centuries. To start with, they all claimed that the image of India as a place of harmony and tolerance is utterly false. It is something that is projected by the Indian community abroad, belonging to the higher castes, according to Annie:

\begin{quote}
I think the Indian society is a segmented society all through. It has been fractured right from the beginning […] That picture… to us it was very revealing to know that the Indian community outside had always projected India as a very harmonious society, but they very well know that it is not a harmonious society, there is this very whole sense of pride, you know,… we hesitate, you know, to really explore differences […] so people from India who have come out and interacted with the west have never really acknowledged that there are divisions here, they have sort of projected an India which is so different.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

The Journey participants identify caste as one issue that lies behind the communal violence. Another is the partition into India and Pakistan in 1947, which, according to Lalitha, has left scars that have never been healed. L.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{48} Interview Annie Namala \\
\textsuperscript{49} Interview Deepthi Sukumar \\
\textsuperscript{50} Interview Annie Namala
\end{flushright}
blames the increasing pace of change in society, due to globalization and environmental circumstances forcing people to migrate from rural areas to urban slums where people have to fight for a living.

At the end of the day, behind the riots are political forces, and they are in the hands of men, Deepthi points out:

And all conflicts have continued to remain because of politically… political motivation, and all political motivation in India has been in the hands of men. […]

So do you think it would be different if women came into power?

If women came into power by themselves, not… men put them into power, it would be different.

In what way?

The… women are more bothered about… people going without food, people without shelter, you know they see it, women see such suffering […] much more than men do. Because […] it is they who are the caregivers basically of society…

Deepthi also identifies women as the possible agents for ending communal violence. In Kenya she saw women taking the initiative to build peace and heal conflicts, and with strong women’s movements, Indian women would be able to do the same if they could come together on this issue.

While women have been the primary victims of communal violence, as in so many conflicts where rape is used as a weapon, through the Hindutva movement’s women’s branch, they have also been perpetrators. After conflicts, women normally play an active part in the peace process on the ground in their traditional role as nurturers and care givers, but when they are induced to leave that role, there will be no healing after conflict, says Homera Ansari:

Yes, because it was the first time that women go together and did fighting. That was something that was not done before. So when you come to the healing, there is no healing done, because women were also involved. They have left aside their mother-nurturing… and they become like men. They brought out that particular aggressive quality that is supposed to be incorporated in woman, like you know the goddess Durga is supposed to be aggressive goddess. That quality they gave to the woman. But that’s not the instinct of a woman. She does not want another woman to be raped in front of

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51 Interview Deepthi Sukumar
her eyes. It was inculcated on them, and they have been working on it a long time, it did not come out in day one.52

Though there is awareness among my informants that so far, women have easily been co-opted to take part in the communal violence in India, they tend to downplay this and claim that women have qualities that make them potential peace builders:

Women right now have only played the role of being the victims […] and they are the worst sufferers. So really, I mean, and women are the only voices which would say no to killing. Somewhere we have to find ways of, you know, getting that voice out.53

Like Homera, L. thinks that because of their role as caregivers, women are more motivated to work for peace:

Women have this feeling of “my children need to be in a safer world”. Without… you know, almost without exception it is what women say: I’ve had a difficult time but I’d like these children to be okay. I’d like them to be safe, I’d like them to… come up in life. And I think that gives the motivation to work for peace.

*And men don’t have that same feeling?*

There isn’t, I don’t think there is an intergenerational sense of… wanting the future of my children to be safe and unborn generations to be safe, I don’t think that’s there.54

Even Lalitha, who mostly refrained from making “sweeping statements” about what women are like, gave this answer to my question whether it made a difference that only women participated in the journey:

I think it was easier for us to accept because we were women, that peace is important, that killing is bad, those things weren’t questioned. Whereas if we had had men and women, lets say that we had had a warmonger among us, you know, typically a male warlord from somewhere had been part of us, it would have been a different thing altogether. And we would have seen how real is our commitment to peace, how real is an instinct to go along with male authority.

*Would you say that women are inherently more peaceful, more inclined to work for peace?*

52 Interview Homera Ansari
53 Interview Lalitha Iyer
54 Interview L.
I think women inherently shrink from loss of life. But short of that we will have all kinds of conflicts. (…) on the kitchen table, on the dining table, in the bedroom… but we won’t kill. (laughter)

_So women are more prone to protect life? They can quarrel…_ 

…but they draw the line there.  

An outcome of the Women’s Interfaith Journey is that HMI has initiated a network of women and women’s organizations all over India “who take initiative and leadership to stop violent conflict, share strategies on building communal harmony, analyze conflict from grass-root perspectives, and help to conceptualize women’s special contributions to reconciliation”.  

### 2.2.6 Women and Interfaith Dialogue

How did it affect the journey that only women participated? Though male resource persons were involved in the journey, one of the guiding principles behind the journey has been to provide women with a space of their own to explore issues in interfaith dialogue. Diane explains what this meant to her:

> As women we need to get clearer in our own minds who we are, and what we are feeling, and to do that… we have been in a society where men have had a dominant position in society, where patriarchy has been so dominant, and I as a woman realise how I have adapted myself. So part of the strength of the women’s journey for me was to recognise more clearly where I had adapted, and more than that to touch again the centre which was not in my head or in my chest but somehow in my belly… that’s what I felt, I felt like I was reconnecting with something. And I feel that we need spaces for women to do that, and to hear each other. And that if men were there it just changes things slightly.

Diane also thinks that there is greater acceptance of emotions in an all-women group: “when you are cleaning up after a women’s dialogue meeting you’re cleaning up all these tissues, and I never did that with all my interfaith dialogue things at the institute”. She has learnt to accept and respect her own tears and emotions:

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55 Interview Lalitha Iyer  
56 Henry Martyn Institute 2002, p 10  
57 Interview Diane D’Souza  
58 Interview Diane D’Souza
By dividing our emotional lives from our rational lives we have in some ways introduced a broken-ness. [...] I think as women we’re trying to reclaim or get in touch with things that have been missing. And it is easier I feel to do that if we have some space to grow in confidence of doing it. So now having had that space on the women’s journey, for me, I can operate in… multiple gender environment and bring that strength with me. 59

Diane feels that there might be a difference between Asian and North American women’s perception of having men in the group, where Asian women would feel more comfortable with that. However, this view is not supported by my Indian informants. We have already seen how Deepthi thinks that conflicts would not have come out with men present, and points out that for Indian women especially, it would be difficult to express their feelings with men around. Lalitha, on the other hand, claims that the presence of men in the group would have made conflict more “head-on” but also that an all-women group facilitated consensus on the importance of peace. She also thinks that if men had been present, they would have taken much of the focus of the group: “I think there would have been a conflict for, you know, either attracting or subduing the men”. 60

L. also feels that there should be separate spaces for women, and this was one of them. With men in the group, “we would all have gone on a head trip” – it would have been an intellectual discourse on interfaith. Annie agrees with this:

I feel that... interfaith issue has been discussed on a very theoretical level and that has been expressed ... and I think there has not been much deepening of that issues as far as communities or people are concerned into action practice [...] So to that extent I feel this was a different journey, where at a very practical level and day-to-day issues we were looking at... religious issues or religious aspects. And by providing that space for women who have not been that much involved in interfaith discussion by and large I think we could bring up newer areas of understanding and newer areas of actual practical work. 61

Men talk about religion – women live it. That could be a summary of my informants’ opinions on faith and interfaith dialogue. Interfaith dialogue, as they perceive it, is something that is conducted by men on a theoretical level, without being informed by religion as it is lived (by women) in daily life. L. reflects on this:

59 Interview Diane D’Souza
60 Interview Lalitha Iyer
61 Interview Annie Namala
I think as women we don’t talk too much about our faith. We do a lot that our faith teaches. Our great weakness is that we do not articulate enough our stands in the understanding of religion, of faith. And maybe that is why it does not penetrate the larger discourse of interfaith dialogue. But we do have very… very unique ways.62

Women’s “unique ways” in “religion as practiced” was what made L., who grew up in a family where her parents did not practice any religion but were very open to all faiths, to discover her roots in Hinduism:

I started discovering elements in [Hinduism] which I found was so… transformative, because those elements pertained to women’s lives as they are lived from day to day. I didn’t find so much in the received and written books, but I found a lot in the way women practised in…. notions of charity and duty, discipline, and that a faith is not what you talk about but a faith is what you live. And I found so many similarities with women in Islam and women in Christianity, and I think many of these were the reasons I said yes, I must go for this [Women's Interfaith Journey].63

It is not only in the sense of performing charity that women live their faith, they also keep the rituals in the home and daily life:

In, I would say almost all cultures that I have read about or know about, whether eastern or western, the role of the ritual and votive roles, in religion, are... sustained by women. Is it clear? Both the ritual performance and the votive rites are done by women. So in a very large measure, women are involved in the traditioning process in religion and culture. Men are not involved in that aspect. That’s what I mean with the living of religion and how women live it differently from men. And because men are not involved in those day-to-day activities, I suppose their idea of religion is... the public sphere and talking about it, discussing it, debating it...64

L. also gave an example of how women appropriate and change rituals. She had bought a new flat for her daughter, and at the move-in, she and her daughters, her mother and grandmother performed the ceremony for moving into a new house, which is traditionally done by husband and wife. The maidservant, who was a Dalit, lit the lamp. In a new family situation, traditional boundaries of caste and gender were transcended: “we said we will do it differently, because to us this is meaningful, these are the people who matter in our lives”.65

62 Interview L.
63 Interview L.
64 Interview L.
65 Interview L.
Based on this living of faith in daily life, there is also an “interfaith life” in the neighbourhoods of India, where people take part in each other’s celebrations, which are sustained by women. L. told how her grandmother, a very orthodox Hindu who would never have taken a meal in a Muslim house, all the same allowed her grandchildren to play with the Muslim neighbours’ children and took the sweets they offered her at Muslim festivals:

So there was… within those boundaries there was a respect for you being the way you were and me being the way I am, and looking for areas of commonality rather than conflict. Today it seems to have been reversed. Today we are talking more about interfaith but we’re looking for areas of conflict.  

So unless women’s ways of practicing interfaith at grass root level is conscientized and strengthened, women will easily be manipulated by communalist political forces:

Simply because […] a large majority of women are not exposed to different faiths. You know, I think you also need an understanding of other faiths in the sense to know more about other religions, in order to arrive at some kind of dialogue

*But don’t women meet on this basic level as you talked about, neighbours and celebrating each other’s festivals and so on?*

Women do meet, but there isn’t… for instance if there were a communal clash, women are not in positions of… you know secular power or political power to avert that, simply because of their position in the family and society. And I think also because of not knowing more, and getting all the information only through the men folk.

*But do men know more about other faiths than women do?*

I think that men have scope to interact more with other men, simply because of the variety of opportunities in the public sphere. There may still be people who choose not to do it. But there is far more opportunity than is available for women.

Provided that women’s insights in faith are articulated and analyzed, L. is certain they would make an impact on interfaith dialogue:

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66 Interview L.  
67 Interview L.
It would definitely become more practical, more earthy. There would be... a lot more scope for seeing what could be done at neighbourhood levels, down the street, across the road, stuff like that.\textsuperscript{68} 

As we shall also see in Chapter Three, this is something that recurs in the material: women want interfaith dialogue to be practical, to take its starting point in peoples’ real lives and their fight for survival, to lead to tangible results pertaining to peace and justice. Deepthi complains:

The interfaith dialogue that I have seen so far, I don’t think has played really a part [in preventing communal violence]. I don’t know... what we mean by dialogue really. Because we have three people come together, a Hindu, a Christian and a Muslim, and each talk about our faiths, and we say come on now, let’s respect each other. But where do we go from there?\textsuperscript{69} 

Annie agrees that interfaith dialogue would be more praxis-oriented if women participated. They would bring in community issues, because, she says, “a lot of community strength comes from women, not so much from men”:

Because I think men work at the top levels of community like you know, in our society men are the decision makers, so at that level of community men are involved, but in the actual ground level of community it is very much more women who are involved in holding communities. So in that way I think it makes much more of meaning to have women think of practical ways and making theory from their understanding and practice, into interfaith dialogue. It is a good initiative to have women. And then later you can always have men’s issues and men’s perspectives brought in. Because it is an issue that is a marginalized issue, and maybe women would bring in more kind of insights into it from a community perspective. And a marginalized perspective also you know, they would be able to relate to it.\textsuperscript{70} 

That women bring in a marginalized perspective is a theme that Diane has elaborated upon in her reflections on the journey:

If women bring in a view from the margins of religion or society, their very position may also bring greater awareness of and sensitivity to the fact that other marginalized perspectives exist. Having experienced patriarchal hierarchies and what it means to be silenced, women may be more conscious of others who struggle to be heard. [...] a valuable contribution arising from women’s experiments with interfaith dialogue, then, can be a greater awareness of diversity, and a sensitivity to the existence of dominant core groups and less vocal marginalized groups – even within one tradition. Who

\textsuperscript{68} Interview L. 
\textsuperscript{69} Interview Deepthi Sukumar 
\textsuperscript{70} Interview Annie Namala
is speaking for others? Who is silent? In shaping interfaith dialogue, women may bring a vital lesson: that creating spaces where the silent regain their voices is not only empowering for those who have been marginalized, it is a source of new insight, learning and wisdom for the entire group.71

The experience of being marginalized, of being “the other”, is, as we shall see, a crucial component in feminist experience of, and reflection on interfaith dialogue.

2.2.7 Aims of Interfaith Dialogue

What then is, according to the participants in the Women's Interfaith Journey, the aim of interfaith dialogue? Which issues should be brought into it? Why is it important? The overshadowing concern seems to be to avoid violent conflict, not least in the Indian context of communalism:

We identify strongly with religion. And religion is now becoming more and more the point of conflict [...]. So then I feel it is important to initiate interfaith, it is very, very important, to initiate interfaith dialogue and discussions. [...] There is a tendency you know to break this kind of community traditions... because in India there has been lots of traditions of Muslims and Hindus going together on many things, like festivals, they have common people whom they consider as saintly people, like there is a tendency to break that kind of a thing.72

Building understanding is indeed a matter of life and death, a necessity – not something optional, says L.:

I think if we want to prevent ourselves from killing ourselves as a race, we need to have more initiatives where we can build common platforms to understand one another. I see that... that is the meaning of dialogue, as a platform for understanding, and respecting difference, celebrating differences, not just respecting them, celebrating differences. And then looking at common areas where we can work together, because the world is becoming more complex. We can no longer afford to sit in neat little categories and say you know, I’m Indian and you’re Western and I do my thing and you do your thing, you can no longer afford to do that.73

In this quotation I find a certain repudiation of the idea of “Asian-ness” or “Indian-ness”. Though there is an essentializing tendency in the Journey participants’ view of womanhood, that is not the case when it comes to ethnicity: they view the situation in India in sociological terms.

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71 D’Souza, Diane 2002, p 8
72 Interview Annie Namala
73 Interview L.
Deepthi thinks it is important that interfaith dialogue happens within the religious communities, and is not an external initiative:

Whether it is the church or the mosque or the temple, they should become places of interfaith dialogue, not a neutral place like an NGO. We should be able to allow people of other faiths into our places of worship. But it is a difficult thing.\(^{74}\)

To Diane, interfaith dialogue is important “because there are so many assumptions we have about people as groups”, in today’s world especially Muslims being stereotyped in the media.\(^{75}\) And the way to get away from the stereotypes is to build relations. She quotes Myra, one of the participants of the original journey:

Myra, coming from the Cree tradition, put it best when she tried to explain her own reaction when an invited guest subtly derided Christians and Muslims. ‘I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck and I thought, “Don’t go there!”’. You see it was no longer someone out there who she was talking about. It was Dilshad and Annie and Zhora. Those are my sisters, I know them. That’s the difference: before the Journey, the hair did not rise on the back of my neck. It rises now.’\(^{76}\)

Thus, the aim of interfaith dialogue is “to grow in understanding of these people who are here and through them I can maybe understand more about faith”\(^{77}\)

The theme that interfaith dialogue is about growing in faith comes out strongly in the written reports by Annie and L. Though they do not use this term, what they seek, and experienced at the Journey, was a kind of feminist spirituality. Annie writes:

But [dialogue] is the path to new possibilities for all of us, it can lead to greater peace and health around. It can lead to greater harmony, sustainability and creativity. It is funny because anytime you start with one deep issue in life it gets connected to the others. We can start with our own faith, we can start with the others, we can start with the world around us – sooner or later we have to touch the other two.\(^{78}\)

L. describes the aim of the Women's Interfaith Journey as being, on a metaphysical level,

\(^{74}\) Interview Deepthi Sukumar  
\(^{75}\) Interview Diane D'Souza  
\(^{76}\) Henry Martyn Institute 1999, p 10  
\(^{77}\) Interview Diane D'Souza  
\(^{78}\) Namala p 4
… the quest of Women Spirit, searching among the troubled consciousness of different peoples for something to sustain our faith in a God and in humanity. Rediscovering the spirituality in ourselves and in others and finding a connectedness that transcends the bounds of religion and cultural differences.79

Here the theme of ambiguity of religion crops up again: it takes an effort to “sustain faith” and “rediscover spirituality” when organized religion is not woman-friendly and seems to breed more violence than peace. Through dialogue, religion can be re-appropriated and re-imagined, understood more in terms of “feminist spirituality”.

2.2.8 Individual Experiences – Collective Aims

Diane D’Souza describes the Women’s Interfaith Journey as a transforming experience.80 In Annie’s words, it made “each member a special person”;81 to L. it “recreated ‘the Journey’ of the soul in quest of wholeness through encounter with the Other”82; Lalitha found that the journey “has taken my awareness of the [caste] issues to a different plane”.83

All the participants seem to have a sense that they were “meant” to be on the journey, that it somehow fit into their lives at that point. L. talks of “something called serendipity […] the pattern of the universe, which says that you’re here, and this is the right place for you to be at this time”84.

It appears that the success of the journeys is to a great extent due to the fact that the participants were able to grapple with issues that were important to them personally. They were not discussing things of academic interest only, but matters that concerned them, and thus a deeper understanding was possible

For Lalitha, the time had come to grapple with caste:

I had reflected on gendering, and what my gendering meant to me, and where I wanted to own it and where I wanted to challenge it. That process had happened in my life. But it hadn’t happened with regard to caste. And it seemed to be the next identity issue which I wanted to work through within myself. To see what it meant to me and what it did not mean for me. On the one hand I can live my life and pretend that caste is not an issue, because I’m on the side of the privileged, on the other it is important to work through that.85

79 L., p 5
80 Diane D’Souza 1999, p 3
81 Namala, p 2
82 L. p 2
83 Iyer, p 11
84 Interview L.
85 Interview Lalitha Iyer
Deepthi feels that God sent her on the journey to help her cope with being a Dalit among high-caste people in her new workplace:

I’m a person of big faith, I believe in God completely, especially in Jesus Christ as my saviour, and I feel that I got prepared to take up this job, being the only Dalit woman in the setting, […] I mean, of course among our workers, we do have them among our sweepers and... the lower the job goes we have many more of people belonging to my community, in those jobs, but in my position, I think I’m the only Dalit, in the YWCA. So I’m proud of it also, but at the same time I realise that I am here for a purpose, and I also believe that I have been prepared for this and that preparation was the interfaith journey that I went on in Kenya.86

Annie commented that it was helpful that all the women were in the same age group – that facilitated understanding in a group with different nationalities, religions and castes. For her, the journey was part of what might be called her mid-life-reflection process:

At that particular point of time I was about 40, and within me I was feeling a need of beginning some kind of reflective process. And looking at, you know, I somehow felt that this is now another phase in life where you need to be involved in maybe a different level or a different aspect of work…[…] It was a good opportunity at that time, to take stock, you know, together with the other women who were involved.87

To Diane, the journey meant “a greater awareness of and confidence in… ways of doing things differently […] a growing respect in what I see, what I name as important”88. This has also meant a change in her faith practice:

I find it very difficult to sit anymore in a pew, listening to a man tell me what I should think […] so what has happened to me personally is feeling more… in touch with my own ways of connecting to the Spirit […] choosing less to be in situations where I am doing it for the sake of form rather than for what it really gives me.89

All five women were from the outset open towards other religions, so the journey did not mean a significant change in that respect, but rather a strengthening of that attitude, a deeper understanding.

Annie discovered how little she knew about other faiths and, though considering herself an open-minded person, how biased she was against them. She became aware of “the lack of any processes in society which helps

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86 Interview Deepthi Sukumar
87 Interview Anne Namala
88 Interview Diane D’Souza
89 Interview Diane D’Souza
you cut across sections, be it religion, be it caste, to get to know each other and appreciate each other”. But she also discovered

the potential that faith has in really looking at issues, because that provides like a solid foundation and also a lot of sense of security, a sense of confidence in faith… as a kind of potential can provide you with a space to meet across those boundaries.\(^90\)

She is disappointed in the church, because it does not develop this potential for dialogue, but instead has a “minority consciousness” which makes it very defensive and prevents it from addressing social issues in an integrated way.

Deepthi also considers her inclusivist stance rather unique among her fellow Christians:

I have never said, like I’ve heard other Christians say, that if you’re a Hindu you will never go to heaven. That’s a very commonly made statement among Christians over here. […] I just take my faith, as my own personal relationship with Jesus Christ, as my god, and I know he’s in everybody, whether they are Hindu or Muslim, he sees you as what you are, and I leave it to him to accept … whether a person is praising God in the name of Jesus or anybody else, he’s seeing her true self and he knows her and accepts her […] I believe in basically that human beings are good people, and I don’t believe in a god who’s not going to see that.\(^91\)

For those who were Dalit activists, Hinduism had been more or less synonymous with the caste system, but the interaction with high-caste Hindus had shown them that there are other sides to Hinduism, and above all that Hindus can be “good people”. Deepthi told me:

But on this journey I realised that it is only when a person is practising that you know, the laws of that particular philosophy, caste system is only one philosophy of the many philosophies of Hinduism. And the other philosophies are basically good philosophies, except for the caste system. And these Hindu women, they showed me that they are basically good people, who have been able to study their religion and take only the good out of [it]. Because they wanted to be good people. And they are good people too. Caring people.\(^92\)

The fact that the Women’s Interfaith Journey to such a high degree became a part of each woman’s personal journey helps to explain the project’ success. But individual insights and new friendships are not enough for these women,

\(^90\) Interview Annie Namala
\(^91\) Interview Deepthi Sukumar
\(^92\) Interview Deepthi Sukumar
who are committed to peace building and social change. To be worthwhile, the journey should have an impact on a larger scale. Annie writes:

We found it difficult to accept that this journey was meant for us to live and experience, share and express; that our experience and expressions are valuable enough to be invested in; that we can claim the space for ourselves. [...] It took all of us – educated, intellectual, active and women in responsible positions – some time to accept that – I can give this journey as a gift to myself, my experiences and thoughts are valuable enough to invested [sic] in, my expressions and sharing are valuable to be heard and recognised – that I am created in the image of God. The journey was an affirmation to myself.93

All the women expressed a concern that what they had achieved at the journey must be used, analyzed, put to use. There is a strong sense of accountability:

At different times on the first journey, both in the beginning and at the end, one question that came up was the cost, how much it cost for a journey like this to happen, and, you know... so one way of looking at it is to say you know, it’s so much money spent, you know, on a gaggle of women. Another way of looking at it is to say: this is something that has never happened before. And it needs to happen. And then to build on it and say now how can we extrapolate these learnings, to local contexts, at lesser costs, in shorter time frames, and to me that is the exciting challenge about work like this. Because there are enough research and development initiatives in the [...] business world, which run into billions and no-one blinks an eyelash at it.94

Lalitha is disappointed that the process has not been taken further:

All the time and energy we’ve invested in learning something, and what we put together, how does this thing get used somewhere? To me right now it seems to be lying in an archive.95

Annie is also clear that unless the experiences from the journey get analyzed, it will remain an isolated attempt and not make any impact:

But my concern is also like, you know, this project, has started, but the issue is so large and we make such small kind of interventions like, at the journeys, so to what extent are we able to generalise the understanding that we are able to get? And at what level of scope can it really influence? [...] It needs to be systematized, and it needs to become part of certain curricula, certain dialogues, certain other levels, we need to take it forward.96

93 Namala
94 Interview L.
95 Interview Lalitha Iyer
96 Interview Annie Namala
In Chapter Three, we will recognize this strong sense of accountability on the part of especially Third World participants in women’s interfaith conferences.

2.3 Conclusions: A Journey into Each Others’ Lives

The Women's Interfaith Journey is a project that aims to explore women’s ways of doing interfaith dialogue, conflict resolution and peace building. It takes its starting point in women’s interactions at grass roots level, in their lived faith, their struggle to make ends meet and sustain life for themselves and their families, their efforts to create justice and well-being for their communities.

2.3.1 Focus, Locus and Methodology

Starting in women’s lives means that it is not mosques, temples or churches, not the official representatives of religion, or scholars of religion, that have been the focus of the journeys, because these are not the primary places where women live their spiritual lives, nor are women to any substantial degree represented among the leadership of religious communities or scholarship. This insight has guided the set-up of the journey, and is also confirmed by the participants, who discern a clear difference between how and where women and men exercise their faith.

However, this is not totally unproblematic. In all religions there is a growing number of women who hold religious office and are scholars, but HMI has chosen not to seek participants in the journey from this group. The outcome might have been different if the participants had included religious leaders or scholars.

The Women's Interfaith Journey operates from the fact that women are prominent in “religion as practiced”, trying to conceptualize what it might mean to interfaith dialogue. This entails a change of locus, focus as well as methodology of the dialogue. The locus will not be places of worship or learning, but neighbourhoods, NGOs, women’s centres – places where women meet. The focus will be how faith works in daily life, what gives strength and wisdom, what contributes to peace and justice. And the

97 This pertains especially to Islam, but also to Hinduism and Christianity inasmuch as women, though worshipping in temples and churches, are generally not in charge of what is being said and done there.

98 For instance, Maura O’Neill’s account of a women’s interfaith dialogue where the participants were ordained representatives of their traditions, shows that teachings and dogmas played a greater role than in the Women's Interfaith Journey. Cf. section 3.4.1 below.
methodology will be the building of relationships through the sharing of life stories – in words, but also song, dance, art and ritual.

Deepthi Sukumar’s concern that interfaith dialogue should take place in the places of worship and not through NGOs need not contradict this. I interpret her statement as a concern for religious communities to take responsibility for the dialogue, to put it on their own agenda.

The rationale for the Women’s Interfaith Journey is that this change of locus, focus and methodology will lead to new insights, new knowledge.

2.3.2 Gender Pragmatism

The language used by the participants and in the documents from the journeys appears to be very “essentialist”, as there are many references to “women’s ways” of doing things, that “women do things differently”. On the face of it, my informants construct men and women as two completely different kinds of human being. Women are emotional, caring, peace loving, down-to-earth and practical. Men are rational, theoretical, calculating and prone to be violent.

However, I interpret this not so much as a question of an essentializing view of “womanhood” as a realization that women’s place in the society in which they live gives them another perspective and another scope of action than men. Though there are some references to “woman’s instinct”, more comments point to women’s role as caregivers, of having the chief responsibility for nurturing the family, their confinement to the neighbourhood and lack of access to the public sphere as the sources of women’s “doing things differently”. They also point to the benefits and drawbacks of this: on the positive side the awareness of needs at the basic level of existence, on the negative the lack of a broader perspective, of exposure to different communities.

The participants are activists, and this entails a wariness against theory and analysis, which is frequently expressed as the “male” way of doing things. This lack of interest in theory explains the absence of feminist analysis on gender differences. They operate from their perceived empirical reality, and are not interested in challenging cultural assumptions about women. In terms of gender pragmatism, they “practice their physical gender” in a way which they find works in their context and in order to contribute to women’s liberation, utilizing gender stereotypes rather than challenging them.

There is, however, a tension between on the one hand, their lack of interest in, almost dissociation from, theory and analysis, philosophical and theological concerns, and on the other their awareness of the need to analyze the experiences of the Women’s Interfaith Journey, to conceptualize and
make the insights available to others so that they inform the broader scene of interfaith dialogue. What then, are the key insights that have come out of the Women's Interfaith Journey?

**2.3.3 Five Key Insights**

I want to highlight five insights which emerge in the material: acknowledgement of “messiness”, stress on building relationships, the ambiguity of religion, a quest for a spirituality that transcends religious boundaries and the insistence that religion cannot be seen separately from other issues in a society.

The critique of “the boxes” and acceptance of the *messiness* of existence were, to Diane D’Souza, something completely new in the context of interfaith dialogue. Is it particular to women? Can it be said to be a feminist perspective?

With a few exceptions, the participants in the Women's Interfaith Journey, though belonging to different religious traditions, do not hold office or “represent” their religion in any official way. They do not have the “vested interests” that Annie Namala mentions as an obstacle for real dialogue. For a pastor, imam, member of church board etc it might have been more natural to identify with “the box”, and consequently, harder to free herself from its confines. Is it, then, a “women’s perspective” or a “lay perspective” that questions “the boxes”?

Women are, as we have seen, a majority among the practitioners of religion, while not being to a great extent in charge of “religion as prescribed”. In terms of feminist theory, the Journey could be said to operate from standpoint epistemology, where awareness of “messiness”, that “things do not fit” is understood as knowledge that is accessible to those who are at the bottom of the hierarchical structure, or at the margins of a tradition. Criticising the notion that a religious person is someone who fits into a “box”, refusing to be defined by “the box” and questioning the very term “interfaith dialogue”, thus redefining the whole enterprise, is part of the feminist project of questioning established norms and terminologies.

The stress on *relationships* is connected to the critique of “the boxes”. You cannot build a relationship with a box, and hardly with someone who is locked into a box. If “interfaith is about people”, “finding a connectedness that transcends the bounds of religion”, “to grow in understanding of these people who are here and through them understand more about faith”, the essential thing is getting to know the person, and through her way of living

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99 Among the participants in the original journey, one was a Cree Elder, another was an Islamic teacher of religion.
her faith, gain new knowledge about faith. What is important is not the
principles of faith, but how faith is lived by persons, how religion
“strengthens life”.
This entails a holistic way of looking at both religion and people. Through
their experiences of the Journey, the women came to the same conclusion as
Wilfred Cantwell Smith: it is not meaningful to talk about “religion” as an
abstract concept – there is no such thing. What exists is people, whose ways
of being to a greater or lesser extent are shaped by religion as one of many
facets of life. To focus on religion exclusively, without taking the rest of a
person’s life into account, is regarded as superficial and unhelpful.
Telling and listening to stories, life stories, is essential to building
relationship. Not least listening: when Diane D’Souza described the ways of
learning during the journey, the word “listening” recurred again and again.100
To be listened to, to be in Nelle Morton’s term “heard into speech”, is one of
the most important features of the feminist movement.
Building relationships, creating bonds and connectedness, is also a way to
facilitate conflict resolution. “Not letting go”, insisting upon setting things
straight, is a consequence of not wanting a relationship to be broken.
Carol Gilligan’s theories have had a decisive influence on this emphasis
on relation building. Thus, the Journey could be seen as an example of
Kampmark’s theory about how Gilligan’s discourse on women’s ethics
influences culture and works as a self-fulfilling prophecy.101
The dynamics of the Journey also includes a strong sense of justice, that
contributes to the acknowledgement and resolution of conflict. This can be
interpreted in terms of the participants having reached the desired moral
stage, which I found in my reading of Gilligan, where care and justice are
balanced, and we could talk of an ethic of care and justice. We shall return to
this in Chapter Three.
Allowing the “messiness” of life, not having to “represent” a religion, the
centrality of getting to know a person and what faith means to her, also open
up for acknowledging the ambiguity of religion. All my informants clearly
recognize that religions have oppressive as well as liberating potentials, and
that the negative sides must be taken into account in the dialogue. Deepthi
puts it well when she says that dialogue should help the participants to “deal
with the trauma of finding bad things in one’s religion”.
“Dealing with the trauma of finding bad things in one’s religion” is
actually the basic rationale for feminist theology, and here it is applied to the
area of interfaith dialogue.

100 Cf. section 2.1.1
101 Cf. section 1.6.1
There is a tendency in the material to view “organized religion” as opposed to faith as understood and practiced by people, and as an obstacle to spiritual growth. The quest for spirituality must go beyond religious boundaries. “Organized religion can seriously damage your spiritual health” is a warning that the participants in the Women's Interfaith Journey would like to put on the religious “boxes”.

When Annie and L. talk about “snatches of a time before the formalization of religion” and “searching among the troubled consciousness of different peoples for something to sustain our faith in a God and in humanity” it resonates with Ewart Cousins’ concept “global spirituality”.

My interviewees largely fit into Heelas’ and Woodhead’s “spirituality of life” category, though the stress is on the well-being of all rather than of the individual. They do not embrace a religious tradition in its totality, but pick elements they find meaningful, not only from one tradition. Their criterion of true religion is that it strengthens life and well-being for all. It is the way religion is lived in everyday life that is a source of inspiration to my informants, not the doctrines, philosophies or liturgies of religion. The stress is on orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy.

This insistence on praxis, that interfaith dialogue must be practical and lead to action dealing with people’s life realities, points to the conviction that you cannot talk of interfaith issues separately from other issues. To separate interfaith dialogue from issues of caste, class, gender or ethnicity can only lead astray, is a strong message from the participants in the journey.

According to Annie Namala, there is a “key issue” in every society that needs to be taken account of in interfaith dialogue. It might be difficult to find consensus as to what the “key issue” is – different participants might have differing perspectives – but the insight that talk about faith cannot be isolated from other issues is essential. Is conflict/consensus in a group based on class, caste, gender, ethnicity rather than mis-/understanding of religious issues? How is my understanding of faith coloured by my situation in life?

This could be characterized as a holistic approach to interfaith dialogue. Faith is one aspect of human life that is intertwined with all other aspects – it cannot be understood in isolation. And, again, this approach is facilitated by the emphasis on building relationship, acknowledging our “multiple identities” and the “messiness” of life.

2.3.4 Will the Journey Go On?

As we shall see in Chapter Three, many women’s interfaith projects are cut short by a lack of financial resources and institutional back-up. Instead of leading to follow-ups and networking, the insights derived from them often end up in an archive. My interviewees concerns that their insights might not
be developed and made available for others seem justified in this perspective.

Being connected to an institution like HMI enhances the possibility that a project like Women’s Interfaith Journey will not be an isolated phenomenon, but be able to influence the larger picture of interfaith dialogue and feminist theology. The connection provides organizational tools for carrying out the praxis side of the Journey, and for spreading the insights and methodology to women’s organizations and other NGO’s.

There are indications that what was learned from the journeys is already colouring theological reflection within the Institute. The Director, Andreas D’Souza, is developing “a theology of relationships”, where he explicitly draws upon the insights of the Women’s Interfaith Journey, especially the themes of starting in praxis and transcending boundaries.102

With the upcoming conference in April 2006, there is hope that the experiences from the journey will not “end up in an archive” but be analyzed and made use of.

In this analysis, it is important to apply feminist theory. As we have seen, there is a lack of analysis and critique of gender stereotypes in the reflections on the Journey. There is a danger that if the Journey is interpreted simply as “women’s ways of dialogue”, the insights from it will remain marginal, rather than analysed within a larger framework.

Though “holistic” is a catchword for what the Women's Interfaith Journey is all about, there is a danger that the dichotomy between theory and analysis as a male activity and that practical work as a women’s activity is re-inscribed. The journey is presented under HMI’s “praxis” activities, and not under its “academic” activities. While travelling and meeting activists is a practical activity, the aim goes beyond equipping the individual participants with tools and insights for reconciliation work. The Journey could very well be labelled the “field study” part of an academic enterprise.

There has been a shift in emphasis from the original journey where interfaith was more in focus, to the later ones, where conflict resolution is the central theme. In part, this has to do with a general shift from theology to reconciliation training in HMI’s activities, felt to be necessary in the present circumstances of violent conflict in Indian society. But it also reflects the idea that women are more interested in practical work for peace and justice than in talking about faith, which was expressed by some of the participants. If the interfaith component had been more accentuated, theory and praxis, spirituality and activism might have been better held together.

102 Andreas D’Souza 2002
The great value of The Women’s Interfaith Journey is that it takes its starting point in women’s lived faith, destabilizes the idea of religions as fixed entities, and redefines interfaith dialogue.

The participants generally do not interpret what they are doing in terms of interfaith dialogue, which they define as something cerebral, dealing with abstract concepts and not with lived reality.\textsuperscript{103} This is a measure of the failure of malestream dialogue to put its principles into practice. By being “a journey into each other’s lives”, the Journey embodies the principles for interfaith dialogue as expressed in the WCC Ecumenical Considerations: “dialogue must be a process of mutual empowerment […] to join in a common pursuit of justice, peace and constructive action” and “in dialogue we nurture relations”.\textsuperscript{104}

Instead of disclaiming the label “interfaith dialogue”, the participants should proudly proclaim that they have found a way to make interfaith dialogue work.

\textsuperscript{103} While there are exceptions, such as the \textit{Vidyajoti} institute, \textit{gurukul} theological seminary in Chennai, and \textit{Tamil Theological Seminary} in Madurai, there is a general critique against interfaith dialogue in India along the same lines as that of the Journey participants, cf. Evers 2003, p 250

\textsuperscript{104} Ecumenical Considerations, pp 9-10
3. Feminist Approaches to Interfaith Dialogue

In Chapter Two, The Women’s Interfaith Journey was presented as a case study of a feminist interfaith project. I showed that this project has a different locus, focus and methodology than malestream dialogue: the locus being neighbourhoods, NGOs, women’s centres; the focus faith as lived in everyday life; and the methodology the building of relationships through the sharing of life stories. I also deducted five key insights in this dialogue: the acknowledgement of the “messiness” of life, which forbids any neat categorization of people into religious “boxes”; the emphasis on building relationships which allowed for a creative handling of conflict; the ambiguity of religion which entailed the demand that dialogue must deal with “the bad things about religion”; a quest for a spirituality that transcends religious boundaries; and the insistence that, to be worthwhile, interfaith dialogue must deal with issues of peace and justice.

In this chapter, I will study two sets of international conferences, and Asian regional conferences. More than the content of the input at the conferences, I will look for significant traits in the process, methodology and issues they dealt with. I am also interested in how what was learned from the conferences has been used by the organizing bodies. Have they influenced their policies? Have they been spread to a wider audience? Other studies of women’s interfaith work will serve as reference points.

The international conferences are from two contexts: one academic based in Harvard University, and the other ecclesial, the WCC. The documentation from the conferences is varied: publications, video tapes and archive material. I have also had occasion to interview conference participants.

One of the earliest international conferences was Women, Religion and Social Change, arranged by Harvard and Berkeley Universities in 1983, followed up by a conference to which the original participants were invited, in 2003, arranged by the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. These conferences are referred to in the following as WRSC I and II. I have chosen them because the initiative was an early one, global in scope and has been well documented. They are also one of few women’s interfaith arrangements that have been followed up in a second event. WRSC I is documented by the anthology Speaking of Faith, and WRSC II by transcription of the conference proceedings, published on the Pluralism Project’s website. I have
also had the opportunity to interview Diana Eck and some of the conference participants.

I have chosen to study WCC initiatives, because the WCC is a global institution, with a reception process which should ensure that experiences made at its arrangements are passed on within the organization and its member churches. The most important of these conferences was held in Toronto in 1988; I also briefly include a consultation on the role of women in religious education in Mülheim in 1999. The Toronto conference was documented in a series of video productions broadcast on Canadian TV. There is also a Moderator’s Report by Diana Eck published in Current Dialogue, a chapter in Wesley Ariarajah’s Not Without My Neighbour¹ and questionnaires, evaluations and correspondence kept in the WCC archives. However, not many of the speakers’ contributions have been archived. The input of the Mülheim conference, was published, together with some evaluations, in Current Dialogue.

The Toronto and WRSC conferences also have a common denominator in Professor Diana L. Eck, who was their convener and moderator of the conferences. At the time of the Toronto conference, Diana Eck was moderator of the WCC unit for interreligious dialogue, and is presently head of the Pluralism Project. She is a person who has been on the centre stage in interfaith dialogue during the period covered by this dissertation.

Who took part in these conferences? The common denominator for the women at all the conferences is that they are activists – women engaged in bringing about change in society and religious institutions. Most are also scholars – in the case of Toronto scholars of religion, many also ordained, in Mülheim, educators in the field of religion, and in WRSC from religious and social studies.

The records of the conferences² include 125 persons, of whom 123 are women. Of these, 17 persons participated in both the WRSC events, three of them also took part in the Toronto conference, and one person participated in both the WCC conferences.

As the second WRSC conference was a follow-up of the first one, it is natural that the same names should appear. Otherwise, it is apparently not a question of the same women appearing everywhere. While it is positive that engagement in interfaith issues is not confined to a “women’s interfaith jet-set”, this could also be interpreted as a sign of the lack of networking and continuity between women engaged in interfaith dialogue.

¹ Ariarajah 2003
² The documentation differs between the events. In the case of the Toronto conference, I have had access to a participant list which includes everyone, whereas Speaking of Faith only records the contributors whose papers are published in the book, and likewise for WRSC II: the website only lists the names of those who were on the panels.
As this dissertation has an Asian focus, I have chosen to include Asian regional conferences. They belong in yet another context: the Christian women’s movement in Asia. The conferences were arranged by the Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (AWRC), and are documented in reports. This documentation also serves as a background to Chapter 5, which deals with Asian feminist theology.

These conferences, though remarkable for their scope, are not unique. Too often, organizers of women’s interfaith initiatives are not aware of similar projects and events, and are not able to learn from each other. Therefore, to give an idea of the multitude of feminist interfaith initiatives across the globe, I will give a survey of such initiatives in an excursus.

**Excursus: A Survey of Women’s Interfaith Initiatives**

This survey, which does not purport to be exhaustive, contains a broad range of events and projects which I have encountered during the course of my work. They can be divided into three broad categories: isolated events, long-term projects and interfaith organizations focusing on peace work.

**Isolated Events**

One of the earliest initiatives was a series of two conferences called *Women of Faith in the 80s*, held in the USA in 1980 and 1984. It included mainly Christian and Jewish women, but Islam was also represented through Riffat Hassan. The papers from the conferences, including an interreligious worship service, are collected in the volume *Women of Faith in Dialogue*.3

Two conferences held in Europe in the 1990s aimed at arranging new events or building up networks, but remained isolated events. *Respect Equality Dialogue*, arranged by the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women (EFECW) and other organisations with the support of the European Commission “Soul for Europe” project, in 1997, gathered some 50 Christian, Jewish and Muslim women. It aimed at linking networks of women in the different religions, but this was not achieved.4

The Interreligious Women’s Summerschool “Upstream”: *Women, Religion and Power of Life* arranged by Kerk en Wereld in the Netherlands in cooperation with the Protestant Academy Mülheim, Germany, in 1999 was to be followed by another conference in 2001, but that never came about.5

In July 1998, more than 100 Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and *Kong Hu Cu* women came together in Jakarta, Indonesia, to pray together. The prayers were offered for victims of violence, especially

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3 Mollenkott 1987
4 Respect Equality Dialogue 1998
5 Upstream 2000
rape, which had been increasing, and the purpose was to strengthen and heal women from sorrow and fear in this situation.\(^6\)

The Interfaith Center of New York hosted a programme focused on “Women and Religion” during September-December 2004, including exhibitions, performances and discussions.\(^7\) Another New York based event was an afternoon at the Tanenbaum Center in 2003, “Women through the Prism of Religious Texts”, which in the centre’s newsletter was characterized as “groundbreaking”, and a sign of “progress in having women appear prominently in these discussions”.\(^8\) Comments like these, 20 years after *Women, Religion and Social Change*, and 15 years after the Toronto conference, show how little women’s achievements in interfaith dialogue are known.

An example of interfaith elements in Christian women’s conferences is a panel on “Wisdom/Hokmah, Torah and Fatimah”, where a Jewish, a Muslim and a Christian woman discussed understandings of wisdom in their traditions, at the *Evangelical & Ecumenical Women’s Caucus* conference 2004.\(^9\)

### Long-term Projects

In Europe, there have been a number of projects involving Christian, Jewish and Muslim women, some of them research projects, some in community, ecclesial or educational contexts.

There are numerous small interfaith women’s groups in many European countries. Two such groups in Münster, Germany, were studied in the research project *Dialog von unten: Muslimas und Christinnen im Austausch* led by Professor Annette Wilke and Regina Kemper. As the title indicates, it is a dialogue “from below”, lay women exchanging experiences, everyday problems and beliefs. The project found that the dialogue groups furthered the integration of Muslims in German society, as well as correcting negative stereotypes about Muslim women, and changing the participants’ perceptions of self and other, and that there was a sincere wish both to share one’s own beliefs and learn about the other’s.\(^10\)

Another German project was the *Sarah-Hagar* project, arranged by *Der Überparteilichen Fraueninitiative Berlin – Stadt der Frauen*, together with 13 different religious and secular organisations. The project, which concerned relations between Christian, Jewish and Muslim women, consisted of eight programmes between 2002 and 2004, and concluded with

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\(^6\) Sartika 1999, p 32  
\(^7\) www.interfaithcenter.org/calendar.shtml accessed 2005-01-10  
\(^8\) Tanenbaum Center 2003  
\(^9\) www.eewc.com/Conf2004Panel.htm  
\(^10\) Kemper & Wilke 2001, pp 138-142; Wilke 2001
a congress in May 2004. The congress issued an appeal for the creation of an intercultural/interreligious study house for women. The project also developed “guidelines for a gender-adequate social policy” in the fields of family, labour and education, which make visible the interests and needs of women as well as their different religious and cultural backgrounds.

Another Christian-Muslim project is a small Norwegian dialogue group, tied to the dialogue centre Emmaus, documented in the book Dialog med og uten slør (Dialogue with and without a veil). The veil referred to in the title should be understood not only as a signifier for Muslim women, but also in a symbolic sense: “who is wearing a veil in this story, and in what way, will change through the dialogue” (author’s translation).

In England, there are also various women’s interfaith groups, some Muslim-Christian, but also multi-faith groups. Three initiatives in Birmingham are the Women’s Peace Group, which gathers monthly to talk about and pray for peace and reconciliation, Women’s Voices, which aimed to “explore women’s spirituality in an informal atmosphere”, and the annual Women of Faith Day.

A project on a larger scale is the European Project for Interreligious Learning (EPIL), which tried out a “curriculum for women and interfaith living” designed to:

- identify and make intentional the contribution of women to shaping a Europe of many faiths
- be a contribution to the ongoing discourse on human rights/women’s rights
- bring insights from the women’s movement and feminist scholarship into interreligious teaching

This curriculum was carried out in a two-year project between 2002 and 2004, taking place in five “modules” in Switzerland, Germany, Spain, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Lebanon, with Christian and Muslim participants from these locations.

In the USA there are many women’s interfaith initiatives. A California-based network is SARAH (Spiritual And Religious Alliance for Hope), which is connected to the United Religions Initiative. Their aim is “to discuss and expand our experiences of women’s spirituality in the home, community and the world” and to do community work “to make a real difference towards peace and understanding”.

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11 Sarah-Hagar project 2004
12 Grung & Larsen 2000, p 9 “Så hvem av oss som bærer slør til enhver tid i denne fortellingen, og på hvilken måte, forandrer sig gjennom dialogen”
13 Tetlow 2004, pp 38-47
14 Current Dialogue 35, p 45
15 Cf. Traitler 2004, and the EPIL project’s homepage www.epil.ch
16 www.sarah4hope.org
Women Transcending Boundaries, an organisation based in Syracuse, NY, was founded as a direct response to 9/11. A Muslim and a Christian woman took the initiative of gathering some friends in their homes, and now 40–50 women come to monthly gatherings, where women of all faiths share beliefs, customs and experiences. The organisation also funds a school in Pakistan, and develops training materials in Urdu, as well as other service projects.17

Among the many interfaith groups in American universities, the Women’s Interfaith Action Group at Boston University is an example of an all women group. Originally, the university chaplain took the initiative, but since she left her position, the young women run the group on their own, meeting weekly. They are “an open and active group of female students and mentors who meet weekly to learn about different religions, to hear about the spiritual/life journeys of other women in many traditions, and to join together in volunteerism and social action”.18 They have also produced their own guidelines for dialogue.

The Women’s Interfaith Institute consists of two regional groups in the USA. It started in 1988 as “Clergywomen’s Interfaith Institute”, but dropped “clergy” from its title, as the Institute is a network for women leaders, not only ordained, in the Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Bahai communities.19

As part of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, a Women’s Network has been established, and has held five consultations, one of them the second Women, Religion & Social Change conference, which will be covered below.

In the area of contemplative/monastic dialogue, Nuns in the West is an initiative started in May 2003, when 30 monastic Buddhist and Christian monastic women gathered in California, organized by the Catholic Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. It was followed up by a second meeting in 2005.20

A final example from the USA is the Women’s Multifaith Center in Orlando, Florida. It is unique in that it focuses on sharing ritual. It provides an “opportunity for its participants to ‘pass over’ into the rituals & spiritual disciplines of the world’s faith traditions”, and its wider aim is to contribute to peacemaking through understanding and safeguarding the religion of ones neighbour.21 The centre started in 1995, and builds on the principle of

17 www.wtb.org
19 www.womensfaithinstitute.org/history.htm accessed 2005-10-31
20 Bender & Cadge 2003; Internet links accessed 2005-11-14: thubtenchodron.org/InterreligiousDialogue/nuns_in_the_west_II.pdf
www.urbandharma.org/nunsofwest.html
www.urbandharma.org/niw05/index.html
thubtenchodron.org/InterreligiousDialogue/spiritual_sisters.html,
21 Information leaflet, Women’s Multifaith Center
hospitality, that is, women from one tradition invite others to participate in their rituals. There is an introduction, and after the ritual, space is made for creative responses to what one has experienced in the ritual. But there are also “feminist rituals” which focus on a theme rather than having a core ritual from one tradition.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Covered Women for God} is an online e-group networking women of faith who hold the common religious conviction to veil themselves and to dress modestly, giving support to each other in how to deal with discrimination and harassment. It was founded by a US Muslim woman, but involves women from all religious traditions. It is unique in reaching religiously conservative women, who would normally not be involved in interfaith dialogue.\textsuperscript{23}

In Australia, there is a \textit{Women’s Interfaith Network} with the aim of “bringing together women of different traditions in order to promote harmony, understanding and respect among the followers of the various world religions, and as a sign of solidarity among people of faith”\textsuperscript{24}, which in April 2005 organized a Paths to Peace Through Friendship gathering, with 160 women of all religions.

The \textit{Pilgrimage Project} initiates pilgrimages around the world “that build alliances among women, promote cross-cultural communication, and empower women”.\textsuperscript{25} The project focuses on the United States, India, South America and the Middle East, but so far, conversations and pilgrimages have only been carried out only in India and the US.

There are associations for women theologians, that are interreligious. \textit{The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians}, though predominantly Christian, has members of all religions, and has especially engaged in Muslim-Christian dialogue, as well as the relationship to African Traditional Religions.\textsuperscript{26} In Europe, the \textit{European Society for Women in Theological Research (ESWTR)} has members of all religions, but does not have interfaith dialogue as such on its agenda though the Yearbook has included articles on the subject. The \textit{Interreligious Conference of European Women Theologians (IKETh)} has interfaith dialogue as one of its aims, and focuses especially on Jewish-Muslim-Christian dialogue. \textit{TARA} is an Asian research forum on issues of culture, women and religion, consisting of a core group of ten, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu women.

\textsuperscript{22} Jackson 2000
\textsuperscript{24} Women’s Interfaith Network Constitution
\textsuperscript{25} Pilgrimage Project Mission Statement http://www.thepilgrimageproject.org/About.htm accessed 2005-10-31
\textsuperscript{26} Pemberton 2003, pp 16, 39, 79
Women Against Fundamentalisms is an organisation which focuses on the negative side of religion. It was launched in 1989 to “challenge the rise of fundamentalism in all religions”.

Interfaith Organizations Focusing on Peace Work

Several of the initiatives described above have the promotion of peace and harmony as one of their goals. Many women’s interfaith organizations have peace work as their primary goal. This applies not least to Israeli-Palestinian initiatives.

There are many fruitful dialogues between Israeli Jewish and Palestinian Muslim and Christian women. The Jerusalem Link is among the best organized of these, and has been in operation for many years. It is a cooperation between an Israeli women’s organization for peacemaking, Bat Shalom, and the Palestinian counterpart, Jerusalem Center for Women. Gull Törnegren’s forthcoming doctoral dissertation on developing a feminist communicative ethics, Utmaningen från andra röster (The Challenge of Other Voices), builds on interviews with women who have taken part in this dialogue. According to Törnegren, Jerusalem Link represents “a thoroughly reflected institutional model for dialogue and cooperation for justice and peace, created from the specific needs and conditions of the context”.

Women in Black started as an initiative by Israeli women to protest against the occupation of Palestinian territory. They were joined by Palestinian women, and later the idea spread to other parts of the world as a way of protesting against violence. Women in Black is part of the Coalition of Women for Peace, comprising 10 different women’s groups.

While most dialogues, like Jerusalem Link, have concentrated on social and political issues, an interesting exception is Women’s Interfaith Encounter, a project within The Interfaith Encounter Association. In this project, Muslim, Christian, Druze and Jewish women study topics of relevance to women from the point of view of the different religious traditions. It aims not only at understanding the other, but also at deepening one’s own faith, and meetings include common worship. The aim is “to create a sacred space of trust, harmony and support during difficult times”.

In former Yugoslavia, there are numerous women’s groups and centres, many of which are multireligious/multiethnic. One consciously interreligious group working for reconciliation is Strength in Diversity in Bosnia.

27 waf.gn.apc.org/background-htm accessed 2005-07-11
28 Törnegren 2005, my translation
30 Cf. Lohre 2003
In South and Southeast Asia, the International Women’s Partnership for Peace and Justice is “a spiritual based feminist organization working to support grassroots women’s groups […] guided by principles of non-violence and grounded in the integration of feminism, social action and spirituality for sustainability and transformation at the personal, community and society levels”. They organize workshops for social change and retreats where activists can find time for personal reflection and reconnect with their spiritual traditions.

On the international level, the World Conference of Religions for Peace has a “Women’s Mobilization Program”, which organizes regional women’s networks, publishes a newsletter and various publications on women’s role in action for peace and justice, among them a manual for conflict resolution: Women of Faith Transforming Conflict: A Multi-Religious Training Manual, which builds on women’s experiences of conflict solution in West Africa and Southeast Europe.

Peace X Peace is a US-based but international network of women for peace. It consists of an internet-based hub connecting and supporting women’s circles inside and outside the US for dialogue, support and collaboration; as well as an educational outreach programme that produces video films and a website which provides news from women’s peace activities. The rationale for the organization is connecting small women’s circles around the world to increase their impact. A large part of Peace X Peace activities is devoted to the Middle East.

The Global Peace Initiative of “Women (GPIW) is “an international, multifaith network of women leaders who come together to stimulate peace building and reconciliation efforts in areas of conflict and post-conflict”. It was launched in 2002 in the Palais des nations in Geneva, as a response to the Millennium Peace Summit convened at the UN headquarters, which gathered the world’s religious leaders, and consequently was completely male dominated. GPIW brings together women leaders and scholars in religion with those in business, government and education who can contribute their skills and networks towards the goals of the initiative, and develops projects in cooperation with the UN. Among the programmes launched by GPIW are a Women’s Partnership for Peace in the Middle East and an Iraqi-US Women’s Dialogue.

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31 www.womenforpeaceandjustice.org/index.htm
33 www.peacexpeace.org
34 GPIW Mission Statement, GPIW website
35 The launch of GPIW, as well as Strength in Diversity and Pluralism Project’s Women’s Networks are described and assessed in Lohre 2003
3.1 WCC Consultations on Women in Interfaith Dialogue

3.1.1 Women in Interfaith Dialogue – Toronto 1988

In 1988, the WCC Subunit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and the Subunit on Women in Church and Society arranged a consultation on “Women in Interfaith Dialogue”. It was held in Toronto on June 5-11 and gathered 60 women of Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Baha’i, Christian, Wiccan and Native North American religious traditions. The participants came from all over the world, and while the majority were from USA and Canada, many in this group had roots in other parts of the world. Many of the participants were religious scholars, rabbis, pastors or priestesses.

The background to the conference was the failure to include women in interfaith dialogue. One reason for this failure was, according to Diana Eck, the absence of networks between women of faith, and the ensuing lack of knowledge of who might be suited to take part in dialogue conferences. The purpose of the consultation was, according to the letter of invitation,

> to become better aware of one another’s commitments and experiences as religious women, to think together about our common issues and concerns as religious women, and to extend the network of women of all faiths who are interested in inter-religious relations and who might discuss the potential for an inter-faith women’s movement.36

Before the consultation, a questionnaire was sent out to the participants, to get an overview of their interests and priorities. One of the questions was “What do you see as the most important local and regional issues for women to consider in an interfaith context?” Answers to this question differed widely, but issues such as violence, health, prostitution, peace, minorities and migrant women workers were mentioned as a priority by many. Other issues that scored highly were promoting harmony, respect and appreciation of each other’s cultural and religious contexts, exploring scriptures and tradition, promoting women’s involvement in religious life and leadership, and the threat of fundamentalism and politicization of religion.37

This conference is actually one of the few women’s interfaith conferences where questions of scripture, theology and worship have been dealt with to a great extent by scholars and women in ministry. However, the answers to the

36 WCC Archives
37 WCC Archives
questionnaire indicate that though questions of religious traditions per se were considered important, as for the participants in the Women’s Interfaith Journey, social and political issues headed the agenda for women in this conference. Eight different topics were chosen for the conference, reflecting the two focuses of religious traditions and social issues. Each was discussed by panels of three or four women: New styles of Leadership – Our experience; Interpreting Scripture and Traditional Sources of Authority; Our People – the Communities We Come From; Ritual and Worship – Our Experiences; Women’s Networks and Communities; Education for Peace-Making; Images of Women, Images of Ourselves: Myths, Images and Role Models; and Family and Family Law.

The number of presenters at each panel was such that half of the participants were contributors, i.e. there was no division into speakers and listeners but a high degree of programme participation. The participatory character of the conference was underscored by the seating arrangement, with the women seated around tables in a large square so that everyone could see everyone else, instead of the traditional auditorium. There were also gatherings in small groups, both inter-faith and on one occasion intra-faith groups. Each morning, women from one of the religions represented led worship according to their tradition, inviting the others to share to the extent they wished. The worship was held in the conference hall, adding to the holistic thrust of the conference. There was a welcoming ritual on the first day, based on Native American elements, and a farewell ritual the last day inspired by feminist spirituality. The conference also included an introduction to Toronto as a multi-religious city and a walking tour to different places of worship, which for many were their first visit to places of worship other than their own.

One of the remarkable features of this conference was that the participants came not only from the established world religions, but also from the neo-pagan Wicca movement in North America. This was prompted by the local multireligious context, as the local planning committee, which grew out of an existing interfaith network, had a decisive influence on the programme. This also meant that the participation of Native American women was significant. “This was way ahead of anything the WCC had done”, remembers conference moderator Diana Eck.38 There had by then been two consultations with adherents of traditional religions in Africa in 1986 and in Canada in 1987 respectively, but traditional religions had not been included

38 Interview Diana Eck 2004-03-18
in general multifaith consultations.\textsuperscript{39} There been no participation of Wiccan/Neo Pagan adherents in any other WCC consultation.\textsuperscript{40}

**The Conference Process and Participants’ Reactions**

The picture of the Toronto conference which emerges from the video documentation and participants’ evaluations is colourful. It contains understanding and altered stereotypes as well as culture clashes and conflicts; and a forging of bonds through arguing, laughing, praying and dancing together. Collective identities were asserted, often antagonistically, and at the same time there was sharing and caring on a personal level. Conflicts arose over social and political issues, while faith was a connecting bond regardless of dogmatic differences.

*Stereotypes Changed*

In the evaluations sent in after the conference, many mentioned the participation of representatives of Wicca religion as a new experience. Many had felt apprehensive and reluctant at first, but found them “less threatening” than expected, and that their stereotypes changed.\textsuperscript{41} The Wicca representatives themselves had on the one hand felt that they were still considered inferior “because we were not people of the book”,\textsuperscript{42} but on the other hand learned to appreciate the complexity of established religions of which they had up till then been solely critical, through “confronting the powerful, compelling, beautiful experiences of religion here”.\textsuperscript{43}

*Culture Clashes*

The Native American women were happy to have an opportunity to share their spiritual traditions, which they felt were less detrimental to women than other religions represented in the conference, but were not so happy with the conference format. In a group discussion among themselves, recorded on video, they complained about being told to end a private conversation in order to go to the conference plenary: “We would never do that to each other because that would be considered extremely rude”.\textsuperscript{44}

This was a culture clash that was also felt by other participants. Especially Muslim participants complained that the conference was too “Christian oriented”, that it was a “Western, Christian platform”, arranged on terms

\textsuperscript{39} www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/meetings.html accessed 2004-04-29
\textsuperscript{40} E-mail from Hans Ucko 2005-06-30. In the Parliament of the World’s Religions, Neopagans have taken part since 1993, and are increasingly taking part in local interfaith work in the USA and UK, though this is often controversial, cf. Harris, Grove 2005, Templeton 2004
\textsuperscript{41} WCC Archives
\textsuperscript{42} Margot Adler in Faithful Women V
\textsuperscript{43} Margot Adler in Faithful Women VII
\textsuperscript{44} Faithful Women III
which were “not only alien but hostile”.\textsuperscript{45} One aspect of this dissatisfaction was that the Muslims felt they did not get enough time and space to rectify misconceptions about Islam in the Christian West. The other was a West–Third World divide, where the participants from the Third World wanted the conference to focus more on questions of race and class, peace and justice.

“I was perhaps invited in my capacity as a PhD student on Islamic studies, but I came as an African Muslim, and we two have different problems”, said Rabiatu Ammah.\textsuperscript{46} I find this a significant remark in two respects. The first is that though many of the participants were scholars, they were also activists, and the latter identity was in this context the most important. It also reflects another aspect of the West–Third World divide: the women from the Third World, including the Native American women, expressed accountability to their communities, an accountability mirroring that of the participants in the Women’s Interfaith Journey, while the white North American and European women came more on an individual basis.

\textit{Acknowledging Conflict}

Power relations were thus acknowledged, between the West and the Third World as well as between Christians and women of other faiths in a Christian setting. The issue of mission, as well as “the fact that some present religions were and are responsible for the destruction of cultures and religions”, was also brought up, as something that ought to have been, but was not, discussed. The Christians present agreed that mission was something they needed to come to terms with and discuss openly, but one participant also felt compelled to say that Christians were also being stereotyped, and that the Christian participants of the consultation did not identify with the kind of Christianity criticized by the others.\textsuperscript{47}

The two foci of the conference, religious traditions and socio-political issues, were not easily held together. Janet Hatfield asked: “Are we here talking of women in religion, or are we women in religion talking about social and political issues”? She advocated the former, arguing that all the participants were actually dealing with peace and justice issues in their life and work, and this was an opportunity to come together to discuss women’s issues, which normally were not dealt with in other settings.\textsuperscript{48}

Along with this discussion was also the issue of whether or not to adopt resolutions, where Third World women were more keen to produce a resolution, while the Western women were more apprehensive about the

\textsuperscript{45} Rabiatu Ammah, Riffat Hassan in Faithful Women V
\textsuperscript{46} Faithful Women V
\textsuperscript{47} Faithful Women II
\textsuperscript{48} Faithful Women V
usefulness of resolutions and claimed that “the process in itself is a conclusion”.49

All these disagreements were out in the open, and this openness and willingness to acknowledge conflict were appreciated and remarked upon by many participants. One of the two most appreciated panels was that on “Education for peace-making”, where emotions went high when Christian Palestinian Jean Zaru discussed the situation in Israel/Palestine with Jewish Israeli Deborah Weissman. One participant commented that “conflicts arose and were confronted with skill and grace and a noticeable absence of recrimination and hostility”.50 In this panel “hard issues” were confronted, and this inspired confidence that “other hard issues can also be faced”.51

Another incident that concerned Jewish-Muslim relations occurred in connection with a visit to the local mosque. A Jewish participant picked up openly anti-Semitic pamphlets, and later confronted the Muslim participants with them. One of these expressed her regrets that such pamphlets should be found in mosques. But she also added that perhaps this would make the Jewish participant understand how she felt when she encountered prejudiced and vilifying depictions of Arabs in European and American literature.52

Re-claiming Traditions Together

While disagreement arose over political and social issues, the encounters with other women’s beliefs and forms of worship strengthened the participants’ appreciation of other religions as well as their self-confidence in reclaiming their own traditions. Jewish rabbi Caryn Broitman testified of her experience of conducting the Shabat prayers on the last evening of the conference:

I never felt so completely comfortable doing what I was doing. There was no element of imitating a man which has been a small but significant part of my feeling whenever I was doing these things. And that moment could only come about by being with women of all different faiths, I don’t even think it could have happened among only Jewish women.53

The “symbolic value of women taking symbols of their faiths in their hands and using them creatively”54 was an important part of the conference experience for many.

49 Janet Hatfield, Faithful Women V
50 Evaluation, WCC Archive
51 Faithful Women VII
52 Conversation with Inger Lise Olsen
53 Faithful Women VII
54 Faithful Women VII
The importance of the focus on beliefs and traditions is underscored by the fact that the second panel, which many participants expressed their appreciation of, was that on “Interpreting Scripture and Traditional Sources of Authority”. In this panel, participants were especially impressed by Muslim scholar Riffat Hassan’s exegesis of the Qur’an. This was seen as an inspiration and encouragement for others to grapple with their own scriptures in a scholarly and creative way.

Embracing Diversity
A recurring phrase at the conference was “I can only speak for myself….” There was a consciousness among the women of the diversity within their tradition, of only being able to speak from their own understanding of it. This was generally seen as something positive, but caution was also voiced: “Do we ever come to a stage when we feel that I need to speak out? Try – with the understanding that we may misinterpret – to speak generally?”

One example of the diversity of views at the conference is the participation of Asma Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, belonging to an Islamic dissident group, which provoked a letter of protest from A. Z. al-Abdin of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Selly Oak Colleges, to Wesley Ariarajah, then Director of the Sub-Unit on Dialogue. In his reply, Ariarajah pointed out that Ms Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was not there as the sole representative of Islam, and that there was a diversity of opinions also within the Christian and Jewish groups at the conference. From the available documentation, the presence of Asma Mahmoud Mohamed Taha does not appear to have been a problem for the other Muslim women at the conference.

Togetherness, Listening and Sharing
Overall, according to the evaluations, the conference was a strong and positive experience for the participants. Epithets such as revolutionary and life-changing, wonderful and lasting, confirming and broadening, reinforcing and strengthening, emotionally charged, mind-stretching, consciousness-raising recur in the evaluations. In spite of the West-Third World gap, there was also a great sense of having very much in common as women, of there "being no gap".

55 Faithful Women V
56 Letters in WCC Archives
57 “This conference changed my life” says Swedish participant Inger Lise Olsen. “I would have needed two months to walk in the Norwegian mountains and ponder upon my experience afterwards. It changed my attitude to religion, and I got a sense that ‘God is greater’. I have carried the conference within me as a gem ever since.”
58 WCC Archive
59 Faithful Women V
What created this feeling of togetherness? The format of the conference was crucial, according to Swedish participant Inger Lise Olsen. The welcoming ceremony, where the Native Americans welcomed the participants to their ancestors’ earth, and everyone had the opportunity to greet one another, set the tone. Hearing three or four voices speaking about every subject revealed commonalities and patterns: “we are all suffering from the same patriarchal structures”. At the same time, there were differences, which inspired hope, as when women from cultures where the first menstruation was experienced negatively, heard of how this was an occasion for celebration in other cultures.60

It was seen as a new kind of conference, “hearing people who are powerless in their traditions speaking”, 61 sharing the experience of being invisible. There was a feeling that having a whole week together created the safe space necessary for openness and honesty, that there was a way of listening and sharing that was specific for women, which gave hope for the future: “Maybe women will be able to do something that men have not been able to do up till now”.62

In the concluding round of evaluations, a participant told of a significant incident. She had had a neck-ache all week, and someone who had brought ointment offered to massage her, and she commented: “Where else on a conference would you meet someone prepared for all eventualities? Certainly not in a men’s conference”.63 She also concluded: “I have got many more grand-mothers and mothers after this conference”. This incident illustrates how there was a personal encounter, a sharing on all levels of existence, based on an “ethic of care” that was experienced as uniquely female.

Another important factor for the success of the conference was the fact that there was a structure in place upon which to build, an existing women’s interfaith network in Toronto. One of the leading persons in this network was Lois Wilson, then one of the WCC vice-presidents, a fact that was important for the implementation of the consultation.64

When it comes to suggestions for the future in the evaluations, there is a demand for a more even geographical spread, a less “Western” way of working, some defined goals for the conference, that the next conference should be held in the South – but above all a very strong concern that there

60 Conversation with Inger Lise Olsen
61 Faithful Women III
62 Faithful Women VII
63 Rabiatu Ammah in Faithful Women VII
64 Diana Eck, Inger Lise Olsen
must be some kind of continuation and development of what has been achieved at the consultation.65

This was an all-women conference – with one exception. Wesley Ariarajah participated as a silent auditor.66 In the final evaluation session however, Ariarajah was “allowed” to speak, and remarked on how community had been created more than in any other meeting he had attended, with openness, willingness to speak personally, to make space for the other. He judged it to be one of the most successful meetings the Sub-unit on Dialogue had had, and expressed a conviction that women can contribute to a culture of dialogue. He concluded with the words: “I am sure our sub-unit will hold many more meetings which bring women together for dialogue”.67 We shall return to this statement below.

**Organizers’ Evaluation**

The consultation was, as we have seen, experienced as a ground-breaking event by the participants, and Diana Eck, then Moderator of the WCC Working Group of the Sub-Unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths, spent the better part of her Moderator’s Report in 1989 expounding upon the lessons from it.

The most striking feature of the conference, according to Eck, was the sensitivity to the diversity within religious traditions: “None wanted to speak as a ‘representative’ of her tradition, but simply as a person of faith in her tradition, sensitive to the range of other standpoints within the tradition.”68 This meant that there was an absence of universalizing speech, but instead a situating of every contribution in the context of a particular strand of tradition, and the context of personal experience.69

Eck also commented on the multiple religious belonging of many participants, having parents from different religious traditions, being converts or living in mixed marriages, which meant that the meeting of religious traditions was taking place “in the very grain and substance of our experience”.70

In Chapter Two, we saw that the participants in the Women’s Interfaith Journey did not perceive what they were doing as interfaith dialogue. Diana Eck made the same observation about the Toronto participants. Many of them were involved in interfaith dialogue “but not in a self-conscious way.

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65 Evaluations, WCC Archive  
66 The participants expressed their gratitude for his presence as well as his silence in a greeting card that is kept in the WCC Archive  
67 Faithful Women VII  
68 Eck 1989, p 12  
69 Eck 1989, p 17  
70 Eck 1989, p 12
They are activists whose very life involves dialogue, but who do not think of it as ‘interfaith dialogue’.”

When women’s voices emerge in religious traditions, it is a multifaceted revolution, says Eck: a revolution of language, history, interpretation, experience, leadership and ritual. When women’s voices are heard, all these aspects of religion change, and women can recognize the same changes in each other’s religions.

Eck points out five lessons for dialogue from the Toronto consultation, expressed through the following key words: the margins, diversity, change, interdependence and involvement. Like Diane D’Souza and Annie Namala of the Women’s Interfaith Journey, Eck found that the margins are a good place for dialogue:

There is a readiness to dialogue, to ‘reach over to talk with one another’ among women who are already at the margins of their traditions. The reach is not so far. The investment in centrist positions of power is not so great.

Again, not being in the centre, women experience the diversity of their own traditions more consistently than men, constantly adjusting the tradition to their own experience. Making this adjustment also opens for an understanding of change as normative:

the ability to see the structures of our religious traditions as fluid, as constantly in the process of reformulation and change, has been what has given many women the hope and courage to stick with it.

Diana Eck found that the participants held a conviction that our lives are interdependent, which led to a conviction that women must work collaboratively. That dialogue must lead to action for peace and justice was also a striking feature of the conference. Eck attributes the relative lack of interest in questions concerning scripture and doctrine to a rather uncomplicated pluralist stance on the part of all participants:

Not once did anyone raise the question of whether God or truth was to be seen in other traditions. I think it would be fair to say that none of the women there were vexed about the question of the salvation of others. We began with a sense of “we” larger than the “we” of our particular traditions. The movement therefore, was toward the issue of how we might be further involved with one another in the work of building a better world.
This observation chimes in with Wesley Ariarajah’s opinion in his reflection upon the conference in *Not Without My Neighbour* (1999), that women’s approach to dialogue is more “life-oriented”, comes out of actual experiences and aims at bringing about change at the basic level of life. Dialogue among women, Ariarajah states, “makes more immediate connection to and use of the “dialogue of life” that is already present in all pluralistic situations.”

In his chapter on the issue of women in interfaith dialogue, Ariarajah highlights four features of the Toronto conference that distinguished it from other dialogue conferences: the speed with which the women bonded and a “we” emerged; the lack of dogmatism and defensiveness in the presentations; the central role of sharing of personal experiences; and finally women’s common experience of exclusion and subordination.

While both Eck and Ariarajah comment on the sense of “we”, the absence of dogmatism and universalizing perspectives, and the role of personal sharing, none of them mention the amount of conflict, and the ability to acknowledge and deal with it, that is so evident in the videos and the evaluations. They stress the commonalities in a way that tends to gloss over the West–Third World divide and the critique of the conference format as being too “Christian” or “Western”, which comes out strongly in the video documentation.

**Aftermath of Conference**

In spite of the enthusiastic reports from Diana Eck and Wesley Ariarajah, and the latter’s statement at the end of the conference that the sub-unit would hold “many more meetings which bring women together for dialogue”, and despite the participants’ strong concern that there must be a follow-up and development of the consultation, nothing happened.

The videos produced during the conference were broadcast on Canadian TV, and are available from the Film Board of Canada. A press release was issued, and articles appeared in several news media directly after the conference. But apart from Diana Eck’s Moderator’s Report, published in *Current Dialogue*, no documentation was made by the WCC. While the videos are a very good documentation, capturing the process and spirit of the conference, they are not as accessible as a printed report would have been, especially as there are no copies of them kept in the WCC library or archives. The consultation is not even included in the “List of major meetings 1969–2001” on the website of the WCC Interreligious Relations

75 Ariarajah 2003, p 68
76 Ariarajah 2003, pp 62-64
No attempts were made to hold the participants together in a network, or to arrange a new conference.

Thus, of the purposes stated in the invitation, the first two, becoming aware of one another’s commitments and experiences, and thinking together about common concerns, were fulfilled, but the third, to build networks and an inter-faith women’s movement, was not.

One explanation for this is that the combination women and interfaith dialogue proved fateful in that it “fell between two stools” of the sub-units of dialogue and of women respectively. Neither of the sub-units wanted to claim the issue of women and interfaith dialogue and take responsibility for the development of a women’s interfaith movement.

The sub-unit of women was just about to launch the Churches’ Decade in Solidarity with Women, and interfaith dialogue was not high on the agenda. The theological motivations for the Decade were expressed in strongly Christological and Trinitarian terms, which might have contributed to a low priority for interfaith issues. The director of the sub-unit Anna Karin Hammar was discouraged from participating in the conference by her co-workers in the unit.

The sub-unit for dialogue, on the other hand, made a point in the years approaching the 1991 General Assembly in Canberra of making interfaith dialogue a main issue in all the units, and wanted it to be an integral part of the Women’s Decade as well. However, the dialogue sub-unit does not seem to have had a strategy for how this should be done, or to have taken any steps to ascertain that it happened. A heavy workload on the staff and co-workers of the sub-unit prior to the Canberra Assembly, and limited economic resources due to the WCC’s financial crisis after the Assembly are the explanations given by Eck and Ariarajah.

### 3.1.2 Consultation on Women and Religious Education and Instruction – Mülheim 1999

The context of the consultation in Mülheim is a WCC programme on “Christian Religious Education in Religiously and Culturally Pluralist Societies”. Since the 1990s, this has been a priority concern for the WCC Unit on Education, in cooperation with the Office on Interreligious Relations. Already from the start of the programme, the role of women in

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78 Cf. Lande 2002, pp 37-85
79 Conversation with Anna Karin Hammar
80 Interview Diana Eck and e-mail from Wesley Ariarajah 2004-04-19
81 Interview Diana Eck and e-mail from Wesley Ariarajah 2004-04-19
Religious education was acknowledged, and two of the goals of the programme are:

- to study women’s experiences in interreligious and intercultural living and identify issues and methods for educational models
- to enable women to develop educational methods and resources from their learning/teaching experiences\(^{82}\)

Regional workshops have been held to carry the programme forward. The EPIL project, described in the Excursus above, was connected to the programme.

The consultation in Mülheim invited women of different faiths to discuss the role of women in religious education and interfaith dialogue. 15 women, including Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians, met for five days. The objectives of the consultation were:

- To discuss the role of women in religious education
- To identify dominant values in religious education
- To share experiences on how religion can be liberating or restricting, promoting or frustrating our lives in a religiously plural world
- To discuss various perspectives on continuity of tradition, religious ritual and ceremony in family life and society
- To study existing WCC Guidelines on Dialogue in Community and explore if these guidelines are useful for women in religious education\(^{83}\)

The participants were asked to bring a two-page paper on their experiences in the light of these objectives.

**Participants’ Contributions and Reactions**

The rationale for bringing women together to discuss religious education, and for focusing on women in the programme, was that women are supposed to be in charge of transmitting religious knowledge within the family, and to children in school as well as in Sunday school and its equivalents. This presumption did not go unchallenged by the participants, however. Priscilla Singh asked:

> While we are entering the threshold of the new Millennium, is it right still to expect of only women, the key role in transmitting values to the next generation? Is it not the parental duty of both the mother and the father? This question needs to be asked in the context of the increasing expectation on

\(^{82}\) Pirri-Simonian 2000, p 46
\(^{83}\) Pirri-Simonian 2000, p 35
women to carry on traditional roles while they have to enter various other roles as working women along with a decline in community living and living as extended families, in which the grand parents also played this role. Moreover, the erosion of the nuclear family with more women facing single parenthood, this is an impossible expectation.84

On the other hand, many participants expressed a conviction that women really do have different approaches to religion, education and interfaith relations, based on their traditional roles. “Women’s educational practices as an alternative to a traditional men’s approach is orientated to a polyphony of truth and knowledge”, said Irina Grushewaya from Belarus, who also found that “women seem less strict than men, favouring discussion, reflection, dialogue and support openness towards expressing different opinions”.85

The need not only to give women access to theological education and the interfaith arena, but also to change oppressive patriarchal structures was a recurring theme. Dialogue in itself can be a liberating experience for women, said Anne Hege Grung from Norway. Dialogue is about being a subject oneself, and also enabling the other to be a subject – and being a subject is precisely something that has been denied women in many religious traditions. She also pointed out that women often experience being “the Other” within their religious tradition. At the same time, Muslims are projected as “the Other” by Christians and vice versa, and in this, women are particularly objectified and stereotyped.

Grung, drawing on her experience of a women’s Christian-Muslim dialogue, also pointed out that while women have much in common, they may often have very different views about what it means to be a woman, differences that can be both challenging, enriching and empowering.86

In reflections on the consultation experience, participants commented upon the open-mindedness, atmosphere of trust and deep and personal contact that had characterized the meeting. “It was not just ‘talking about’; it was a ‘talking within’”.87 The insight that women in other traditions were experiencing the same exclusion and suppression, and working on changing their traditions, was empowering. Sharing prayer as part of the daily encounter was also important: “something elementary was created every day by teaching and sharing different forms of prayer”.88

84 Singh 2000, p 23
85 Grushewaya 2000, p 14
86 Grung 2000, p 12-13
87 Heuss 2000, p 39
88 Hartmann 2000, p 37
There was also a strong demand that the discussion should continue among the conference participants, as they worked so well together. A new conference after two years was discussed.89

The participants produced a statement that summarizes their discussions during the consultation. The statement gives general suggestions for the development of religious education and guidelines for dialogue, but also highlights women’s issues. Firstly, it states that there are certain issues, for example violence, that demand action and are common among women of all faiths. Action on such issues will empower women. Secondly, it points out that “inter-religious networks of women must be built to make room for women in problematic hierarchical and patriarchal structures”, with the aim of replacing such structures with ones in which women feel comfortable. Thirdly, it highlights that in interfaith education, women “tend to know the person first and her faith second” – women’s dialogue is built upon relation building. It is a slow process, in which praxis is prior to theory.90

Finally, the statement demands that “guidelines on interreligious dialogue should make ensure [sic] that women are written into the dialogue”91

After Mülheim
There was no follow up of the Mülheim conference, due to lack of funding. Some participants have remained in touch on an informal basis.92

3.1.3 Impact of Women’s Dialogue Initiatives on the WCC
As the saying goes, “A single swallow does not make a summer”. The WCC initiatives on women and interfaith dialogue can be seen as swallows, foreboding an equal participation by women in interfaith dialogue, that has not yet been achieved.

As we have seen, Wesley Ariarajah found that the participation of women can make a change in interfaith dialogue. The dialogue needs the changes that women can bring to it. The time is past, Ariarajah claims, when dialogue could, or should, be a concern only of religious leaders. There is a change in religious consciousness from an intellectual, dogmatic understanding, to a more experiential, intuitive one. Dialogue needs the connection with and use of the “dialogue of life” that is so prominent in women’s dialogue. Further, if dialogue does not take on board the feminist rethinking that goes on in all religions, it distorts religious reality. Conversely, this rethinking would benefit from taking place in a dialogue context. And finally, women not

89 Hartman 2000, p 36
90 Consultation Statement 2000, p 41-42
91 Consultation Statement 2000, p 42
92 E-mail from Anne Davison 2004-05-13
being represented in interfaith dialogue signals that dialogue is a men’s affair, and might be considered irrelevant for women.93

Without women’s participation, dialogue is “compromised”, states Wesley Ariarajah. It is not just a question of equality and representation. If the sexism that pervades religious traditions is accommodated by interfaith dialogue, it is compromised.94

According to Ariarajah, one outcome of the Toronto conference was that it became a policy of the Sub-Unit on Dialogue to insist on greater participation by women from all partners in dialogue meetings.95 However this policy is not codified in any document. Today no gender policy is implemented by the Office for Interreligious Relations, other than the WCC’s general guidelines for gender equality concerning employment.96

Although Wesley Ariarajah was in charge of interfaith dialogue at the WCC for a decade after the Toronto conference, he failed to take the necessary measures for including women’s voices and concerns in the work of the sub-unit. With hindsight, Ariarajah admits that it was a mistake that there was no follow-up meeting, as it might have helped to establish a tradition within the Sub-Unit of facilitating meetings among women.97

Lack of financial resources is one explanation. Ariarajah claims that he had decided that one of the three staff positions should be filled with a woman, and had begun to explore women’s names for a possible position on Hindu-Buddhist relations and theological issues in interfaith dialogue, when the third position was suppressed for financial reasons.98

In his book, Ariarajah gives some further explanations: when religious institutions select their own participants in dialogue, the patriarchal structures inevitably lead to a nearly all-male representation, and when coerced to include women, the latter are not seen as real representatives of the nominating bodies.99

Ariarajah does not mention this in his essay, but it is a sensitive matter for a Christian body inviting to interfaith dialogue to meddle with the composition of other religions’ delegations.100 The same is true when it comes to the issue of women in the Orthodox churches. As Anne Davison points out in a presentation of the European Curriculum for interfaith

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93 Ariarajah 2003, pp 67-71
94 Ariarajah 2003, p 65
95 E-mail from Wesley Ariarajah 2004-04-19
96 E-mail from Hans Ucko 2004-11-17
97 E-mail from Wesley Ariarajah 2004-04-19
98 E-mail from Wesley Ariarajah 2004-04-19
99 Ariarajah 2003, p 65-66
100 This is hinted at in the letter from A Z al-Abdin mentioned above in connection with Asma Mahmoud Mohamed Taha’s participation in the Toronto conference
learning for women, women’s issues “are in themselves divisive issues, within Christianity and Islam and between these religions”.\textsuperscript{101}

We have seen that the responsibility for furthering women’s involvement in interfaith dialogue “fell between the stools” of the dialogue and women sub-units. However, it should also be noted that both these areas were controversial and had to fight for recognition within the WCC. Interfaith dialogue was, in the words of Wesley Ariarajah, an “uphill task”\textsuperscript{102}, and as Anne Davison points out, women’s issues are divisive. It might not have been in either’s best interest to be associated with another unit that had to fight for its existence.

But was the reception of the consultation on women in interfaith dialogue unique? Perhaps it is the fate of most WCC consultations to end up in the archive? Of 32 “major meetings” in the 1980s, 19 resulted in printed reports. Of all the themes covered by the meetings between 1969 and 2001, very few were addressed only once, but most are followed up in at least one more conference. For example there have been five consultations about dialogue with primal/indigenous religions, five about education and three about spirituality/interreligious prayer. The vast majority of the consultations have been on Christian-Muslim relations, and here also some themes are recurring, like “Religion, Law and Society” or human rights issues. On the Christian-Jewish side, six consultations have been held on “The Church and the Jewish People”, where there is also a special working group. So it appears that a follow-up of consultations held by the Sub-Unit on Dialogue is the norm, and reports are often published.\textsuperscript{103}

The present Interreligious Relations Team has not taken up the challenge of women in interfaith dialogue.\textsuperscript{104} There is virtually no thread connecting the Toronto conference with the Mülheim conference. As far as one can see from the documents, there was no building upon the foundations laid in 1988 in the Mülheim conference. In Mülheim, the emphasis was not so much on women’s contributions to interfaith dialogue as on their traditional roles as

\textsuperscript{101} Davison 2000, p 44. Annette Daum and Deborah McCauley have commented on this in the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue: “Feminists concerned with interfaith dialogue with other feminists hardly rank as a priority constituency within an already marginalized issue and are in no position to pursue their concerns through the institutional channels created for dialogue between Jews and Christian”. (Daum & McCauley 1983, p 156)

\textsuperscript{102} E-mail from Wesley Ariarajah 2004-04-19


\textsuperscript{104} The conference “Critical moment in interreligious dialogue” 7-9 June 2005 included 10 women among the 29 speakers mentioned on the website. Two of these, Rabbi Naamah Kelman and Dr Marion S. Best, both called for women’s conferences and networks. Women’s contributions to dialogue were however not singled out as a theme during the conference. http://www.oikoumene.org/interreligious.html The same goes for “My Neighbour’s Faith and Mine 12-14 November 2005, http://wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/vivre-ensemble.html
educators of children and upholders of traditional values in the family, though the actual contributions in the conference and overall program had a more feminist twist.

The Mülheim conference explicitly demanded that guidelines on dialogue should ensure women’s participation. The Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions, which claim to be “taking stock of 30 years of dialogue and revisiting the 1979 Guidelines”, published in 2003, shows an almost complete lack of gender perspective. The exceptions are that the document uses inclusive god-language, and that paragraph 22 mentions gender as one of the “differences in identity” that “also have an important impact on the nature and style of interaction”. 105

Neither does the recent document Religious Plurality and Christian Self-understanding, the result of two years of consultations between the networks of Faith & Order, conference on World Mission and Evangelism, and the Office of Interreligious Relations and Dialogue, contain any reference to the possible impact of feminist theology or changed gender relations on the subject matter.106

Given the exhortation from the Mülheim conference, it would not have been unreasonable to include a paragraph on the importance of including women in interfaith dialogue. The argument in Wesley Ariarajah’s essay in Not Without My Neighbour and Diana Eck’s Moderator’s report after the Toronto conference about the importance of including the “dialogue of life” in interfaith conferences, on acknowledging intrareligious diversity, and the benefits of a dialogue “from the margins” could also have been incorporated in the document, if the experiences from the Toronto conference had been part of the “taking stock of 30 years of dialogue”.

3.2 Women, Religion and Social Change

In 1983, a conference on “Women, Religion and Social Change” was arranged in cooperation between the Harvard and Berkeley Universities. The 80 participants, most of them women, gathered at Harvard Divinity School to discuss mainly social and political issues important to women in the light of religion. The papers from the conference were published and widely spread in the volume Speaking of Faith. Cross-cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change, edited by Diana L. Eck and Devaki Jain, from the organizing committee.

105 Ecumenical Considerations, p 10
106 Religious Plurality 2005
Twenty years later, the core group of the conference, together with participants from the Pluralism Project’s women’s networks, gathered again at Harvard under the same heading. This time the conference was arranged by the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, under the leadership of Diana Eck. Transcripts of the panel discussions are published on the Pluralism Project’s website.

3.2.1 Women, Religion and Social Change I, 1983

The conference was part of a cooperative programme of Berkeley and Harvard Universities, “Social Values in a Comparative Perspective”. When the members of the project found that women’s perspectives were missing in the project, a working group on Women and Social Values was formed, and conceived the idea of the conference.107

In 1983, in connection with the U.N. Decade for Women, there had been numerous conferences on the economic, political and social concerns of women, but religion had not been considered. This conference wanted to bring religion into the discussion on women and social change. The broad working question of the conference was: “What is the relation of religion to the kinds of social change projects and struggles in which women are engaged around the world?”108

Invitations to present “case studies” at the conference, sent to 26 women, 17 of them from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, and 9 from North America and Europe. In addition, about 30 North American participants, both women and men from different religious traditions and fields of research, participated, together with people from international agencies working with women and development, as well as Harvard students and lay women from Boston Area churches who helped out as volunteers, making a total attendance of about 90 persons. In contrast to the WCC conferences, the participants did not come primarily as women of faith, but as scholars, though many were also engaged in religious communities.

**Significant Features of WRSC I**

WRSC I was characterized by a sensitivity to cultural differences and an ability to acknowledge and handle conflict. It was a feminist project, where the ambiguity of religion as a force both for oppression and liberation was highlighted, and where the women in spite of vast differences could find common denominators in what we have termed women’s traditional experiences and feminist experiences.

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107 Interview Diana Eck 2004-03-18  
108 Eck & Jain, p 1
Sensitivity to Cultural Differences

The conference organizers were careful to take account of cultural differences already at the planning stage. Though it was an American initiative, an international planning group was tied to the organizing committee, to ensure that the issues, participation and procedures would reflect the perspectives from diverse cultures and traditions.\(^\text{109}\)

Thus, it was not determined from the outset, which issues were “women’s issues”, out of an awareness that “throughout the world women have recognized that their own deepest concerns are not only what have been labelled ‘women’s issues’ but are all of the most critical [...] issues of the day, to which women bring their own perspectives”.\(^\text{110}\) The format of “case studies” was chosen to ensure the relevance of the issues taken up.

Beginning with experience, collective and diverse, the issues began to emerge. Rather than beginning with presumed issues and questions, the conference enabled us to see what the issues and questions are, as women struggle with religion and social change today.\(^\text{111}\)

Diana Eck comments that this methodology was consonant with Carol Gilligan’s research, where she, rather than supplying women with an ethical problem to solve, began by asking “what is an ethical problem for you”.\(^\text{112}\) Gilligan was one of the conference presenters, sharing her research on women’s abortion choices.

A Feminist Project

Though the term “feminism” was not used in the title of the conference, the organizers were clear that it was a feminist project, which had grown out of the women’s movement:

It is not always called feminism, although in its plainest sense ‘feminism’ is what this movement is about: listening to the voices of women, advocating the participation of women, caring about the rights and concerns of women, working for the welfare of women and transforming the world of women and men through the struggle of women for equality and for a just and peaceful society.\(^\text{113}\)

Just as the word “feminism” is not uncontested, so neither is “religion”. In some cultures, other terms would be more adequate. Therefore, the prospectus for the conference provided a definition: “We mean the word...
‘religion’ to include those deeply held traditions and values which shape our ways of life, our ways of thinking and our hopes for change.”

**Ambiguity of Religion**

Further, the ambiguity of religion for women was a theme spelled out through the conference. In the introduction to *Speaking of Faith*, the editors write:

> Not surprisingly women committed to social change have a deeply ambiguous, or perhaps paradoxical, relation to their religious traditions, and women’s movements for change have been both within traditions, and over against traditions.\(^{115}\)

Some of the presentations dealt with ethical issues without directly addressing the topic of religion, but most of them discussed this ambiguity. Many held the tension between the oppressive and liberative aspects of religion, stressing that women must actively struggle to change traditions. Many found religion to be mainly a positive force, judging its negative aspects to be the result of corruption by worldly, patriarchal and capitalist powers. This was the standpoint of Christian liberation theologians from Latin America and South Africa as well as Hindu followers of the Gandhian understanding of religion.\(^{116}\) There were, however, a few who found religion to be predominantly negative. Both Muslim Fatima Mernissi and Post-Christian Daphne Hampson found Islam and Christianity respectively to have the subordination of women built into their structures to such a degree that women’s liberation would make them crumble.\(^{117}\)

Comparing with the Toronto conference, it is interesting to see that while two of three presentations by Muslims were very critical of their religion at “Women, Religion and Social Change”, five years later in Toronto, the primary concern of the Muslim participants was to give a positive image of Islam. There could be many explanations for this. It could be just a question of different persons having different opinions. It could be the thrust of the conference, where WRSC was more political, and the participants more activist than those in Toronto. But it could also reflect the need of Muslim women to counteract an increasingly negative image of Islam in public opinion. Without being able to give a definite answer, I want to point out how changing political circumstances change the climate for interfaith dialogue, something that will be even more apparent in WRSC II.

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114 Eck & Jain 1986, p 3
115 Eck & Jain 1986, p 2
117 Eck & Jain 1986, pp 88-100, 129-138
All the presentations were published in *Speaking of Faith*, where they are organized under six headings: Speaking from Experience: Women in the Midst of Conflict; Changing Traditional Roles: Religion and the Image of Women; Changing Leadership Roles: Religious Institutions and Women’s Challenge; Organising for Social Change; Deciding on Moral Issues: The Case of Abortion; and Building a Common Foundation for Social Change. As we can see, though the focus was on changes in society, intra-religious issues also had a place in the conference. The question of women’s ordination in Christianity and Buddhism was dealt with, and Judith Plaskow explained the dilemmas involved in developing a Jewish feminism.

Ethics was a shared concern, explicitly and implicitly, in most presentations. Ethical models presented included Carol Gilligan’s ethic of care and Veena Das’ ethic of interdependence, and it was emphasized that ethics have to do not only with moral reasoning, but also with the distribution of power, authority and decision making.\(^\text{118}\)

*Diversity and Conflict*

The concerns of the women participating were diverse, and so were their opinions. Some issues elicited intense conflict. Divisive issues were the situation in the Middle East, racism and marginalization of Native Americans in North America, and the question of violence and non-violence, where pacifist Gandhian women from India and Palestinian Quaker Jean Zaru clashed with the liberation theologians from Latin America and South Africa, who maintained the right to use armed action.\(^\text{119}\)

The conflict over violence was between representatives of the Third World, but there was also a West-Third World divide. The difference between the individualism of women of the West and the sense of accountability on the part of women of the Third World was evident here as it was in Toronto. Daphne Hampson recounted an incident which illustrates this tension:

> At a summing up session one American suggested we should evaluate the conference in terms of what has it meant to me. A third world woman retorted that this was a luxury we could not afford.\(^\text{120}\)

While being difficult, these conflicts were perceived as constructive. As in Toronto, one reason for this was, according to Diana Eck, the size and duration of the conference. People met and interacted over several days, had breakfast and lunch together, and a community emerged where trust could be

\(^{118}\) Eck & Jain 1986, p 198-199  
\(^{119}\) Eck & Jain 1987, p 12, 18-19, 271-284  
\(^{120}\) Hampson 1984, p 19
built. People could not leave for the airport after delivering their paper, they had to stay and face their opponents. Fatima Mernissi testified to this, quoted in *Speaking of Faith*:

> Here communication was possible. I am not talking about simple sorority. I am talking about my contact with Shulamith. We didn’t understand each other at all. And she came to me later and said: ‘We have to talk’. I’m talking about that. It is not a magic thing, and it is not easy. I am talking about the fact that this impossible dialogue here appears to be possible. It is not simple. I am not saying that now Shulamith and I understand each other. I am saying only that it is possible.

Thus, though conflict was acted out in “anger, pain and tears”, dialogue was possible, and reconciliation and affirmation took place. Despite differences, the commonness of experiences and responses was perceived as striking.

**Commonalities: Rebellion and Care**

What then, did all these women with diverse experiences, backgrounds and persuasions, have in common? Sylvia Marcos, psychotherapist from Mexico, found a key word from her experience of working with marginalized poor women, that she found was applicable to the women at the conference too: rebellion.

> Rebellion is what we have in common. I am a rebel, each one of us is a rebel. We are different types of rebels, but we are all rebelling against intolerable situations. I am sure if we go back into our own lives, we have all had moments when there was nothing else to do, when we felt totally oppressed or alienated, totally incapable of managing the situation, totally at the end. But somehow, something happened, and we claimed our capacity for rebellion. We took force and power from within ourselves, and we said ‘No’.

This is a more offensive and activist mode of talking about women’s marginalization and reclaiming of traditions than in Toronto and the Women’s Interfaith Journey.

Another perceived commonality, which agrees with the emphasis on care and emotions we have seen in those projects, was women’s “capacity for compassion”, and for showing emotions of grief and anger without

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121 Eck & Jain, p 13 and interview with Diana Eck
122 Eck & Jain pp 13-14
123 Working paper
124 Working paper
125 Eck & Jain 1986, p 241
embarrassment. These two commonalities, rebellion and care, correspond to the categories women’s feminist experiences, and women’s traditional experiences.

In Speaking of Faith, Diana Eck and Devaki Jain summarized some shared themes they found in the presentations, themes which we recognize from Toronto and the Women’s Interfaith Journey: an ethic of care and interdependence, affirmation of experience rather than ideologies and principles, a claim to self-definition, a yearning for liberation, an affirmation of both particularity and universality, and openness about religion.

**Reactions from Participants**

“Amazing” and “extraordinary” are words used by the participants to describe “Women, Religion and Social Change”. Daphne Hampson wrote in a report in The Modern Churchman:

> It was quite unlike a “normal” basically male conference. I had not known that such a diverse group of women, thrown together for the first time, could be so open and so sensitive to one another. I knew how self-consciously feminist groups in this country operated. I did not know that women in general, and in a group of about eighty including the Americans, could do that. People listened to one another. They talked with, not at others. There were tears as people described emotional situations. We laughed and celebrated together. People cared for one another. Many of us had been through difficult situations and there was a depth of empathy. We were all slightly overcome by what happened!

In their reflections on the conference, many participants commented upon the connection between politics and religion, between theory and practice, which they seldom found in other settings. The ability to acknowledge conflicts, facilitated by the format of the conference, was also appreciated:

> Minimizing formal structures was a risk, but I think it worked. This exhilarating freedom inevitably leaves some people feeling uncomfortable: the ambiguity, the ends that are not neatly and predictably tied up by the end of the week, the conflicts openly acknowledged, the informality by which apparent consensus is reached. I feel strongly that this kind of discomfort is not “bad”. On the contrary, our ability to tolerate [sic] such feelings makes us better able to understand the differences that exist between us – particularly in national, cultural, ethnic, or religious terms – and to accept and appreciate them.

126 Phillips, p 9
127 Eck & Jain 1986, pp 230-231
128 Hampson 1984, p 19
129 Reflection by Phillipa Bowet in Women, Religion and Social Change Newsletter
Reflecting on their experiences 20 years later, the participants I have contacted testify that this was a groundbreaking and life changing event. Sylvia Marcos says:

It was a cutting edge conference that left an imprint in all of us, participants, for life… If you ask me, I started building a perspective on women that included religious beliefs and practices in my teaching, publishing and research.130

For Daphne Hampson, the conference had a considerable impact on her life:

[It] really empowered me. I met fascinating people. They were leaders in their respective fields. And for example Carol Gilligan came as a speaker to the conference: that bowled me over. I had never thought about the kinds of ideas that she raised; which seems odd now twenty years later.131

Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, now Venerable Dhammananda Bikkhuni, states that “50 years from now, when people write about my life biography, my commitment to bikkhuni sangha will always begin with the 1983 conference”.132 She was there to talk about the future of the bikkhuni sangha (community of fully ordained nuns) in Thailand, but it was only after the conference that she became truly engaged in the issue, and started a network for women seeking ordination in Thailand, eventually becoming the first ordained nun herself. She comments:

In terms of interfaith dialogue, the issue of ordination of women is a common issue which cut across all nations and traditions. We are very strengthened when we came together as women of different faith, sharing experiences and strategy is an important learning process, we can learn from each other.133

The importance of the conference was that it was a pioneering work in the field of Women and Religion, and broadened the perspectives on research on peace and justice. To combine social and political issues with religion in the academy was a novelty, and according to Sylvia Marcos it came at a time when

on the one hand the religious people were breaking away from a perspective that dealt mainly with text analysis and hermeneutics [and] on the other hand the women that had been politically committed – like myself – were invited

130 E-mail from Sylvia Marcos 2004-09-26
131 E-mail from Daphne Hampson 2004-08-17
132 E-mail from Venerable Dhammananda 2004-05-28
133 E-mail from Venerable Dhammananda 2004-05-28
and we were, for the first time, thinking that maybe religion could become a tool for the liberation of women.\textsuperscript{134}

As in the Women’s Interfaith Journey, some participants were reluctant to label this an interfaith conference. Daphne Hampson states very clearly that it was not about interfaith issues “as the term is currently used in Britain, meaning discussing differences between different world religions and whether they can be reconciled”.\textsuperscript{135} Sissela Bok agrees with this, but found it important “to see how most of the different participants succeeded in using their religious background so as to attempt to further purposes of peace and understanding”.\textsuperscript{136}

\textbf{Aftermath of Conference}

After the conference, the participants kept in touch through a newsletter. There they could exchange news of their work, activities, and publications, share information about conferences and other events and suggest areas for common action. The conference had produced a Working Paper for Action, which was followed up through this. The Newsletter was discontinued after a few issues due to lack of resources.\textsuperscript{137} There were plans for a new conference in conjunction with the international women’s meeting in Nairobi in 1985, but they came to nothing.\textsuperscript{138}

\section*{3.2.2 Women, Religion and Social Change II, 2003}

There was an interval of 20 years before participants in “Women, Religion and Social Change” met again as a group. This time, the conference was arranged by the Pluralism Project of Harvard University, under the leadership of Diana Eck.

The Pluralism Project is a research project that aims to engage students in studying the new religious diversity in the United States. Part of this project involves studying emerging religious networks, and while doing this the project team realised that once again, women’s networks and women’s leadership within religious organizations were invisible. This led to another project within the Pluralism Project, the “Women’s Multifaith Networks”, that seeks to introduce women’s organizations from different religions to each other, to facilitate networking and cooperation. When the “Women’s Networks” had held three consultations, Diana Eck decided to broaden the

\textsuperscript{134} E-mail from Sylvia Marcos 2004-09-26
\textsuperscript{135} E-mail from Daphne Hampson 2004-08-14
\textsuperscript{136} E-mail from Sissela Bok 2004-07-18
\textsuperscript{137} Interview Diana Eck
\textsuperscript{138} Interview Diana Eck

128
perspective and invite some of the participants from 1983 to meet with representatives of the “Women’s Networks” in a new “Women, Religion and Social Change”.

The aims of the conference were quite general, including fostering dialogue and exchange, with the stress on women’s participation in religious communities and women’s roles in peace building and social change. As in the first conference, the relation of religion to social change projects in which women are involved was a central concern. The conference included participants from major world religions, Wicca, as well as post-Christians and those of no religious affiliation.

The conference lasted for five days, between April 30 and May 4. The panels were open to the public: The US Religious Context Today; Perspectives on the Global and the Local, Religious Networks and Women’s Leadership; Dialogue in the Midst of Conflict; Religious Violence, Extremism and Fundamentalisms; and Common Values, Human Rights, Civil Rights. Besides this, there were roundtable discussions and small group discussions for the invited participants, 17 of whom hade been at the 1983 conference, and around 20 from the Women’s Multifaith Networks. Many of those who attended the public panels were young students, some of whom also took part in a panel, describing their own multi-religious experiences.

The encounter between the older women from the 1983 conference, many of them now in positions of authority in society, religion or academy, the younger women participating in the networks, and the very young students, was an important part of the conference. But there was also a discrepancy between the more politically oriented WRSC I participants and the more religiously oriented women from the Women’s Networks.

Some issues, like globalization and fundamentalism, were more pertinent in this conference, while others had disappeared. The issue of whether violence is justified in the struggle for justice was not taken up, probably due to the changes that had taken place in Latin America and South Africa and also 9/11, the rise of terrorism and “the war against terrorism”.

The latter had a big impact on the conference: the USA was involved in the war in Iraq, and this had prompted two women to decline to attend. Costa Rican theologian Elsa Tamez had pledged not to go to the US as long as it was involved in military action in Iraq, and Fatima Mernissi, who had been actively engaged in planning the conference finally found that her going to the US would not be justifiable to her friends and colleagues in the Arab world.

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140 Interview with Diana Eck, conversations with Elinor Pierce and Mary E Hunt.
141 E-mail from Daphne Hampson 2005-08-21
Even though part of the rationale behind the conference was to bring awareness to American women about how the US is perceived in the rest of the world, the extent of anti-American sentiment was a shock to the organizers. Originally, they had wanted the conference to have a subtitle like “Mirror of America”, but the non-American participants made it very clear that they did not want that mirror.\textsuperscript{142} This is not surprising, as the tenet of postcolonialism is precisely to correct the tendency that “when western people look at the non-western world what they see is often more a mirror image of themselves and their own assumptions that the reality of what is really there, or of how people outside the west actually feel and perceive themselves”.\textsuperscript{143}

So again, there was a divide between the US participants and those from other parts of the world.

**Significant Features of WRSC II**

WRSC II was characterized by the political situation after 9/11, which had not only sharpened the antagonism between the West, especially the US and the Third World, but also changed the climate for interfaith dialogue. The role of religion was found to be different, with rising fundamentalisms on the one hand and, on the other, more flux in religious belonging and in the boundaries between the religious and the secular. As in the first conference, the Middle East issue raised strong emotions, but the conference was also experienced as one of very few places where it could be discussed at all.

**A Harder Climate for Dialogue**

The conference not only enabled the American women to realize how the US was perceived abroad, it also gave the international participants insights in what it was like to live in the US as a Muslim woman or woman of colour, or an activist, in 2003. The panel “The US Religious Context Today” clarified how global events affected the lives of communities and individuals in the US, where the lives of non-Christians as well as the climate for interfaith initiatives had changed for the worse.

One example was the radical change by the turn of the century in a shelter for women in the South Asian community, which had been making progress in the late 1990s, both in terms of government support and in co-existence of religious traditions, changed radically by the turn of the century. The Intifada in Palestine, 9/11, the Iraq war, Gujarat violence and other events in South Asia had created suspicion of Muslims as well as a Muslim-Hindu conflict between women in the South Asian community in the US. At the same time,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{142} Conversation with Elinor Pierce, co-ordinator of Pluralism Project Women’s Networks, March 2003
\item \textsuperscript{143} Young, Robert 2003, p 2
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
the US administration’s stance on promoting heterosexual marriage and a faith-based approach to family violence made it difficult to run a multireligious shelter based on feminist values.\textsuperscript{144}

The post-panel discussion focused on identity issues: the mechanisms behind, and the hazards versus benefits of, identifying with a religious group. There was a perception that both interfaith dialogue and the dialogue between different groups within the same religion had become harder. Many expressed an urge to find common concerns on which to act, rather than engaging in a dialogue what focused on religious identity.

The question of religious identity was also central in other panels, not least the one on religious extremism and fundamentalisms. Speaking from the situation of Indian communal violence, Veena Das felt “disturbed by the notion that one must represent one’s religion or one’s nation or whatever”, and Nawal El Saadawi persisted in her claim from 1983 that “the masses in Egypt are not religious. The masses in Egypt are secular”.\textsuperscript{145} She also complained that international agencies would only fund events that have “Islam” in the title, thus reinforcing religious identity as a major issue.

Being an interfaith gathering, this was a remarkably diverse collection of people, probably the most diverse of the conferences described in this chapter. Besides adherents of all major world religions and of various shades of orthodoxy, it included people who described themselves as secular, and as having left their original religious belonging without affiliating with another one.

\textit{Between the Religious and the Secular}

No one, however, questioned the importance of religion and spirituality, and there was a great deal of concern about how to understand and relate to women’s involvement in fundamentalist movements.\textsuperscript{146}

Another concern was how to bridge the gap between the secular women’s movement, which was perceived as hostile to religion, and their own stance as religious persons committed to women’s liberation and social change. Azza Karam described how there is a continuum between religious extremism on the one hand, and secularists on the other. In the middle continuum, she said,

“there are a whole host of women’s movements which have as their primary goal the attempt to see to what extent you can still be a woman of faith […] deeply committed to the faith tradition and at the same time seeing to what

\begin{footnotes}
\item[144] www.pluralism.org/events/wrsc2/transcripts/wrsc2-panel5+6.html
\item[145] www.pluralism.org/events/wrsc2/transcripts/wrsc2-panel11.html
\item[146] www.pluralism.org/events/wrsc2/transcripts/wrsc2-panel11.html
\end{footnotes}
extent what the faith advocates can be liberating, enlightening, the tool for empowerment.”147

Many speakers pointed to the need of alliances between religious and secular women to bring about change.

Sylvia Marcos began her input by recognizing that it was the first Women, Religion and Social Change conference that had made her reclaim the good things in her tradition instead of just discarding religion completely. She then went on to describe the indigenous religious movement in Mexico, which she claimed was “neither secular nor religious, but something in between or both at the same time”. She described it as a political justice movement that emphasizes the spiritual, which is characterized by three traits, reminiscent of Ewart Cousins’ Global spirituality: it is not either/or, but beyond categories; it has an ethic of interconnectedness; and it is based on an appreciation of the earth as sacred.148

An example of the difference in opinions between WRSC I and Women’s Networks participants was a debate about the veil, which flared up when Sherif Hetata, husband of Nawal El-Saadawi and the only man on a panel, mentioned genital mutilation and veiling of women as examples of the increasing violence in Egypt. He was challenged by Leila Ahmed and Azza Karam, who claimed that those two issues were not on the same level. It appears from the transcript that several students in the audience joined in the defence of the veil.

The Middle East: Speaking from the Heart

Again, it was the situation in the Middle East that provoked most emotions in the panel “Dialogue in the Midst of Conflict”. Speakers in this panel were Laila Al-Mayarati from the Muslim Women’s League in the US, Blu Greenberg, president of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, and Jean Zaru from Ramallah Friends Meeting in Palestine, who also had been at the 1983 conference. The panel was chaired by Alma Abdul-Hadi Jadallah from the Institute for Conflict Analysis.

The panellists all started by expressing their disenchantment with dialogue. “Why should we bother at all?” asked Laila Al-Marayati, when there is “no listening going on”, and Muslim-Jewish dialogue in the US has “completely disintegrated […] because of the inability to discuss the conflict in the Middle East”, and when “it makes people physically ill” trying to discuss this issue. Still, she found dialogue important because of the need to “rehumanize one another”, to see persons as somebody we care for, to

147 www.pluralism.org/events/wrsc2/transcripts/wrsc2-panel8.html

132
“condemn racism and hate mongering”, and to affirm the value of human life. 149

Blu Greenberg spoke of difficult experiences of dialogue, and explained that she stayed in dialogue for personal and principled reasons, the personal being the friendships she had made through dialogue, the principled the conviction that “if we keep talking on a personal level we won’t be killing each other”.150

Jean Zaru described how she had tired of dialogues about theology and doctrine, which hid realities and failed to lead to transformation and working for “just solutions for our world”. She called for a “move from neutrality and objectivity to compassion and ethically-based priorities, from exploitation of nature to gentle cooperation with nature, from gods removed and far away to gods within, and from death to life”.151

All three panellists spoke very frankly about the reality in Israel and Palestine as they perceived it. Blu Greenberg confessed that she had hesitated about whether or not to soften her remarks, but said “if I can’t speak here about what is in my heart, where can I speak?”152

The panellists’ perceptions of the situation in the Middle East were all but diametrically opposed, but their position towards dialogue was strikingly similar: a repudiation of dialogue that only concerns theology and not “the hard reality”, and where no real listening takes place, and a vision of a dialogue based on care, personal relations, affirmation of life, and aiming for transformation of religion and society.

The focus on women was not as strong in 2003 as it had been 20 years earlier. There was, however, a small group discussion that assessed the situation for feminism, that revealed the “many and complicated, multivalent approaches to feminism” in today’s world.153 There was a feeling that while in 1983, American women had dominated the discussion on feminism, now all were there to learn, especially the Native American women had a strong voice in the discussion, and there was no “orthodox feminism”.154

We […] could find new approaches to feminist struggles that could also be plural, in the sense of accommodating all the differences in priorities and strategies that different cultural, religious and even epistemological backgrounds imprint on women’s rights agenda”.155

149 www.pluralism.org/events/wrsc2/transcripts/wrsc2-panel10.html
150 www.pluralism.org/events/wrsc2/transcripts/wrsc2-panel10.html
151 www.pluralism.org/events/wrsc2/transcripts/wrsc2-panel10.html
152 www.pluralism.org/events/wrsc2/transcripts/wrsc2-panel10.html
153 Conversation with Mary Hunt
154 “Orthodox” is not used here in the ecclesial sense
155 E-mail from Sylvia Marcos 2004-09-26
There was also a shared sense that women had been successful in claiming spaces on the margins of many institutions, but had not been able to shift centres of power.\textsuperscript{156}

\section*{Participants’ Assessments}

My informants, though appreciating the opportunity to connect again with the participants of the first conference, were not as enthusiastic about WRSC II as about the previous conference. According to Diana Eck, there was less tension than there had been in 1983 but rather great excitement about meeting again after all these years, and a sense of the women having persisted on the same visionary course they had taken in 1983,\textsuperscript{157} whereas the participants found that tensions were higher, and that the quality of listening was not the same in this conference.

It was a question of different agendas, but Daphne Hampson also draws attention to the format of the conference and the seating arrangements: “the large room didn’t facilitate inter-change as compared with the earlier meeting held in the Braun Room at the Divinity School”\textsuperscript{158} We have seen the importance attributed to seating arrangements in the Toronto conference. Sissela Bok felt that there was more “vehement rhetoric” and “less of an effort to try to sort out what mattered most and what values we could share in working for peace”,\textsuperscript{159} while Daphne Hampson was disappointed about the lack of discussion on the war in Iraq: “I had come from a situation in Britain where there had been intense and highly informed debate in the media about the Iraq situation. I was sorry that there couldn't be the kind of debate and inter-change that I would have hoped for.”\textsuperscript{160}

The different climate of WRSC II reflects a different political climate, especially the increased influence of the US in world politics. Sylvia Marcos, however, found that the conference also reflected a positive development regarding women’s issues and the status of the research field Women and Religion, embodied by the participants. She found that an important topic at the conference was how the women’s movement, however strong, is being manipulated by those in power, as in the case of Afghanistan, were the plight of women was used as an excuse for the invasion. She also found that the conference was “a space of freedom of opinion” which she judges especially relevant in today’s US, where “there are not many spaces left”, and that it

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Conversation with Mary Hunt
\item Interview Diana Eck
\item E-mail from Daphne Hampson 2004-08-17
\item E-mail from Sissela Bok 2004-07-18
\item E-mail from Daphne Hampson 2004-08-17
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
created “a new collectivity among the participants that strengthens the sense of belonging and the possibility of agency”.  

3.3 Interfaith Issues at Asian Christian Women’s Regional Conferences

There have been a number of Asian women’s conferences and consultations on theology arranged by the Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (AWRC), two of which specifically on interfaith dialogue. In the following I will trace how interfaith issues have been dealt with in these conferences.

Whereas the international conferences took place within the academy and in an ecclesial context, the context of the Asian conferences was slightly different, being located within the Asian Christian women’s movement. AWRC provide Asian Christian feminists with an institutional framework essential to implementing their visions. Reports have been published from all the conferences, presenting all the papers, together with liturgies, group discussions and evaluations. On the other hand, the conference dynamics and processes are less well documented than those of the international events.

3.3.1 The EATWOT Context

The need for a “Third World theology of religions” was voiced by Asian theologians, notably Aloysius Pieris, at the EATWOT conference in Delhi in 1981. At the same meeting, the women spoke up for themselves for the first time, the beginning of what Mercy Amba Oduyoye labelled “the irruption within the irruption”. The two themes, interfaith and feminism, thus emerged at the same time, though no connection was made between them at this stage.

In one of the earliest documents on Asian women’s theology, Final Statement: Asian Church Women Speak (Manila, Philippines, Nov 21-30, 1985), regret is expressed that the participants have not taken account of other religions. When the reality of Asian women is analysed, the oppressive role of other religions is acknowledged and seen in relation to the Christian faith; male-oriented Asian religious beliefs are said to buttress “the bias against woman in Christian tradition”. However, it is also stated: “Even as we identified the repressive elements in other religious traditions, we

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161 E-mail from Sylvia Marcos 2004-90-26
162 Final Statement, p 120
recognize that there are also life-giving elements in these great Asian traditions”.163

In the material presented at the conference that issued this statement, there is a contribution on Emerging Spirituality of Asian Women by Mary John Mananzan and Sun Ai Lee Park. This essay deals with interfaith dialogue as “an important part of the discussion of the emerging Asian women’s spirituality”.164 It states: “Ecumenical spirituality seeks unity of humankind in humility and reverence toward all life and all belief systems”.165 The authors conclude that there is a need both to rediscover and resurrect traditions, myths and legends, and also to undertake a critique of culture: “[Women] must actively participate in the interfaith dialogue to give feminist input, sorting out what are the really liberating elements and what are the oppressive elements in them”.166

The conference in Manila was a preparatory conference for an EATWOT women’s conference in Oaxtepec, Mexico, in 1986. The final statement mentions that interfaith dialogue is an important part of Asian feminist work on the Bible and Christology. The statement takes an inclusivist stance when it says: “Christology incorporates the efforts to draw out the humanizing elements in the other religions”.167 The statement further expresses the “need to dialogue and work with women of other faiths, convinced that in other religious traditions, there too we meet Christ”.168

The statement also identifies “life” as a key word for women’s theologising.169 This came to be a central concept in future developments of feminist theology, not only in Asia but also in other parts of the Third World.

**Asian Women Doing Theology 1987**

In 1987, a conference in Singapore, Asian Women Doing Theology, was arranged by EATWOT Asian Women, and Christian Conference of Asia (CCA). The report, published by AWRC, which was established as an outcome of the conference, contains all the papers presented there. The relation to other religions is not a topic in itself, but there are references to indigenous religions and cultures in some of the material, especially in the regional reports.

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163 Final Statement, p 121
164 Mananzan, Mary John & Park, Sun Ai Lee 1989, p 84
165 Mananzan & Park 1989, p 84
166 Mananzan & Park 1989, p 86
167 Final Document, p 188
168 Final Document, p 189
169 Final Document, p 188

136
Most of these references are positive in that they acknowledge that all religions carry similar values: “they teach us to respect the human person, to be selfless, to care, to be concerned for others, and to safeguard life and nature”\textsuperscript{170} However, the report also states: "all of them in one form or another, overtly or covertly reinforce the subjugation of women"\textsuperscript{171}

In the case of Islam in Pakistan, the report distinguishes between Islam according to its scriptures, considered relatively women-friendly, and cultural beliefs and customs, which are to blame for the subjugation of women. The most negative assessments of other religions come from Thailand and Chinese contexts, while Maori women are unambiguously positive about their spiritual heritage.

Other religions play no part in the sections on dogmatic issues such as Christology, Pneumatology, Mariology, Ecclesiology or Spirituality, except for negative references to the Chinese spirit-world compared with the Holy Spirit\textsuperscript{172}.

3.3.2 Faith Renewed I and II

Two conferences arranged by AWRC have dealt specifically with interfaith issues. Adherents of different religions were invited to present their traditions, but the main target group was Christian women, and the aim to make them better acquainted with other religious traditions, and equipped for dialogue\textsuperscript{173}. Both conferences lasted for a week, and gathered 30-40 women. Three of the participants in these conferences also took part in the Toronto consultation: Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, Lalita Das and Akiko Yamashita.

**Faith Renewed 1989**

In 1989, AWRC arranged *The First Asian Women’s Consultation on Interfaith Dialogue*, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The previous conference had given insights into the androcentric bias behind the traditional Christian ways of imaging the divine, and how this reinforces the androcentrism in Asian cultures. This conference would address the question how women in other religions perceived their own situation\textsuperscript{174}.

\textsuperscript{170} Abraham et al. 1989, p 22
\textsuperscript{171} Abraham et al.1989, p 22
\textsuperscript{172} Abraham et al.1989, pp 197, 209-211
\textsuperscript{173} Faith Renewed 1990, p 3
\textsuperscript{174} Faith Renewed 1990, p 3
Attention to Process

As in the international conferences, the process of the conference was planned with care. It started with personal sharing on images of God, followed by visits to places of worship of different religions. Malaysia was chosen as the venue for the conference because of its multireligious setting.

The next stage in the process entailed women from different non-Christian faiths presenting papers and answering questions. They were asked to highlight the core teachings, as well as the liberative and the oppressive aspects for women in their religious traditions. Christian women also presented papers on what they perceived as oppressive and liberative elements in their religious tradition.

Finally, the participants were encouraged to make links between the “womanly images” of the divine in their different faiths. Worship from different faith traditions was also an important part of the process. The findings of the consultation are summed up in the introduction to the report, entitled Faith Renewed: “Women of all religions in Asia are redefining their own spirituality and rediscovering the meaning of faith”.175

In her opening address, Sun Ai Lee Park talked about women’s task in interfaith dialogue as an extension of their involvement in the sustenance of life and building of peace in the community.176 The emphasis on action we have found in the international conferences recurs, when she defines the aim of the conference to be “not only academic findings, but also practical strategies for building communities which are reconciliatory, just and peaceful in the eyes of the creator”.177

A Liberative Core

In the presentations, as well as in the concluding discussion, the oppressive aspects of religion were seen as alien to the core of the religious traditions. There was a conviction that if women go to the sources and read them with their own eyes, from a women’s perspective, they will find a liberating message. Oppression of women is a distortion of the original message: “The problem of oppressiveness began when religions became institutionalised by man”.178 However, the participants also agreed that some scriptures and teachings are shaped by the patriarchal context in which they were written, and where the feminine was seen as a threat to male authority. They also interpreted the refusal of male religious leaders to listen to women’s voices

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175 Faith Renewed 1990, p 4
176 Faith Renewed 1990, p 11
177 Faith Renewed 1990, p 12
178 Faith Renewed 1990, p 113

138
today as an expression of insecurity because religious authority is already threatened by secularisation.\textsuperscript{179}

An important concern for the consultation was that the discrimination against women in religion has repercussions in society. Not only does religion enforce traditional practices such as purdah, sati, female genital mutilation and polygamy, but oppression of women in religion also contributes to oppression in family life, in the economic sphere and in society.

The consultation reached the conclusion that “women of all faiths are awakening to the injustices in religious practices enforced by men”.\textsuperscript{180} Likewise, they claimed for themselves “and all women everywhere those liberating images of God and those scriptural teachings that give to woman her full personhood”.\textsuperscript{181}

\textit{Feminine Images of the Divine}

An important part of the consultation was the search for feminine images of the divine. The Bible was searched for such images, and also indigenous Philippine religiosity and Korean shamanism with strong goddesses and role models were also seen as valuable sources. Lee Oo Chung suggested that female pastors should learn from Korean traditional religion in their pastoral work, as an alternative to male authoritarian models.\textsuperscript{182}

The positive assessment of indigenous spirituality was to be an important theme in the following conferences. As we shall see in Chapter Six, “indigenous spirituality” or “people’s religion” has also become a major source of inspiration for Asian feminist theologians.

\textit{Worship}

The report includes seven liturgies used in worship during the conference. One is a Jewish Sabbath celebration, one a Buddhist meditation, two are reflections on the biblical characters Hagar and Deborah, but with elements from non-Christian traditions, and two are purely Christian services. The closing service had a non-confessional character, emphasizing sisterhood, togetherness, wholeness and the oneness of God.

\textit{Statement}

A statement issues by the consultation presented a vision of a “new creation”, a “new order of equality, justice and peace”, where “socio-

\textsuperscript{179} Faith Renewed 1990, p 114
\textsuperscript{180} Faith Renewed 1990, p 114
\textsuperscript{181} Faith Renewed 1990, p 114
\textsuperscript{182} Faith Renewed 1990, p 37. In 1888-1889 the Korean Association of Women Theologians conducted a study on Korean Goddesses, cf. section 6.1.3
economic and political structures are free and just, and the basic necessities of all are met. The liberative and human aspects of our existing original cultures of our communities will be reclaimed, nurtured and preserved”.

Among “Commitment and Strategies” the statement mentions the study of teachings of other faiths and a meaningful involvement in interfaith dialogue, to reclaim the positive values in indigenous cultures and religion, besides generally to empower women through leadership training, form solidarity networks etc.

This consultation was a Christian initiative, and was conducted on Christian terms. The commitments are primarily directed towards churches, and women in the churches. However, it appears that the organizers managed to create a process whereby everyone could participate with real sharing and listening.

The consultation can be seen as a first step towards including the experiences of women of other faiths in Asian Christian women’s theologizing. It focused on reclaiming feminine images of the divine as well as on finding ways to create a just and peaceful society through dialogue with women of other faiths. As in the international conferences, there is an emphasis on action, and on the renewal of religious traditions.

**Faith Renewed II 1991**

The first consultation on interfaith dialogue was followed by a second two years later. The procedures were similar: representatives of different faiths presented the core teachings of their religious traditions, the oppressive and liberating aspects for women, with responses from Christian women and opportunities for questions and discussion. Discussions appear to have gone deeper this time, there were efforts to incorporate insights and achievements of women of other religions, and to criticize one’s own religion. There were, however, also tensions, which are documented in the evaluations.

There is no reference to it in the report, but it is a significant fact that this conference was held only a few months after the WCC General Assembly in Canberra, where Chung Hyun Kyung made her famous appearance, drawing on Asian religious traditions and being accused of syncretism. The appreciation of indigenous spiritualities and the discussion on syncretism are both themes appearing in the conference.

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183 Faith Renewed 1990, p 119
Christian Self-Criticism

There were no presentations of Christianity as such, but on the relation between Christianity and other religions. They were to a certain extent critical of Christianity as found in Asian churches.

One example of self-criticism was when Dulcie Abraham as a representative of Malaysian Christian women confessed to being unaware of the aspirations and theological struggles of Islamic women, to having looked down upon other faiths, not being involved in social issues, and “lagging far behind their Muslim sisters in the articulation of their concern for women’s rights and determination to study the scriptures and interpret them anew from women’s perspectives”.

In the ensuing discussion, however, Muslim women were also challenged to be sensitive to the situation of women of other faiths, as minorities in a country dominated by Islam. It was recognized that Muslim and Christian women of Malaysia share a common struggle, needing to critique male-biased interpretation of Scriptures, challenge opposition from religious leaders, find a new basis for expressing spirituality, challenge and change structures in society that oppress women and alleviate sufferings of women.

Appreciation of Indigenous Spiritualities

The first Faith Renewed conference had pioneered the positive assessment of indigenous spirituality, and this theme came out strongly in Faith Renewed II.

A presentation of the indigenous spirituality of the Philippines assesses it as being more liberative than oppressive to women, stressing the importance of female shamans and the holistic view of nature. The presentation concludes with an ecofeminist plea for a new spirituality based on the values of indigenous religions. Christianity in the Philippine context is described in almost entirely negative terms.

In the same vein, “A Feminist Theology of the Korean Goddesses” by Christian theologian Choi Man Ja reappropriates goddesses of Korean folk religion as resources for a Korean feminist theology. Choi stresses the diversity of Korean goddesses: there is no stereotypical model of a heroine. The goddesses can help recover women’s autonomy, one of the significant issues for feminist theology. However, the images of Korean goddesses have been modified and devalued by patriarchal culture, and though shamanism possesses liberating elements, it has not led to organized protests against injustice. Korean traditions cannot be taken at face value. The history of

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184 Faith Renewed II 1992, p 45
185 Faith Renewed II 1992, pp 48-49
Korean goddesses can illuminate that of goddesses and feminine images of God in the Old Testament, and help Christian feminists to recover these images.\textsuperscript{186}

\textit{Appropriation and Syncretism}

A discussion followed Choi Man Ja’s presentation, on the topic “How do we use the expression of other religions in our religion?” Some voices warned against incorporating ideas from other religions, as this can be offensive to the adherents of the latter, and also superficial, unless it stems from a deep knowledge of the tradition.\textsuperscript{187}

The issue of syncretism was addressed by Rev. Ann Wansbrough from Australia. She claimed that all religion is syncretistic, and that hidden syncretism is more dangerous than the syncretism of those who admit it. The worst syncretism, she claims, is that “by which we use God to sanctify […] human injustices” such as sexism. “Where syncretism is denied, sexism becomes sanctified even though it contradicts the core traditions. Where syncretism is acknowledged, it can be debated and critiqued.”\textsuperscript{188}

\textit{Diverse Perspectives}

Differing opinions appear in the report. There are several contributions on Hinduism and Buddhism respectively, presenting widely different assessments of their impact on women. Lalita Das, a Hindu, rejected present day Hinduism more or less wholesale, based on the actual oppression of women in Indian society. Strong women in society as well as in the pantheon are exceptions, and cannot serve as role models.\textsuperscript{189} Teresa Vijayan, a Christian philosopher married to a Hindu, claimed on the other hand that on the “metaphysical level”, Hinduism has a lot to offer women and the women’s movement.\textsuperscript{190}

In the same manner, opinions on Buddhism differed. Pulsara Liyanage was very critical of Buddhism on account of “lived experience” and also stressed the parts of Buddhist scriptures that denigrate women, while Buddhist historian Lorna Devaraja and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh stressed the positive aspects of Buddhist teaching, and the possibility of independence from traditional roles offered by the \textit{bikkhuni} institution. They also claim that women in Buddhist societies are independent and respected compared to the Hindu culture out of which Buddhism grew.\textsuperscript{191} The misogynist traits in

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{186} Faith Renewed II 1992, pp 180-190
\bibitem{187} Faith Renewed II 1992, p 191
\bibitem{188} Faith Renewed II 1992, p 75
\bibitem{189} Faith Renewed II 1992, p 105
\bibitem{190} Faith Renewed II 1992, pp 124-129
\bibitem{191} Faith Renewed II 1992, pp 116-123; 192-206
\end{thebibliography}
Buddhism must be understood against the background of this culture, they argue. On the other hand, Yamashita Akiko, a Christian, blamed Buddhism for the sexism in Japanese society, but found wisdom and strength in “religion as practised” by elderly women in the villages, based on Pure Land Buddhism.192

Sr. Marlene Perera’s contribution on Christianity and Buddhism in dialogue states that Jesus and Buddha both belong to the “Enlightened Ones” whose message has been distorted by institutionalisation in a patriarchal culture. She interprets the atheism of Buddhism as a reaction against the sacralization of hierarchy in the Hindu caste system, and claims that the absence of a (male) god in Buddhism removes one of religion’s patriarchal traps.193

“Orientalist” Tendencies
Some of the contributions display “orientalist/occidentalist” tendencies, where the spiritual heritage of Asia is held up as a contrast to the Christian West.194 Teresa Vijayan presents India, in feminine gender, as the provider of spiritual wisdom: “It is this interiority of the spirit that is India’s gift to the world”.195 In an article on sati she tries to explain that the ideal behind this “barbarous practice” is “selflessness and identity with the Atma/self Supreme Reality”. She concludes: “While denouncing the evil we wish to draw attention to the fact that the ideal has a tremendous potential for an indigenous feminist theology, viz, the image of Indian womanhood in the context of her spiritual heritage.”196 In Chapter Six, we shall see how the idea of “Indian womanhood” is central in Indian feminist theology.

Like Teresa Vijayan, Marlene Perera refers to the orientalist theme of the spiritual quality of Asian culture, when she wants Christianity to “acquire the eastern approach to God”,197 which she defines as “God is a very deep, authentic, liberating and life-giving experience rather than the unreachable other up above”.198 An exploration of the immanence of God in the Christian tradition, she claims, would come “close to Buddhist thought which is to touch and tap the force/power within through meditation and contemplation”.199 Buddhism, on the other hand, “is challenged by Christianity to expand the truth of liberation from individual to society”.200

192 Faith Renewed II 1992, pp 169-179
193 Faith Renewed II 1992, pp 207-212
194 Cf. above, section 1.6.3
195 Faith Renewed II 1992, p 125
196 Faith Renewed II 1992, p 115
197 Faith Renewed II 1992, p 209
198 Faith Renewed II 1992, p 209
199 Faith Renewed II 1992, p 209
200 Faith Renewed II 1992, p 209
The same wisdom is to be found in Christianity and Buddhism, “though expressed in different forms and symbols”.201

Worship
The liturgies published in the report include one traditional Jewish Havdalah Service, and one liturgy which, though predominantly using Christian language, fits into the category of feminist spirituality, centred on womanhood and the struggle for life against evil.

Statement and Evaluations
Like the first “Faith Renewed”, the second conference issued a statement. The theme of change in societal as well as religious institutions recurs. The statement holds up interfaith solidarity “to reduce the suffering of all peoples and to preserve the integrity of the universe” as well as to “re-discover our spirituality in creative ways”, change oppressive structures, and the study of original religious teachings in order to “affirm women’s rightful and equal place in religion”.202

The evaluations included in the report reveal that the conference was not free from conflict and frustrations. Some participants had felt that other religions were attacked, that there was a lack of respect, and even attempts at proselytising. There was also disappointment at the numerical dominance of Christians. Because of this, the consultation was not experienced as a mutual dialogue. The consultation was also criticized for being too academic, with too little space for community building, creativity, small group gatherings and sharing of stories. A comparison with the programme of the first conference shows that there really were less of such activities this time.

Specifically, the conflict concerned Lorna Devaraja, who did not take part in the whole conference, and was not aware of the element of critique against all traditions in the presentations. Nor had she been present when Christian women criticized their own tradition, and therefore understood critical questions from Christians about Buddhism as part of the colonial-missionary legacy of denigrating non-Christian traditions.203 This points to Christian feminists’ difficulty in a post-colonial context in gaining credibility in interfaith dialogue.

Mostly, however, the evaluations were positive. Participants had experienced willingness to ask questions without fear, sharing and self-criticism, openness, trust and finding commonalities in searching for non-patriarchal religious expressions and the struggle against injustice. To dialogue among women was a positive experience: “Here we talked about...

201 Faith Renewed II 1992, p 210
202 Faith Renewed II 1992, p 3
203 E-mail from conference participant Elizabeth Harris 2005-08-16
something, sometimes men’s words at Interfaith conferences seem to talk about nothing”.

Recommendations for future conferences were that they should be issue-based and lead to action and building of networks, grass roots women should be invited to share their lived faith experiences. Someone commented that in deeper dialogue it is necessary to touch on the fundamental difference between the religions concerning the nature of ultimate being.

There was also a reaction against occidentalist tendencies in a comment that it could be destructive to criticize the west too much.

Summary
This conference was a step forward from Faith Renewed I in terms of the complexity of presentations. There was more than one contribution on each religion, and those that dealt with Christianity did so in a comparative and/or interfaith perspective. The theme of originally good teachings corrupted by patriarchy is still there, but not as accentuated as in the first conference. The view of religion is more complex.

But the conference remains a Christian conference, a fact that was criticized in the evaluations. There was no presentation of Christianity, the knowledge of which was taken for granted. This was different from the first conference, which was also more participatory, with small group sharing and creative elements.

Certain themes recur from the international conferences: the critique of malestream dialogue as too abstract (“talking about nothing”), the demand that dialogue shall build on the sharing of lived faith experience, deal with justice issues and aim at bringing about change in religious traditions and society. The conflict between the West and the Third World was present through the legacy of colonialism, where Christian women, though themselves being Asian, were associated by some participants with missionary and colonialist attitudes towards non-Christian traditions.

Difficulties in Developing Interfaith Conferences
The introductory Acknowledgement of the Faith Renewed II report, states that a third conference, on “Violence against Women in Religion” would be arranged, in response to the demand for issue-based conferences. However, this conference never happened, nor was there any other follow-up of the two Faith Renewed conferences.

The failure to follow up the Faith Renewed conferences is explained by women engaged in the Asian Christian women’s movement, in organizational and practical terms. In the case of the international

204 Faith Renewed II 1992, p 217
conferences, lack of institutional backing was one reason why the hoped-for networking and follow-up conferences did not come about. The Asian women have their own framework in AWRC. The problem, according to Yong Ting Yin, AWRC coordinator, and Aruna Gnanadason, WCC women’s desk, is that women of other faiths are not as well organized. Consequently, there are not enough contacts and networks between Christian women and those of other religions to make it possible to arrange a conference with equal participation from all religions.205

According to Aruna Gnanadason, in India there is also the caste issue to take into account: religiously engaged Hindu women often represent Brahminical religion and the “upper crust” of society and may not be representative of the majority of Hindu women.206

Elizabeth Tapia, presently teacher at Bossey Ecumenical Institute, points out that there are also very specific and practical problems in the Asian context: the sheer context of survival could prevent women from coming together. For example, at least three factors could prevent a Muslim woman from South Philippines from attending a conference in Manila: she would be viewed with suspicion by her own community; without funding, she would not have the financial means to go; and there could be an outbreak of violence affecting her home and family while she is away.207

Apart from these practical difficulties, the conflict around Lorna Devaraja’s participation in Faith Renewed II suggests that there are tensions connected with the colonialisit and missionary legacy of Christianity that hamper the development of an interfaith dialogue that includes a feminist critique of religion.

The two Faith Renewed conferences did not lead to increased contacts between Asian Christian women and women of other faiths, even though they were an expression of, and possibly augmented, an increasing interest in appropriating elements of other traditions into Asian feminist theology.

3.3.3 The Later Conferences

Subsequent AWRC conferences have been intra-Christian events, though other religions featured in reflection during them. In 2002, a new initiative for Catholic women in Asia was launched: Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA). Interfaith dialogue was one of six themes for discussion at its inaugurating conference. In 2004, CCA co-organized an interfaith

205 E-mail from Yong Ting Jin, conversation with Aruna Gnanadason
206 Conversation with Aruna Gnanadason
207 Conversation with Elizabeth Tapia
consultation on gender justice, with representatives from Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.

“Behold I Make All Things New” 1995

In 1995, AWRC organised a study workshop in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, as an opportunity for “review, assessment and evaluation of AWRC’s work as well as the development of Asian Christian feminist theology”. Interfaith dialogue was a prominent theme in the conference.

In Roman Catholic theologian Arche Ligo’s input on “Asian Women’s Spirituality and Culture”, the theme of Asia’s strong spirituality came up, as well as that of the egalitarian nature of folk religiosity and the need to find the “life-giving and liberating core” of the religions. Women want to reclaim the “dangerous memory” of “our egalitarian beginnings during the time of our early ancestors, now rediscovered to be alive among our indigenous peoples and re-invented by folk religiosity”.

Arche Ligo also pointed out that some women prefer the term spirituality to theology, “to refer to our living, relating and thinking with the Source of Life, Ground of our Being, the Divine” because they consider “theology” to be “very male in content, structure and method”.

This conference is the first one to explicitly condone a pluralist position. Choi Man Ja, in her presentation on “Asian Feminist Theology Inter-Faith Perspectives”, claims only from the pluralist position is true dialogue possible, where “dialogue is done with the principle of justice”. She states that the functions of a feminist inter-faith dialogue are to “(a) criticise elements of oppression of women and the weak in all religions and (b) cultivate the liberating essence/elements in the same”. She picks up the themes of action and change when she claims that inter-faith dialogue must “transcend religion-centeredness and focus on such values as life-giving, justice, peace”. It must address concrete issues like ecology, globalisation etc. The aim of the dialogue is the transformation of religions into “new religions”, in the sense of renewed religious traditions.

Responses from participants involved in interfaith work stressed that instead of talking about beliefs, which was liable to cause trouble, dialogue should focus on common problems and the struggle for a better society. Interfaith dialogue was defined as respect for equality and diversity.

208 Behold I Make All Things New 1996, p 1
209 Behold I Make All Things New 1996, p 47
210 Behold I Make All Things New 1996, p 48
211 Behold I Make All Things New 1996, p 14
212 Behold I Make All Things New 1996, p 14
213 Behold I Make All Things New 1996, p 14
214 Behold I Make All Things New 1996, p 14-15
215 Behold I Make All Things New, p 15
The recommendation to AWRC on this issue was to “provide an avenue for women of different faiths to get together and to give birth to a new religious outlook which is liberative and positive”.216

“Women in the New Creation” 1997

The AWRC 1997 Study workshop in Hong Kong, like the one in 1995, aimed at evaluating and planning AWRC’s work. The focus was on power structures within the church, and the need for non-formal education in feminist theology. There were no sessions on interfaith issues as such, though the need for inter-faith dialogue/action is included in recommended priorities for AWRC.

The endeavour to connect with Asian spiritualities took the form of appropriation. Worship played an important part in the process, as indicated by the report beginning with a publication of the liturgies, which have a strong character of feminist spirituality informed by Asian traditions.

The worship is described in the Introduction as connecting “not only ourselves to one another but our spirits/energies to the spirits/energies/God(s)/powers that be”217 and as involving “not only the Christian spirituality but spiritualities which we have become unfamiliar to by the way our Christian lives have been structured”.218 An example of this is the Blessing of the Food in the opening celebration, which blesses not only God, Eternal Creator of the Universe in biblical style, as well as women, children and men, but also the “spirit stewards” of water, farms, trees, mountains and gardens.219

A reflection on the Wisdom Woman in Creation by Wong Wai Ching “began with the re-membering of goddesses both in our Christian tradition as well as indigenous traditions”.220 In the following discussion, bringing the Asian spiritual tradition was brought into the reflection on a biblical theme was appreciated. There was also a discussion about how Christianity wiped out the diversity of gods/goddesses with “the colonial imposition of a monotheistic tradition”.221 However, monotheism was also defended on the grounds that a plurality of divine beings does not exclude hierarchies, and that monotheism “can be helpful in guiding us to be more human. It provides us with the hope that one person can hold together many characteristic [sic]”.222

216 Behold I Make All Things New, p 17
217 Women in the New Creation 1998, p 2
218 Women in the New Creation 1998, p 4
219 Women in the New Creation 1998, p 6
220 Women in the New Creation 1998, p 30
221 Women in the New Creation 1998, p 31
222 Women in the New Creation 1998, p 31
The workshop recommendations emphasised the need to connect with indigenous women’s spirituality. However, one participant did voice a certain ambiguity: “I am unused to or even feel afraid of these practices yet I feel a certain attraction this way of living [sic], knowing that the Christian tradition has for a long time rejected such beliefs”. There was also an awareness of the hazards of arranging a workshop on indigenous women’s spirituality, specifically the question of whose needs this workshop would satisfy – the AWRC women’s or the indigenous women’s - the risk of appropriating indigenous spiritualities, and the difficulties involved in arranging a meeting where indigenous women would feel comfortable, in terms of venue, workshop procedures and representation.

Ecclesia of Women in Asia

Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced was a gathering of Catholic Asian women theologians in Bangkok, Thailand, in November 2002. The conference was prompted by the fact that at a conference of Catholic Asian theologians the previous year, only 4 out of 40 participants had been women. After the conference, Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA) was established as a network with its own website. The conference was Catholic, but ecumenical participants were sent by CCA and AWRC.

The conference was attended by 55 women, out of whom 30 presented papers, which were grouped under six headings, one of which was “Women and other religions”. One of the presentations in this group was by Diane D’Souza, drawing upon her experiences from the Women's Interfaith Journey.

In her opening address, Evelyn Monteiro, SC, introduced the theme of “Women and other religions” with the following words:

Inter-religious dialogue is not only a way of fostering mutual knowledge and enrichment but also a means of unearthing all that is dehumanizing and oppressive, specially to women. The on-going major issues of the global economic system and the feminization of poverty, the escalating violence against exploitation of women’s work force remain issues that we as ecclesia of women need to battle against and push for solutions with our sisters of other faiths.

223 Women in the New Creation 1998, p 35
224 Women in the New Creation 1998, p 42
225 D’Souza, Diane 2002. The presentations of the EWA I conference are published in Monteiro & Gutzler 2004, a volume I did not have access to before the completion of this dissertation
226 Monteiro 2002
Key words in the discussion on other religions were listening, immanence, connection, life-giving, stories, experiences and a different voice. The group dealing with “Women and the Bible” also mentioned “dialogue with other religious traditions” as an important resource.227

EWA arranged a second conference, on the theme of Body and Sexuality: Theological-Pastoral Perspectives from Women in Asia, in 2004. The Call for Papers included a call for reflections on the contributions of Asian traditions to “a holistic spirituality which integrates our sexuality and sense of selves as body”.228 This elicited “Re-visioning Eros for Asian Women’s Theologizing: Some Pointers from Tantric Philosophy” by Dr. Pushpa Joseph; “India, the Land of the Kamasutra: Erotic Love and Christian Sexuality – a Pastoral Concern” by Valerie D’Souza; and “Bodily Representations of Hindu Goddesses” by Sr. A. Metti.229

Interfaith Consultation on Gender Justice 2004
An example of how feminist methodologies and issues influence the general interfaith scene is the Interfaith consultation on gender justice and genuine partnership of women and men held on 14–19 May 2004 in Bangkok, with CCA as one of the organizing bodies. It was a follow-up of an interreligious consultation in 2003, which had called for examination of “the patriarchal theologies, structures and practices of our religions in order to empower women by developing alternative educational resources for the promotion of equal partnership between women and men”.230

The consultation followed the pattern of women’s interfaith conferences in that it included storytelling of personal experiences, case studies panel presentations on the different religions from a gender perspective and workshops on socio-political impacts on gender relations in faith communities.231 A statement was issued, where the participants committed themselves to take action against violence against women, for equal participation of women in decision-making bodies, against gender discrimination in religious education, and on issues of globalization and consumerism.232

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227 Cluster plenary report
228 Call for Papers, EWA website accessed 2004-03-09
229 EWA 2004 Papers, EWA Website accessed 2005-02-28
230 CCA News March 2004, p 29
231 CCA News March 2004, p 29
232 Statement, Inter-religious consultation on gender justice
3.3.4 Conclusions

The Asian conferences share with the international ones the focus on social action, the emphasis on facilitating the communication process, and the critique of malestream interfaith dialogue. The ambiguity of religion, the need to criticize as well as reclaim religious traditions, is the theme which runs through all the conferences, and the aim of interfaith dialogue is the renewal of all religions – as indicated by the title of the conferences “Faith Renewed”.

The reports enable us to follow a decade of development within AWRC, and we can see how the attitude to non-Christian religions has changed. There is a movement from inclusivism towards pluralism, from sameness to diversity, and an increasing appreciation of “Asian spirituality”, especially as manifested in indigenous religious traditions.

In the early documents, there is a strong conviction that the “core” of all religions is liberative, and that the oppressive traits are due to distortions by male interpreters of the original teachings: when religion is institutionalized it is corrupted and taken over by male interests. In the later documents, there is greater awareness that even the original scriptures contain oppressive elements, and an appreciation that it is not so easy to disentangle what is oppressive and what is liberative.

There is a certain emphasis on “sameness” in the analysis. Essentially the same truth that is revealed by Jesus and the Buddha, the same mechanisms that lie behind the distortion of the liberative message. But there is also a recognition that something is missing in Christianity that has to do with the absence of the female images of God, and the interconnectedness with nature, elements that are perceived to be central to “Asian spirituality”.

The suspicion of “institutionalized” religion, and the appreciation of “Asian spirituality” contributes to the positive evaluation of indigenous religious traditions, which becomes stronger in each conference. In the early conferences, it was especially Filipino, Maori and Korean participants who highlighted indigenous religious traditions.

This could indicate that the criticism of Christianity, and appreciation of indigenous religious traditions is stronger and more univocal in countries where Christianity is the majority religion, and where the religion was used as a means of conquering and “civilizing” the indigenous people, as in the Philippines and Australia. While Christianity is not a majority religion in Korea, it is a substantially larger minority than in other Asian countries.

All the documents contain an emphasis on social concerns, on peace, justice, liberation and environmental issues. Interfaith dialogue is not seen as an end in itself, but as a way of uniting women in the struggle for a just and peaceful world, and networking on concrete issues. “Life-giving” is a key word for the positive values sought in religion. The comment “Here we
talked about something, sometimes men’s word at Interfaith conferences seem to talk about nothing” indicates that the discussions had focused on women’s lived experiences and common problems rather than abstract beliefs and doctrine. There is a critique of “religion-centeredness” in interfaith dialogue, and insistence that it must deal with peace and justice. However, besides priority for these issues, this has to do with a fear that talking about doctrinal issues would lead to conflict. This is in contrast to the experience of the international conferences, where political issues and not doctrinal differences caused conflict.

The reports suggest that conflict was not such a significant feature of the Asian conferences as of the international ones and the Women’s Interfaith Journey. The experience from the Women’s Interfaith Journey precludes any simplistic stereotypes, but there might still be a cultural difference involved in the approach to conflict. It is possible that the stress on harmony in Asian culture prevented conflicts from surfacing in the way they did at the international conferences.233

The evaluations from Faith Renewed II reveal, however, that when non-Christian participants felt that their religious beliefs were attacked, bad feelings were aroused, and this was not dealt with in the conference. It is significant that the evaluations also complain about the lack of small group discussions, storytelling and creative activities – elements I have identified as important for the ability to handle conflict at the other conferences, as well as the Women’s Interfaith Journey.234

The two Faith Renewed conferences were a good starting-point for Asian Christian women’s involvement in interfaith dialogue. However, they were dominated by Christians, and conducted from a Christian perspective, and in that sense not really an interfaith dialogue as such but, as the title says, a “consultation on interfaith dialogue”. The plan to arrange an interfaith consultation on violence against women came to nothing, and no other follow-up of Faith Renewed was arranged. Though all AWRC documents state that interfaith dialogue is a priority, it has not been treated as such.

Structural and practical reasons are given for the failure to organize interfaith conferences, such as the lack of partners from other faiths with whom to organize such events, and practical and financial difficulties for women to attend conferences. The colonial legacy, where Christians are seen as agents of the West, and suspected of having missionary motives, also play a role.

233 Cf Barton 1999, p 139; Eck 1993, p 223. Chatsumarn Kabilsigh in an e-mail (2004-05-28) expresses great discomfort with the aggressiveness she had experienced at the WRSC conferences.
234 Cf. above, section 2.2.3
It should, of course, be said that interfaith dialogue is not confined to the institutional level. Many Asian women are involved in grass-roots activities, which happen on an interfaith basis. But when it comes to reflection about religious traditions, it appears that Asian Christian women reflect on other traditions among themselves rather than with adherents of these traditions.

Interfaith dialogue for Asian women is increasingly an intrafaith dialogue. Through the development of Asian feminist theology, where Chung Hyun Kyung’s performance at the Canberra Assembly of the WCC was a decisive moment, Asian Christian women have gained the confidence to claim their ancestors’ religious heritage, as we shall see in Chapter Six.

3.4 Learnings from Women’s Interfaith Conferences

We have followed two decades of women’s approaches to interfaith dialogue, with two events in an international religious setting, the World Council of Churches; two in an international academic setting under the title “Women, Religion and Social Change”; and a series of Asian Christian women’s conferences. I shall now point out similarities and commonalities that allow us to draw conclusions about feminist approaches to interfaith dialogue.

All the conferences have arisen out of the realization that women are left out of interfaith dialogue, and marginalized in religious institutions. WRSC I was part of a “side project” within a larger project on religion and social change, which had been set up when the larger project did not include women’s concerns. WRSC II was tied to The Pluralism Project’s Women’s Networks, which had been set up for the same reason. The WCC Toronto conference was a way of dealing with the fact that women were underrepresented in interfaith dialogue conferences. The rationale for the Mühlheim conference rather seems to have been the realization that women play important roles in the education and upbringing of children, but that a special effort would still be required to include their voices in the discussion on interreligious learning. In the Asian case, the motivation was more to get to know the situation of women in other religious traditions, to be able to engage in common action and reach a deeper understanding of the oppression and marginalization of women in religious contexts.

We have seen how at every conference, participants have expressed a demand from the participants to have the opportunity to meet again and continue the dialogue, and how these hopes have been frustrated. The explanation for this has been lack of financial resources as well as of
institutional backing. In the case of the WCC, we have seen how the follow-up of the Toronto conference fell between the stools of the Dialogue and Women’s units. In the case of WRSC, there was an attempt to keep in touch through a newsletter, produced mainly on a voluntary basis, which founndered when the persons involved ran out of energy and financial resources. It was not until a new institutional basis, the Pluralism Project, was provided that it became possible to convene another conference. It remains to be seen whether the Pluralism Project will maintain this legacy and make women’s contributions to interfaith dialogue a priority.

One reason for the lack of institutional backing is the marginality of both of the issues; women and interfaith dialogue. In the WCC, besides being marginal, both women’s issues and interfaith dialogue are contentious and divisive. In the field of research and/or action on social change, the role of women has, in spite of the UN Women’s Decade and the Beijing conference, tended to be ignored, and the same is true for religion.

In Asia, Christian women do have their own institutional framework, AWRC, and this may be why the first Faith Renewed conference was followed up as soon as two years later. Other reasons must be sought for the failure to develop interfaith relations between women in Asia. Here, there is the lack of corresponding organisations for women of other faiths, but also that AWRC has prioritized other issues over interfaith dialogue.

3.4.1 Significant Traits in Feminist Interfaith Conferences

Previous research on women and interfaith dialogue shows that certain themes recur, and this is also discernible in my material. These themes include the importance of story-telling and relation-building, the ability to acknowledge conflict, women’s position as “other”, embodied spirituality and engagement in peace and justice issues.

Findings in Previous Research

Pamela Dickey Young, Professor and Head of Department of Religious Studies at Queens University, Kingston, Canada, in Christ in a Post-Christian World identifies four contributions that feminism can make to discussions on religious pluralism:

1. It can act as an internal corrective to Christianity

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235 On the necessity of, and difficulties in, obtaining continued institutional support for women’s conferences, see Pogrebin 1991, pp 327-328
236 There might have been a change concerning the latter, expressed in section 3.2.2 above by Nawal El Saadawi at WRSC II, when she said that you do not get funding for a project unless it has “Islam” in the title. It is true that the rise of fundamentalism and religiously inspired violence has brought a new interest in the role of religion, but more often than not, it is not in a way that is conducive to dialogue.
2. Feminist concerns are shared across religious boundaries, giving common starting points and common ground for thought and action.

3. Since most women are not in positions of power and authority, dialogue among women will go beyond officially sanctioned theological positions.

4. The feminist emphasis on particularity will discourage the search for "generic" religious symbols and terms, and instead point to their multivalence.237

These conjectures are confirmed by the material presented in this chapter, as well as in other research on women in interfaith dialogue.

Maura O’Neill uses the experiences from WRSC I, as recorded in Speaking of Faith, together with her own experiences of taking part in three mixed dialogue meetings, and then convening a small women’s interreligious conference at Claremont, California, in 1988, as a basis for her reflections in Women Speaking, Women Listening. She has also developed her ideas in an essay, “Examining Gender Issues in Interreligious Dialogue”, published in the anthology Pluralism and Oppression (ed. Paul F. Knitter, 1991).

O’Neill’s reflections on the Claremont women’s conference, where the participants were not chosen for any common attitudes, but because they were prominent practitioners and scholars of their religions,238 show that the fact that the participants are women does not automatically contribute to the “common we” so characteristic of the Toronto conference. At this conference, the commonality of being women did not preclude “a good amount of confrontation regarding the tremendous differences”.239

O’Neill observed a strong contrast between two levels of discussion, on the one hand the transcendent: the goal of religion in terms of enlightenment, eschatology etc, and on the other hand the immanent, i.e. people’s everyday struggles. The clash between these two views was apparent when a Buddhist Roshi responded to a question about battered women with an explanation of how in Buddhist teaching, suffering comes from within, which did not appeal to more activist-oriented women at the conference.240

O’Neill’s observations highlight the significance of the fact that in the conferences studied above, all the participants were activists, and that the conferences had a feminist orientation.

Both perspectives, the transcendent and the immanent, are necessary, according to O’Neill, but the question is how to combine them without creating an impasse. Her solution is to have a two-pronged focus as a

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237 Young, Pamela Dickey 1995, pp 26-27
238 O’Neill 1990, p 67
239 O’Neill 1991, p 128
starting-point, namely the question of how one’s religion has both helped and hindered one’s growth as a woman. The answer to the first question, O’Neill assumes, would produce responses dealing with the transcendent aspects, while the latter would deal with the practical, immanent level.241

To me, this seems to be an unduly simplistic dualism, as ideas of the transcendent influence the immanent. The feminist critique of religion often highlights the point that the traditional understanding of transcendence, valuing mind over body etc. has been detrimental for women. At the same time, it is by obtaining strength to endure everyday life as well as the struggle for justice, that the participants of the projects I have studied have found the meaning of religion. The Toronto conference is an example of a conference which by emphasizing both positive and negative sides of religion, and dealing with both dogmatic and justice issues managed to hold the "transcendent" and the "immanent" together.

O’Neill also emphasizes the need to create an atmosphere of trust by starting with listening to each others’ stories: “Listening is the key to enable a woman to tell who she sees herself to be and not who others tell her she is”, O’Neill says, and quotes Nelle Morton’s catchword “hearing into speech”.242 As we have seen, creating trust through story-telling was part of the Women’s Interfaith Journey, the Toronto conference, and to a certain degree through the presentation of case studies, of WRSC I and Mülheim. In the case of Faith Renewed II, the lack of opportunities for story-telling and relation-building contributed to the relative lack of success.

O’Neill points out that by telling stories we find out not only what we have in common, but also what we do not have in common, and that this is a severe challenge to the dialogue proposed by John Hick and others, based on finding an abstract idea that can be held in common.243

O’Neill finds communication theory vital to developing interfaith dialogue for women, as communication is the method of dialogue, and language and gender are interdependent: “It is in communication that this gender system is accomplished”.244 She finds the ‘muted group theory’ useful for understanding gender issues in interfaith dialogue because of the following:

“(1) that women and their concerns continue to be of marginal importance in men’s perception, (2) that males have more difficulty than females in understanding what members of the other gender mean, (3) men suffer and

241 O’Neill 1991, p 134
242 O’Neill 1990, p 90; cf. above p xx
243 O’Neill 1991, p 135
244 Lana F Rakow: Rethinking Gender Research in Communication”, quoted in O’Neill 1990, p 42

156
cause others to suffer, from an inability or unwillingness to self-disclose, to discuss feelings, and to do interaction support work.”

O’Neill’s conclusion is that women, the ‘muted group’, need to talk among themselves at first, where their language and style of communication is understood. We have already seen that this was the experience of the participants in the Women’s Interfaith Journey, and one of the rationales behind that project. The concept “marginality”, a theme in all the conferences, is consonant with the “muted group theory”.

While male-dominated dialogue is increasingly becoming interested in finding common ground in issues relating to social justice, the reverse is true of women’s dialogue, states O’Neill: “Women who have begun dialogue with a secular concept of justice as their major concern have begun to discuss religion”. As one example of this, she mentions WRSC I in 1983, but also the U.N. Decade for Women conference in Nairobi 1985. We have seen that a concern for peace and justice issues has been a top priority in all the projects described above.

O’Neill finds that whereas in male-dominated dialogues “religious matters were discussed with great civility and mutual agreement”, women in dialogue “seem to be open enough to disagree, challenge and contradict”. She points out that this contradicts the conventional picture of men being more comfortable with confrontation than women. O’Neill’s explanation for this is that

in the areas of religion and philosophy, women have been silenced or ignored for so long that when they dialogue among themselves, they take the opportunity to express their anger and to deal with it.

Having made the same observation about the presence of conflict in women’s interfaith conferences, I do not find O’Neill’s explanation sufficient, but would rather see it as the outcome of the efforts to build trust through the sharing of personal experiences.

As we have seen, O’Neill also emphasizes trust-building, and she goes on to say that while conflict can be destructive, it can also be an asset, provided participants respect each other and “trust that the opposing position is being held as a result of the experience of the participant”. She further argues that conflict can be a source of growth and insight, in that it reveals key issues in
the dialogue. She quotes the example from WRSC I where “real problems” surfaced when conflict was not avoided.\textsuperscript{250}

The importance of sharing life stories, the experience of exclusion and “othering”, and peace and justice engagement, are three themes that Ruth N.M. Tetlow also found in her case study of women’s interfaith encounter.\textsuperscript{251} Through participant observation, interviews and a questionnaire, she studied women’s contributions to interfaith encounter in Birmingham, UK. Besides these three themes, she also found that “embodied spirituality” – including symbolic rituals drawing on sight, smell, and hearing, as well as the preparing of food in a religious setting – was a significant trait; and that the women had different ways of perceiving eternal reality, which could lead to a transformation of religious traditions. She also found that this was partly a consequence of the experience of “othering”, which led to a tendency to question orthodoxy and a greater willingness to take risks in interfaith relations.\textsuperscript{252}

The shared experience of “othering” is highlighted as the basis for women’s interfaith dialogue in the earliest anthology of contributions from such dialogues, \textit{Women of Faith in Dialogue}. In her introduction, Jeanne Audrey Powers writes:

\begin{quote}
Because each participant knows what it means for women to be silenced or rendered insignificant in her own tradition, a special kind of hearing and openness in listening takes place. Sensitivity toward differing positions is crucial in dialogue and the common experience of women that run through all of the traditions make dialogue uniquely possible for women.\textsuperscript{253}
\end{quote}

Gé Speelman, in her study of Muslim-Christian couples in the Netherlands, has identified certain “styles of faith” and “styles of communication” which are conducive to interreligious understanding. She suggests that it is the styles of believing and communication, rather than the content of the beliefs that are the issues in interfaith encounters.\textsuperscript{254} She identifies three “styles of faith”: believing critically; submission to the will of God; and faith by rules, and found that “believing critically” was the style that enabled partners in an interreligious couple to take the other’s perspective. Also, those who interpreted their faith in the light of right relationships with other human beings could more easily understand their partner’s faith.\textsuperscript{255} This fits in with the pattern of the conferences described in this chapter: the participants can

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{250} O’Neill 1990, p 96
\textsuperscript{251} Tetlow 2004
\textsuperscript{252} Tetlow 2004, pp 71-77
\textsuperscript{253} Powers 1987, pp 5-6
\textsuperscript{254} Speelman 2001, p 298
\textsuperscript{255} Speelman 2001, pp 227-266
\end{flushright}
be classified as “critical believers” who interpreted their faith in terms of right relationship.

The role of embodied spirituality in rituals is essential in Diana Reed Jackson’s DMin dissertation based on her experiences with a multifaith women’s ritual community (see Excursus), where storytelling and nonverbal approaches are significant.\textsuperscript{256} The rituals celebrated in that community can be the traditional rituals of a faith community, but they can also be innovative, creating new feminist rituals on the basis of one tradition or many. Thus, the element of transformation of traditions appears here as well.\textsuperscript{257}

The theme of transformation of religious traditions through women’s interfaith dialogue also appears in Kathryn Lohre’s study of three women’s interfaith initiatives for peace-building. In her words, they are “redeeming the purpose of religion – reintegrating, reconnecting, and respecting the sacred value of sustainable peace for themselves, their communities, and the world.”\textsuperscript{258} Through adjusting religious traditions in order to create a space for themselves, they accomplish “a renewed and redeemed interpretation of institutional religion that (re)integrates the dichotomy between divine immanence and transcendence endorsed by the institutions of religion and war”.\textsuperscript{259}

Lynne Price, who like Ruth Tetlow writes from the British experience, identifies five feminist perspectives for interfaith dialogue, which fit in well with my material:
1. Starting from particulars and moving towards universals;
2. Validation of personal experience. Religion and the experiences of everyday life should not be separated if they are both to have meaning;
3. Focus on ethical rather than ideological concerns;
4. A working method of co-operation, not hierarchy;
5. Valuing informal and lay initiatives and knowledge\textsuperscript{260}

Drawing conclusions from her study, Tetlow points out that, in the Birmingham context, “it is not the contribution of women that has been ‘missing’ in interfaith dialogue, but, in the absence of a feminist analysis, its implications have seldom been fully valued, except at the local and informal level”.\textsuperscript{261} She finds four “relevant areas of feminist insight”:

a) the importance of difference within as well as between categories
b) the interdependence of humanity and the planet earth

\textsuperscript{256} Jackson 2000, pp 92-96
\textsuperscript{257} Jackson 2000, p 109
\textsuperscript{258} Lohre 2003, p 34
\textsuperscript{259} Lohre 2003, p 36
\textsuperscript{260} Price 1991, pp 12-13
\textsuperscript{261} Tetlow 2003, p 80
c) the need for freedom to define oneself rather than being defined by others
d) the experience of linguistic exclusion\(^ {262}\)

**Significant Traits in the Conferences Studied**

My material confirms much of the findings in previous research. I would like to highlight eight significant traits that characterize the conferences I have studied. These can be summarized under the headings Methodology; A Common “We”; The Role of Ritual; Change As Normative; Ambiguity of Religion; Affirmation of Diversity; Dealing With Conflict; and On the Margins.

**Methodology**

The conferences have been arranged with serious attention to procedure, in order to create a “safe space” where all participants can feel comfortable and enabled to contribute, in the way suggested by O’Neill. The methodologies are clearly inspired by experiences from the women’s movement.

The planning processes were (especially in the cases of WRSC I and Toronto 1988) characterized by open invitations, where the participants were asked to name areas and subjects they found important to include in the programme, conscious efforts were made to avoid a Western bias (even though the results were not always considered satisfactory by those concerned), calls for papers (especially for WRSC I and Mülheim) have been tentative and open-ended, requesting context-based case studies illustrating a problem rather than theoretical considerations. This fits in with Lynne Price’s observation that feminist perspectives on interfaith dialogue include starting from particulars and moving towards universals.

The formats of the conferences were geared towards process and participation. Introductory sessions designed to enable relation building were important at the WCC consultations, the seating arrangements in the Toronto conference, and the importance of sharing in small groups are significant features. Also, a majority of the participants have contributed, often in the form of a panel of 3-4 women talking over the same theme, rather than having a majority of the participants listening to a few speakers. The absence of these features affects the process, and is criticized by participants, as in Faith Renewed II.

These methodologies helped to facilitate a sharing based on the conviction expressed by the catchword of the women’s movement “the personal is political”. The women in these conferences shared life stories; they felt free to express emotions, including anger and frustration, and to

\(^{262}\) Tetlow 2004, p 79
extend care and compassion towards each other. This is expressed over and over again in the evaluations in terms like “real listening”, “talking with, not at each other”, “a deep sharing”.

A Common “We”

Through this methodology, a “we” emerged, which was experienced as stronger than divisions due to religion or culture. In all the conferences, there were comments on the bonding of the group, how a common “we” emerged. What was this sense of community based on?

The women came together as women, and it is fair to say that their sense of commonality was based on women’s experiences both in the sense of “feminist experience” as well as “traditional experience”.

Sylvia Marcos captured the content of “feminist experience” when in WRSC I she stated that what the women had in common was being rebels. They had all experienced oppression and decided that they wanted to break down oppressive structures. Instead of “rebels” we could speak of “activists”. As O’Neill showed with the Claremont example, just being women does not necessarily create a “we”.

But the format of the conferences, especially in Toronto, also encouraged the cultivation of “traditional experience”, of telling life stories, of extending care and compassion to each other. The incident with the offer of massage at the Toronto conference is illustrative. It can also be seen as an example of the “embodied spirituality” Tetlow refers to.

This “common we” was, however, not a homogenous entity, but rather a “stable ground” that allowed participants to recognize differences and act out conflicts.

Dealing with Conflict

With the exception of Mülheim, conflict has been a part of the international conferences, not as a problem or an obstacle, but as something that was acknowledged and dealt with constructively.

The conflicts did not arise over matters of religion, but rather over political issues, strategies and cultural biases. Much of the disagreements can be seen as a Western–Third World divide. A majority of participants have been from the US, especially at the WRSC conferences, which were also “owned” by American institutions, but to a certain extent also in Toronto. The Third World participants felt that the conference format was very “Western” and that their issues and way of thinking did not get enough space.

263 Cf above, section 3.1.1
However, the conflicts were out in the open; they were not swept under the carpet but “confronted with skill and grace”.264 This ability to deal with conflict was testified to when Blu Greenberg said at WRSC II “If I can’t speak here what is in my heart, where can I speak?”

An important factor for this ability to deal with conflict is the holistic and relation building format of the conferences. The women met as persons, over several days, shared their life stories, and encountered each other over breakfast, lunch and dinner. Rather than sidetracking disagreement, they wanted to clarify their own positions and understand their opponents’ in order to sustain relationship. Neither did emotions have to be suppressed, but shouting and crying were “allowed”.

The Asian conferences show a different pattern, which alerts us to cultural differences. In the international conferences, it was women from Africa, Latin America and the Middle East who brought conflicts out into the open, and partly, this was a Third World versus the West issue. The Asian ethos is more attuned to creating harmony than acting out conflict, and the Third World versus the West conflict was not there. However, dialogue was hampered when Christianity was perceived as the western missionaries’ religion, and there were misgivings about proselytizing. But we have also noted that at the conference where there were complaints about lack of listening and understanding, the absence of relation-building measures was also criticized.

It is important here to note that while women meet in dialogue in the shared experience of being marginalized, some are more marginalized than others. Women’s conferences do not escape the power dynamics of post-colonial relations. Gé Speelman has pointed out that there is often a false presupposition that in dialogue, people “are temporally suspending the power differences between them”, but that this can never be done, and those from the dominant group are likely to impose their agendas – and that this applies to feminists as much as to anyone else.265 Lieve Troch, on the other hand believes that “women, who are used to analyse the power dynamics that are at stake between each other […] can enter new insights into the dialogue”.266

There has been an awareness of power dynamics in the conferences on the part of the organizers, heightened by the critique by Third World and non-Christian participants, but the issue could have been problematized more thoroughly in the conference programmes.

264 Cf above, section 3.1.1
265 Speelman 1998, p 112
266 Troch 1998, p 105

162
I understand the issue of conflict at these conferences as arising because of a passion for justice, and being handled with the help of a concern for relationship and caring.

**The Role of Ritual**

According to Ruth Tetlow, “embodied spirituality” and symbolic ritual were an important theme in the dialogue group she studied, and ritual is the basis for Diana Reed Jackson’s multifaith community. Shared worship and ritual have been important parts of the WCC conferences, as well as the Asian ones. The WRSC conferences, which took part in an academic setting, did not include any ritual.

Shared worship is a contentious issue on the interfaith scene. At the WCC women’s conferences the elements of worship were experienced as indispensable. They had the format of one or several women from one tradition presenting a form of worship that was important to her, from her own tradition, and inviting those who want to participate to the extent they feel is possible. This was also the way worship was conducted at the Asian conferences. At Mülheim, the texts/prayers were deliberately chosen to be “open” enough to make it possible for others to participate. At the Toronto conference, however, there were also opening and closing rituals that were more open, inspired by feminist spirituality and where elements of Native American and Wiccan ritual figured prominently.

There are several reasons why the element of ritual was felt to be so essential. One is the part it plays in the sharing on the “life” or “human” level. As the women’s interfaith dialogue tends to emphasise faith as lived rather than as expressed in scriptures and doctrine, sharing ritual is an essential part of the dialogue.

A slightly different aspect of this is that the rituals fit into the “holistic” thrust of the conference format. In Toronto as well as Mülheim, the rituals took place in the same room as the panels and discussions.

Another is that, being on the “margins” of religious traditions, the participants experienced it as empowering to see other women “taking symbols of their faiths in their hands and using them creatively.” It created a bonding on the basis of reclaiming traditions. Sharing ritual is also sharing of the good one has claimed in a religious tradition which is experienced as ambiguous.

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268 For a discussion of “feminist ritual” in multi-faith settings, see Jackson 2000
269 Cf. Excursus
Ambiguity of Religion

The ambiguous relation to religion is a recurring theme. The women in these conferences experience religion as having a potential for both liberation and oppression. Some have left traditions they experienced as patriarchal beyond redemption, while others are trying to live with the tension and believe that change is still possible.

The mix of persons who identify strongly or less strongly with religious traditions, who have changed their religious affiliation, and in the case of WRSC, identify themselves as secular, is probably unique in the context of interfaith conferences. All standpoints have been seen as valid, all ways of dealing with the tensions in a religion have been respected. Indigenous religious traditions have played an important role, and have been assessed as those least detrimental to women, not least in the Asian conferences.

This critical approach to one’s own tradition entailed an absence of defensiveness and dogmatism, as no one wanted to defend her tradition in its entirety.

The ambiguity of religion has been a meeting point, where the women have been able to identify with each other’s struggles, discover similarities, and gain courage and confidence. It has also been a point where they have learnt to appreciate that which other women treasure in their own traditions.

Change As Normative

“Change” has been a key word in all the conferences. This is not surprising in the case of WRSC, as the word appears in the title, but this in itself is a significant fact: the purpose of bringing women together was to discuss change. The stated purpose was to discuss the relation of religion to women’s work for social change, but the conference also dealt with the changing roles of women in religion, and their struggle to bring about changes in religious traditions. Likewise, the title of the Asian conferences, “Faith Renewed”, indicates that renewal of religious traditions is perceived as the goal of interfaith dialogue.

But it was in Toronto that “change” was experienced most strongly as a key concept in women’s approach to religion. The women in Toronto were actively working to change their traditions, but they also had a view of religions as being fluid and constantly changing, which enabled them to remain within traditions that excluded and marginalized women. They would see “chaos and change as normative”. 270

Even in Mülheim, where the objectives were not primarily to discuss change, the issue of changing patriarchal traditions and structures became an important part of the process.

270 Eck 1989, p 21
This fits in with the findings from previous research, that transformation of traditions is an important theme in women’s interfaith dialogue.

Related to the theme of change is the emphasis on action. As we have noted above, the participants in these conferences were activists, and had a strong notion of dialogue as action-oriented: there is no point in sitting and talking about religion if this is not related to social action to make the world a better place.

**Affirmation of Diversity**

The affirmation of change as normative and the affirmation of diverse standpoints vis-à-vis religion are closely connected to the affirmation of diversity within religions.

None of the participants claimed to speak as a representative of her tradition, but would rather say “I can only speak for myself”. Instead of interpreting this as a lack of confidence, it should be seen as an acknowledgement that not only are there many strands within one religious tradition, but each person has her own interpretations and emphases on what is most important within that strand.

Again, this contributed to the absence of defensiveness and dogmatism, that was experienced as such a striking feature of the Toronto consultation. Even the Muslims, who felt a strong need to defend their religion against the increasing vilification of Islam, had no problem with the presence of a representative of a “dissident” branch, and did not shy away from acknowledging the diversity of interpretations within Islam.

**On the Margins**

Diana Eck stated in her report from Toronto that the margins are “a good place for dialogue”, implying that the margin is a place where women are to be found. This was also the standpoint of Diane D’Souza of the Women’s Interfaith Journey, and a recurring theme in previous research.

We must, however, question whether the women who took part in these traditions were really on the margins of their traditions or of society. They were, for the most part, persons who held positions in the academy, many of them were ordained and had a standing in their religious institutions.

But it is also true that those who had moved from the margins towards the centre were aware that they were in a place where the tradition did not suppose them to be. All had experiences of marginalization and exclusion, of being “the other”. None attended the conference in a capacity of “official representative” of her religion.

Some of the traditions represented were in themselves marginal, as Native American religion and Wicca. Many of the women worked with people
living on the margins of society, being enabled to view religion and society from that perspective.

Diana Eck points out two advantages of being at the “margins”: the investment in centrist positions is not so great, and “the reach is not so far” to women in other positions.\footnote{271} This evokes the image of the margins as borders between countries. Those who live close to the borders often have more in common in terms of living conditions, language and culture with those living on the other side of the border than with those who live in the capital of one’s own country. All kinds of exchanges, legal or otherwise, take place in the borderland.

This interchange at the “boundaries” is exactly what shapes religious traditions, according to Kathryn Tanner: “Christian distinctiveness is something that emerges in the very cultural processes occurring at the boundary”.\footnote{272} The dialogue at the margins would then be an “avant-garde” dialogue, situated at the point where religious change takes place, a process where new religious identities are shaped.

The religious life going on at the “margins” is what I have labelled “religion as practiced”. There have been connections to “religion as practiced” in the conferences studied, such as Elizabeth Amoah’s presentation on witch beliefs in Ghana at WRSC I, and the comparison of traditions concerning first menstruation in Toronto. However, this has not been an explicit focus.

The “Dialogue of life” often has its context in “religion as practiced”, in the religious life lived by ordinary people. We have seen how Wesley Ariarajah noticed that the women in Toronto did make connections to this “dialogue of life” in their presentations.

**Summary**

The women’s interfaith conferences that we have studied operate from a position of marginality. They are a response to the fact that women have been excluded or marginalized in various contexts. The women who participate do so not as official representatives of religious institutions, but rather assume the position of the marginalized, with an appreciation of the diversity within religious traditions. Traditions that are in themselves marginalized are represented on an equal basis.

The ambiguity of religion is a recurring theme in these conferences. The women have themselves experienced that religions can be oppressive and life-denying, but also that they have liberative and life-giving potentials.

\footnote{271} Cf. above, section 3.1.1 \footnote{272} Tanner 1997, p 115
Religious doctrine was not a cause for conflict, and no one felt the need to be defensive about her own religious tradition. When conflicts arose, they concerned political issues, and were dealt with constructively.

What made these conferences work so well was that the participants felt they were part of a “we” that transcended religious, ethnic and social boundaries. This “we” was based on women’s common experiences both of struggle against oppression and of cultivating a culture of care based upon building relationships. The emergence of this “we” was facilitated by the employment of methodologies and procedures from the women’s movement.

3.4.2 Conclusions: No Simple Sorority

Feminist approaches to interfaith dialogue call the whole concept of interfaith dialogue in question. As we saw already in Chapter Two, the women in the Women’s Interfaith Journey spent a lot of time discussing the concept, and did not readily understand what they were doing in these terms. Something of the same applies to the conferences studied in this chapter. Diana Eck noted that though the participants in the Toronto conference were involved in what she understood to be interfaith dialogue, they did not think of it as such. Likewise, Sissela Bok and Daphne Hampson rejected the label “interfaith dialogue” for the WRSC conferences. There was also a distancing from malestream dialogue on the part of many WRSC II participants, who felt it was too abstract and divorced from reality. From the Asian conferences, we heard that “here we talked about something, sometimes men’s words at Interfaith conferences seem to talk about nothing”.

It should be noted that most of the participants did not have much experience of malestream dialogue, and were speaking from a general impression of what is going on there. Still, the conveners of the projects, Diana Eck and Diane D’Souza, as well as Wesley Ariarajah, who are familiar with the dialogue scene, confirm the view that something different was going on at the women’s conferences.

What, then, do these women understand to be the content of the concept “interfaith dialogue”, with which they cannot identify? Apparently, it is perceived as something very cerebral, verbal, “discussing differences between religions and whether they can be reconciled”. Their experiences from such dialogue are that it shies away from issues that can provoke conflict, especially when it comes to Christian-Jewish-Muslim dialogue where the Israeli-Palestinian issue is too emotionally loaded to bring into the dialogue.

But there is also a concern that interfaith dialogue could, and should, move from doctrine to ethics, be based on care and personal relations rather than neutrality and objectivity and have transformation of individuals,
society and religious traditions as its goal. This is the kind of dialogue that has taken place in the conferences in my material.

Understood in Bourdieu’s terms, the women in my material are not only excluded from the “field” of mainstream interfaith dialogue, they have rejected it and created their own field, where another symbolic capital is relevant. They lack the symbolic capital of positions in religious institutions which would give them access to the dialogue table. Though they, as academics, have the capacity to engage in abstract discussions on doctrine, that is not the field they want to be in.273

In creating this new field, attention to the conference process has been crucial. The conferences have been more process-oriented than result-oriented. Methodologies borrowed from the feminist movement, including seating arrangements, storytelling, formats geared towards the participation of all, and the creating of a “safe space”, have contributed to the creation of a common “we” based on women’s traditional and feminist experiences, which are the symbolic capital necessary to be a player in this field. However, this “we” was, in Fatima Mernissi’s words, “no simple sorority”.274 It did not come naturally just because all the participants were women, nor was it free from tensions caused by power imbalance between third World and Western women.

The participatory thrust of the conferences has ensured that the issues dealt with reflected the participants’ real concerns, starting in the particular, moving towards the universal. This has meant that issues were brought up that differed from those in mainstream dialogue, or were approached from a different angle. This methodology is influenced by the theories of Carol Gilligan.

In *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan found that girls’ different solutions to moral problems are due to the fact that they are “answering a different question from the one the interviewer thought had been posed”.275 The women brought different questions to the conferences. As Diana Eck noticed, they were not “vexed about the question of the salvation of the others”. Their questions were how to survive in male-dominated religious traditions, but also the survival of humanity and the planet in a world of war and injustice. When conflicts arose, it was over different perceptions of, and solutions to, unjust situations in the world. The focus was on faith as lived, on the impact of religion on people’s lives.

There are numerous “guidelines”, drawing up the rules for interfaith dialogue, aiming at providing an atmosphere conducive to dialogue. Some

\[\text{273} \text{ Cf. Bourdieu 1993, especially the Editor’s Introduction pp 4–9 for a presentation of Bourdieu’s field theory}\]

\[\text{274} \text{ Cf. above, section 3.2.1}\]

\[\text{275} \text{ Gilligan 2003, p 31}\]
rules recur in most guidelines, such as the demand that everyone must be allowed to define themselves; that one should compare others’ practice with one’s own practice and not one’s ideals; and that dialogue must be based on relationships built on honesty and trust.276

Much of the essence of such guidelines was implicit in the feminist methodology of the conferences, making written rules unnecessary. The demand to be allowed to define oneself is a basic claim in the feminist movement. The very rationale of the conferences was that the practice of every religion falls short of the ideal when it comes to the role of women. And, as stated above, creating the safe space where trust could be built through personal relations was the guiding principle for the methodology.

Guidelines are a way of formulating an ethic for dialogue. I would like to term the ethic practiced in the conferences studied here, as well as the Women’s Interfaith Journey, “a narrative feminist ethic of care and justice”.277 Narrative, because the telling of life stories was a central part of the process. Feminist, because it was based on a feminist analysis, taking both women’s traditional and feminist experiences into account. Justice, because justice issues (women’s feminist experience) were high on the agenda. Care, because caring relations (women’s traditional experience) were developed, and, by being brought into the conference room, transcended the public/private dichotomy, as well as the dichotomy between emotion and reason.

This narrative feminist ethic of care and justice allowed conflicts to be handled in a constructive manner. The concern for justice ensured that conflicts were not swept under the carpet, but confronted. The concern for care and sustaining relationships ensured that there was an atmosphere of trust, which allowed emotions to be expressed, and also a demand to “sort things out”, to truly understand and be understood.

What guidelines for dialogue often avoid is dealing with power issues. There are always power relations between the participants that influence the dialogue process, which issues are or are not taken up, etc. Power issues have been addressed at the women’s conferences, especially by Third World women, who have pointed out the dominance of Western ways of working, despite conscious efforts by the organizers to avoid such dominance.

An obstacle to interfaith dialogue can be that the participants are there in the capacity of representatives of their religious traditions. This accountability can lead to apologetics and defensiveness, or prevent them from going as far as they might personally be prepared to go in dialogue. In

276 Wirén 2002
277 Cf. above, section 1.6.1
the women’s conferences, the participants were there as women of faith, not as representatives of religious traditions.

The stress on story-telling, faith as lived in everyday life, and of the diversity within traditions, allowing one to speak only for oneself, place the conferences within the “turn to subjectivity” described by Heelas and Woodhead. The individualism is, however, checked by the sense of accountability on the part of Third World participants, and their demand that the conferences must deal with issues important in their contexts, and serve the interests of their communities. While they did not come as representatives, they had a collective identity, different from the individual identities of the Western women.

Marginality is an important theme in the reflections upon the conferences. It has been seen as an asset, making dialogue possible. It is in the borderland that religious traditions develop, people at the margins can reach over to each other, and they do not have vested interests in the centre. Wesley Ariarajah claimed that the future of interfaith dialogue lies in it moving away from being a concern of religious leaders only, towards connections with the “dialogue of life”.

Another way of understanding marginality is in terms of “otherness”. Interfaith dialogue is an encounter with the religious “other”. Women share the experience of being “the other” within their religious traditions, but as feminists of faith they also share a marginality in a predominantly secular women’s movement. When women meet in this shared experience of being “the other”, otherness is not a threat, but a bond.

But in this positive assessment of marginality, there might also be a risk of reifying women’s marginality. If women keep doing different things at the margins, or play in their own field, will they ever influence the centre? Or, when women leave the margins and to an increasing degree occupy centrist positions, will they be able to bring the perspective of the marginalized into the dialogue?

The conferences studied in this chapter remain marginal, a separate field. Though embodying the spirit of guidelines for malestream dialogue in a unique manner, they have not influenced the larger interfaith field. As Ruth Tetlow pointed out, the problem is not primarily that women are missing in interfaith dialogue; it is the absence of feminist analysis. A feminist analysis of the conferences studied above suggests that interfaith dialogue could benefit from:

- a feminist methodology for creating a “safe space” for dialogue
- a “narrative feminist ethic of justice and care” as a foundation for dialogue
- the experience of otherness and marginality to be brought into the dialogue
• faith as lived in everyday life as the focus of dialogue
• bringing “religion as practiced” into the dialogue
• acknowledgement of power issues
• daring to talk about “the bad things about religion”
PART II
THEORETICAL CHALLENGES
“Diversity” has been a touchstone of feminist theology throughout its history. The early pioneers were white middle-class women, but in the next generation in the mid-80s, “women of colour” challenged their assumptions about “women’s experiences” for being universalist, not taking issues of race and class seriously. There has been an ongoing dialogue between white feminists, womanists, mujeristas and women of Asian origin, probing the issues of difference and diversity.¹

This discussion on difference and diversity provides, and is already – inasmuch as Jewish feminists have taken part in it – a foundation for interfaith dialogue. Themes in this discussion have included how to acknowledge difference while not reifying it and turning the dialogue partner into an Other; to acknowledge power relations between feminists from different ethnic communities; universalism and particularity; and appropriation.

In this discussion, both differences and commonalities are seen as important. Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz argues that difference should be embraced with engagement, not just respect. Feminist theologians will benefit from valuing difference in that it makes them struggle to understand each other’s work from the inside and allow it to challenge their own. It will lead to a creative dialogue, “which will lead us to a new place”.²

Judith Plaskow stresses the need to keep difference and commonality in tension:

I think knowledge of these commonalities need to be named, not as universals pointing to some generic ‘women’s experience’, but as specific places of insight and connection.³

Not least the question of appropriation is a vital issue. To what extent can white feminists draw on womanist theology without acknowledging that it is shaped in and by a different context? To what extent can Christian feminists

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² Isasi-Díaz 1992
³ Plaskow 1992, p 108
use Jewish concepts as a common heritage? How does a Jewish feminist avoid importing categories that are inappropriate to Jewish experience from Christian feminist, womanist, or mujerista theory? Considering power relations, what is “appropriate appropriation”, and how can there be reciprocity?

While the feminist theology movement was not initially diverse when it came to race and class, it was diverse religiously. Early anthologies like *Womanspirit Rising* (1979) and *Weaving the Vision* (1989) were multi-religious. The *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, founded in 1985, also defines itself as interreligious, as does the European Society for Women in Theological Research, founded in 1986, and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, founded in 1989.

However, feminist theology has increasingly come to be dominated by Christian theologians, who have not paid much attention to religious diversity in their work. Jewish feminists have accused Christian feminists of anti-Judaism, as we shall see below. The principal spokeswoman for an interreligious feminist theology is, however, Rita M. Gross, who since the late 1990s repeatedly has challenged her Christian colleagues to become more pluralist.

Gross is a historian of religions, specialized in Asian religions, but she also considers herself a theologian, as she does “critical and constructive thinking” about religion, especially her own tradition, which is Buddhism. She grew up in a Lutheran family, but left Christianity for Judaism, and later engaged in Vajrayana Buddhist practice.

In several articles, she has complained about being excluded and marginalized as a non-Christian feminist theologian, both in the feminist theology movement and in the academy. Christian feminist theologians do not engage in either the study of non-Christian religions or interfaith dialogue as much as Gross thinks they should.

According to Gross, the feminist grounds for developing theologies of religion are, firstly, that feminist theology was born from “the experience of being excluded”, and the “convictions that the voices of the excluded deserve to be heard and that adequate theology cannot be done on the basis of erasing many voices”. Secondly, “widening the canon”, “rejecting the binding authority of the past and […] searching for new traditions” have been central to feminist theology. These concerns cannot “stop when they hit the boundary of one’s own religion”.

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5 Gross 2001, Gross 2000  
6 Gross 2001, p 87  
7 Gross 2001, p 87  
8 Gross 2001, p 89

176
A feminist theology of religions must be pluralist, Gross argues, because

[i]t is inconceivable that a feminist theologian would go through all the heartache of being excluded from her own religion and doing the theological work required to include herself back in, only to turn around and make exclusive or inclusive truth claims about the religion that excluded her!\(^9\)

Furthermore, in Gross’ view, only the pluralist position can make religions provide “peace, wholeness and healing”,\(^10\) which is their purpose. With this statement, Gross makes it clear that for her, “ethical behaviour is far more important than theological doctrines”\(^11\) as a criterion for evaluating religions.

There is also an epistemological side to theology of religions, says Gross: one cannot claim to do adequate constructive theology without knowing anything about religions other than one’s own. The other religion provides a “comparative mirror” in which we see ourselves and our religious traditions in a new way.\(^12\)

While issuing a warning against “inappropriate appropriation”,\(^13\) Gross argues that feminist theologians should widen the canon by integrating elements from other religions. Chiefly, this should be done by “osmosis”, where unfamiliar ideas gradually affect how one thinks and theologizes. Deliberately carrying elements of other traditions over into one’s own is more difficult, and is better suited for materials from marginalized strands of the own tradition. As there are examples of how religious symbols can cross cultural frontiers, Gross does not, however, rule out the possibility that Asian goddesses like Kali and Kwan-yin could transform into “Western goddesses with Asian roots”.\(^14\)

Finally, she issues a warning that unless it engages in interfaith dialogue and the study of other religions, feminist theology will be “marginalized in the academy and in the world”.\(^15\)

Several of Gross’ points invite discussion. Her claim that feminist theology must be pluralist is not self-evident. It should be perfectly possible to arrive at a “feminist Barthian” standpoint, and claim that “religion” is patriarchal while “revelation” through Jesus, Wisdom incarnate, alone is liberating. An “inclusivist” standpoint which claims that Jesus is the ultimate expression of Shakti, Prajna or whatever feminine divine principle is to be

\(^9\) Gross 2001, p 89  
\(^10\) Gross 2001, p 90  
\(^11\) Gross 2001, p 90  
\(^12\) Gross 2001, p 91  
\(^13\) Gross 2001, p 95  
\(^14\) Gross 2001, pp 96-97  
\(^15\) Gross 2001, p 101
found in other religious traditions, is also possible. Evangelical feminists also tend towards inclusivism.16

Likewise, Buddhist feminist Grace G. Burford does not think that Christian feminist theologians necessarily should be expected to abandon theological truth claims. Rather than being about superiority such claims can be seen as a mode of understanding the nature of reality and behaving according to it, as “the best, if not the only, way to human religious transformation and fulfilment”17.

Burford was one of the respondents to a lead-off article by Rita M. Gross in a roundtable discussion in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*,18 where she presented the ideas outlined above. The respondents, all of whom belonged to religions other than Christianity, basically agreed with her presentation, but with particular disagreements and qualifications.

Another contentious issue is Gross’ use of the term “theology”. She has herself defined it, as we saw above, as “critical and constructive thinking about religion” – but to what extent can this be done interreligiously? Must theology not be done within a singular tradition, or at least with a specific tradition as its basis?

This theme was picked up by some participants in the roundtable. Burford questioned the term “theology”, which has, if not Christian or monotheistic, then at least theistic implications, and would exclude non-theistic traditions. We must either expand the term, or find a more inclusive one “to refer to this activity that falls somewhere between the supposedly objective ‘academic study of religions’ and the theistically loaded ‘theology’”.19

Jewish anthropologist Susan Sered also criticizes the term ‘theology’ for being a Western Christian paradigm. She points out that while Christian feminists have excelled at theology, Muslim feminists excel at understanding the convergence of political power and religion and the application of post-colonial theory, and Jewish feminists at creating ritual. Thus, Muslim and Jewish feminists’ achievements are rendered invisible when the genre of ‘theology’ is privileged. Thus, Sered’s question is “whether Christian

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16 The American evangelical feminist journal *Daughters of Sarah* published two issues (Vol. 16 and 20) on interfaith themes, which show a wide variety of standpoints, but where the editors keep an inclusivist stance. The Evangelical & Ecumenical Women’s Caucus (EEWC) conference in 2004 included a panel on interfaith dialogue, which is recorded on their website: www.eewc.com/Conf2004Panel.htm, accessed 2005-11-01. Maura O’Neill’s forthcoming book *Soul sister or Step Sister: Conflicting Feminisms and Their Effect on Interreligious Dialogue* will explore the possibilities of dialogue between religiously conservative women. Cf. also Covered Women for God in Excursus above.

17 Burford 2000, p 88-89

18 Gross 2000

19 Burford 2000, p 87

178
feminists are willing to step down off a discursive stage that has been beneficial to them in many ways”.20

The subtitle to Rita Gross’ essay was “Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighborhood or Christian Ghetto?” Susan E. Shapiro, in her response, questioned the word ‘neighborhood’ as suggesting that feminist theologians of diverse faiths have more in common than they actually do. Again, her concern is the risk of “importing an uninterrogated concept of specifically Christian theology into and as the basis of this religious diversity”.21

Theologist Carol Christ, however, finds that theology can be done on an interreligious basis. According to her,

[i]ssues that might fruitfully be discussed across religious ‘boundaries’ include: “self (relation, community, autonomy), embodiment (including sexuality), death (and life after death) suffering, nature and the environment, prayer/meditation, social ethics, method, symbols, rituals, conceptions of divine power etc.”22

She goes on to point out that the problem with the relation between Christian and non-Christian feminist theologians is structural: the discipline of theology is dominated by Christian institutions, where, to be tolerated, feminist theology has to be taught by persons whose Christian credentials are impeccable. “Christian feminists did not create the system. They have simply found a way to work within it”.23 She also voices an apprehension that it is not conducive to a career in academic theology to engage with non-Christian feminist work.24

That concern for religious diversity must not bypass questions of ethnic diversity was forcefully argued by Black Muslim scholar Amina Wadud. She turned her response into a furious attack on the ignorance of racial discrimination that she detected in Gross’ essay. Gross had complained that when she tries to raise the question of religious diversity, “people would return to the topic of intra-Christian dialogue and complain that there was not enough non-white Christian feminist diversity in the group”.25 While Gross has religious diversity as her first priority, Wadud’s is that race must never be ignored. She questions the word ‘diversity’ as “the key term of the

20 Sered 2000, p 108
21 Shapiro 2000, p 120
22 Christ 2000, p 81
23 Christ 2000, p 80
24 Christ 2000, p 79
25 Gross 2000, p 73
past decade and one that allows whites to be members of the disenfranchised”.26

Besides chastising Gross for not taking racism seriously, Wadud also criticized her Christian “sisters of color” for usurping the term ‘Womanist’27, and was joined in this critique by Yvonne Chireau, who highlighted the religious variety in African American communities, where women play and have played fundamental roles.28 The issue of multiple religious belonging was further brought up by C. S’thembile West, who professes not to “feel aligned with any particular sect, but find useful life tools within an eclectic body of worship practices”.29 This is a stance she claims to share with many African Americans, especially women, and she argues that these strategies open “a window onto new understandings and options for how one might negotiate the terrain of diverse religious ideologies”30.

In her concluding remark in this roundtable, Rita Gross expresses surprise that there were no Christians among the respondents. It was, however, the editors’ intention not to invite Christian theologians to this roundtable. An invitation in the Editorial to Christian theologians to respond in later issues seems to have passed unheeded.

Kwok Pui-lan has, however, elsewhere criticized Rita Gross because, in her critique of feminist theology for not engaging in questions of religious pluralism, she “fails to notice that ‘Asian and African feminist theologians, such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Chung Hyun Kyung, and myself, have discussed the challenges of religious diversity for decades, and she includes few non-Western sources in her attempt to envision a feminist theology of religions’,31 and neglects Asian Buddhist women’s contribution to a feminist renewal of Buddhism.32

To sum up, the challenge to Christian feminist theologians from their colleagues of other faiths is to engage both in the study of other religions and in interfaith dialogue, in order to ensure that feminist theology does not become an exclusively Christian field. There is no unanimous call for Christian feminists to abandon exclusive truth claims, but to be aware of, and find ways to counter the inherently Christian definition of ‘theology’ that makes other discourses go unnoticed. While Rita Gross claims that feminist theology will be marginalized if it does not engage in interfaith dialogue, there is also an apprehension that feminist theologians will be marginalized if they do. To combine feminism with openness to religious

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26 Wadud 2000, p 92
27 Wadud 2000, p 95
28 Chireau 2000, p 101-102
29 West 2000, p 112
30 West 2000, p 115
31 Kwok 2005, p 201
32 Donaldson & Kwok 2002, p 28
diversity is not the best way of promoting a career in the academy, according to the contributors to *JFSR*. 
In interfaith dialogue on feminist ground, Jewish-Christian dialogue is a special case. Partly, it is for the same reasons that Jewish-Christian dialogue is a special case in all interfaith dialogue: the common background of the two religions, and the need for Christians to come to terms with a shameful history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.¹

But there are also special elements in the relations between Christian and Jewish feminists. Among non-Christian theologians, Jews have been the most prominent in feminist theology, and have been part of the movement from early on. But these Jewish feminists have also accused their Christian sisters, as well as post-Christian worshippers of the Goddess, for innovating new forms of anti-Judaism. Jews are not only, as in classical theology, being accused of killing God, they are now also accused of killing the Goddess and inventing patriarchy.

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. The debate has continued in various journals, such as the American *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* and *Lilith*, the German *Schlangenbrut* and the Swiss *FAMA*. A comprehensive study on the subject is Katharina von Kellenbach’s *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*.

While being a special case, Jewish-Christian dialogue also has significance for the broader field of feminist approaches to religious plurality. Dialogue between Jewish and Christian feminists highlights how feminist theology can be both a stepping stone and a stumbling block in

¹ Much has been written on the distinction between anti-Judaism and antisemitism, and there is no consensus whether or not they denote different things. I will use the term anti-Judaism for what is discussed below, unless I quote sources which use antisemitism. I understand anti-Judaism to connote negative statements about the Jewish *religion* which is a sin of Christian theology, whereas antisemitism is negative statements about Jewish *people*, and has its roots in 19th century racial biology. The distinction is not clear cut, as Christian anti-Judaism fed into and enforced antisemitism and vice versa, but I still want to make it. I will use the terms Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Scriptures unless my sources use “Old” and “New Testament”, which I will put between inverted commas.
interfaith dialogue. Jewish and Christian feminists have a shared agenda, but they can also have different, even opposing agendas. The necessity of acknowledging these different agendas to reach a fruitful dialogue will be shown in this chapter.

5.1 Shared Agendas and the Debate on Anti-Judaism

Christian and Jewish feminists share the agenda of coming to terms with patriarchal traditions. There are also parallels between oppression of women and anti-Judaism which need to be spelled out in feminist analysis. Still, feminist theology has not escaped the evil heritage of anti-Judaism in Christian tradition, but has given it a new twist.

By way of a background to the heritage of anti-Judaism in Christian theology, I will first summarize Rosemary Radford Ruether’s analysis in *Faith and Fratricide*.

*Faith and Fratricide* is an early work, written at about the time when Ruether first embarked upon her feminist project.² Perhaps this is why there is not much of a feminist analysis in this work, though there are themes that surface here, which she later elaborates in the feminist context, such as the problem of dualism, and endorsement of the prophetic heritage in Judaism and Christianity. She has, however, commented on the inability of fellow feminist theologians to understand her interest in anti-Judaism at this time (1974).³ In her feminist works, she has been careful to stress that openness to women’s leadership in the early church was not unique but “an expression of diversity within Judaism of the time”⁴.

Ruether argues that anti-Judaism is embedded in the roots of Christian theology, rather than being solely due to influence of pagan thought, and that it is not something which is easily purged. Theology, particularly Christology, needs to be thoroughly re-thought, not only to atone for a destructive history, but also to reconstruct and re-vitalize Christianity.⁵

Ruether argues that Judaism has been “the other” against which Christianity forged its identity. From its beginning as a Jewish sect Christianity adopted the antithesis between the “true” and the “apostate Israel” and fused it with Platonic dualism between body and soul, material and spiritual, so that “Judaism is identified with all that is ‘old’ and ‘carnal’, while Christianity is spiritual and eschatological ‘newness’”.⁶ Ruether views

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² Ruether 1989, p 53
³ Ruether 1989, p 53 ff
⁴ Ruether 1998a, p 61
⁵ Ruether 1974, p 228
⁶ Ruether 1974, p 95

184
the *adversos Judaeos* literature not as created primarily either to convert or
attack the Jews, but as an expression of an intrinsic need for Christian self-
affirmation: it was created “to affirm the identity of the Church, which could
only be done by invalidating the identity of the Jews”.7

Dialectics that have been reified into dualisms is an important part of
Christian anti-Judaism, according to Ruether. The church distorted the
prophetic dialectic between judgment and promise into a dualism, where it
kept the promise for itself and projected judgment onto Judaism. Thus, “the
Church deprived itself of the tradition of prophetic self-criticism”.8

The key issue in the distortion of dialectics into dualisms, says Ruether, is
Christology, or specifically “the historicizing of the eschatological event”.
Realized eschatology, or the reification of messianic hope as a historical
event, makes it a “reality-denying, rather than a reality-discerning
principle”,9 and is the root of “both Christian anti-Semitism and the patterns
of totalitarianism and imperialism that have appeared in Christianity”.10
Ruether concludes that we must understand the messianic meaning of Jesus’
life as “paradigmatic and proleptic in nature, not final and fulfilled”.11

5.1.1 Three Paradigms in Feminist Anti-Judaism

Anti-Judaism has tainted Christian feminist theology since the days of
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who’s *The Women’s Bible* has lately been criticized
for its heavy anti-Jewish bias.12 The charge of anti-Judaism can be
summarized in three points: making Judaism the anti-thesis of (especially
eyear, woman-friendly) Christianity; subsuming Jewish (feminist) interests
under Christian; and scapegoating Judaism for the death of the Goddess and
the rise of patriarchy.13 It should, however, be pointed out that in this area,
feminist theology is in no way worse than other brands of theology. Anti-
Judaism in feminist theology is not intentional, and often “potential anti-
Judaism” is often a more apt designation.

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7 Ruether 1974, p 181
8 Ruether 1974, p 230
9 Ruether 1974, p 246
10 Ruether 1974, p 248
11 Ruether 1974, p 249
12 Cf. i. a. Daum & McCauley 1983
13 I borrow this thematization from Susannah Heschel according to Kohn-Roelin 1991, though
other groupings could be made, cf von Kellenbach 1994 and Zunhammer 1987 a
Judaism as Antithesis to Early Christianity.

Especially in the early days of feminist theology, the catchword “Jesus was a feminist”, coined by Leonard Swidler in 1971 in a very influential article,\textsuperscript{14} tended to set Jesus over 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.

Even theologians like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether, who have consciously worked on the issue of Christian anti-Judaism, do not always avoid this pitfall, according to their critics. When it comes to Ruether, Katharina von Kellenbach compares \textit{Faith and Fratricide} with \textit{Feminism and God-talk} and finds that Ruether’s “account of Jesus’ opponents change in her later work because of her theological agenda”. Though Ruether analyses the anti-Jewish polemic of the gospels from a historical point of view, and denounces it in \textit{Faith and Fratricide}, von Kellenbach finds that it reappears in \textit{Feminism and God-talk} where the Jewish authorities are seen as those primarily responsible for the trial and execution of Jesus.\textsuperscript{15}

Judith Plaskow has pointed out that “Christian feminists are not always sure who they want to say Jesus was and is”, and wanting to hold on to his uniqueness without making ontological claims, they “are forced to focus on his human uniqueness, and this uniqueness is most easily established by contrasting him with his Jewish context”.\textsuperscript{16} This is an example of how the feminist wrestling with Christology, while being an asset in interfaith relations, in the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue can have its perils. But it also shows how Jewish-Christian dialogue can force theologians to scrutinize their arguments.

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\textsuperscript{14} It first appeared in \textit{Catholic World} January 1971, has according to Swidler’s CV appeared in 33 different versions throughout the world and is still available at Christian feminist websites like www.godsworsetwomen.org and EEWC’s Web Explorations: www.eewc.com/Explorations/May2002_part3.htm accessed 2005-11-01. It has been revised over the years, in the latter version for example, Swidler has changed “Jesus” to “Yeshua” and added a “word of caution” that the tenet of the article should not be taken as ground for Christian superiority. However, he persists in using only misogynist quotations from the Jewish sources, a practice criticized by Jewish feminists.

\textsuperscript{15} Von Kellenbach 1994, p 119-120

\textsuperscript{16} Plaskow 1991, p 104
Subsuming Jewish Feminism under the Christian Agenda

An apparently more benevolent attitude is to assume that what is liberating for Christian feminists is liberating for everyone else. This is parallel to the talk of a “Judeo-Christian tradition”, as if the traditions were one and the same, or at least had the same core. But this is tantamount to making Jews invisible.

One example is the Christian feminist favourite Bible verse Gal 3:28, which from a Jewish point of view appears to deny Judaism the right to exist as an independent religion. Another is when the Psalter in Inclusive Language, in order to avoid the patriarchal “Lord” instead uses the unspeakable Name of God, vocalized in English transcription, and of course to be read aloud when the Psalms are used in worship. Here, sensitivity to feminist concerns is achieved at the expense of sensitivity to Jewish concerns: this Psalter is impossible for Jewish feminists to use.

There is in feminist visions of cosmic sisterhood (such as those developed by Mary Daly) a universalist claim, denying particularities, which, argues von Kellebach, that is not a far cry from the universalist claims of traditional Christendom, which they repudiate.

Judaism as Scapegoat

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 has changed into 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 warfaring 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. Rosemary Ruether’s Midrash preface to Feminism and God-Talk is one example of a text which, say critical voices, has bought into the myth of Goddess-murder.

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17 Gummel 1991, p 21
18 For example, this Psalter is used for Morning Worship in the Iona Abbey Worship book, though the Iona Community is normally sensitive to interfaith issues.
19 von Kellenbach pp 128-131
20 i. a. Gerda Weiler, Gerda Lerner, Merlin Stone; cf von Kellenbach 1994, pp 91 ff
21 Kessel 1991, p 4; Plaskow 1991, p 102-103
5.1.2 Shared Agendas

“Anti-Judaism is a feminist issue” could be the slogan for those who want to take feminist theology to task for its potential anti-Judaism. There are parallels between sexism and anti-Semitism, much like those between sexism and Orientalism. Women and Jews have been the inferior “Other”, upon whom undesirable qualities are projected. Again, Judaism is described, and slighted, in feminine terms.22 Katharina von Kellenbach points out that both feminism and Jewishness are constructed as characterized by lack: “women are characterized by penis-envy and Jews by Christ-envy”.23

Parallels between Anti-Judaism and Misogyny

Feminist scholarship has seen a parallelism between the persecution of Jews, culminating in the Holocaust, and the medieval witch-hunts. The same scapegoat-mechanisms were behind them, as both groups could be constructed as symbols of evil. As women must for ever atone for the fall of Eve, Jews must for ever atone for the death of Jesus.24 There is a negative correlation between pogroms and witch-hunts: very seldom were both Jews and witches persecuted simultaneously in one place.25 For instance, it was only when German cities were “Judenrein” in the 15th century, that witch-hunts started there.26 When one scapegoat had disappeared, another had to be found.

There was an interchange of attributes and images between Jews and witches. The pointed hat of the stereotypical witch, was originally the hat Jews were forced to wear, and it was also placed on the head of witches on their way to the stake. Conversely, in anti-Semitic lore, the Jewish male was said to be afflicted with menstruation as a punishment for refusing to accept Christ.27

The similarities between the persecution of Jews and of witches cannot be explained by any sociological similarities between the actual groups. “Witches” were mostly poor, isolated, marginalized women, who did not constitute a coherent group, while Jews, though marginalized in society, were a cohesive group with a strong group consciousness. It was their status as “heretics” and symbols of evil, that were threatening to the church authorities and made them targets for scapegoating.28

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22 Examples of this can be found in i. a. Adolf von Harnack’s and Otto Weininger’s writings, cf. von Kellenbach 1994, p 20 and Rieger 1987a, p 6
23 von Kellebach 1994, p21
24 von Kellenbach 1987, p 41-42
25 Ruether 1975, p 105, Plaskow 1989, p 301
26 von Kellenbach 1987, p 42,
27 Ruether 1975, p 106
28 von Kellenbach 1987, p 41-42

188
Exposing the similar structures of anti-Judaism and misogyny helps us to analyse and understand both phenomena. This is a shared agenda for Christian and Jewish feminists.

There is, however, according to von Kellenbach among others, also an ethical demand on feminist theology to be sensitive to all kinds of oppression:

I became able to listen and to take in Jewish pain because I connected it to my own experience of hurt and anger as a woman. I tried to confront anti-Semitism as I would expect men to deal with sexism. Just as sexism is men’s problem because it is men who rape, hate, discriminate and beat women, so anti-Semitism is the problem of Gentiles.29

Further, she argues, “the awareness of multiple oppressions gives feminist theologians the tools to analyse and confront anti-Semitism”,30 and finally that “[s]ince feminists have no stake in maintaining religious institutions, we have a unique opportunity for radical dialogue”.31

The Feminist Critique of Religious Traditions

Dealing with the question “how to survive as a feminist in a patriarchal religion”32 is the main task where Jewish and Christian feminists must learn from and support one another. Jewish feminist Blu Greenberg mentions “questions of authority, access to religious leadership, language, communal status, our place in religious history, and the core issue, what is or is not divine truth vis-à-vis women”33 as items on a shared agenda. And Judith Plaskow attests to the shared agenda of 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.34

A creative suggestion for Jewish-Christian feminist dialogue is to treat the concept of covenant from a feminist perspective. Annette Daum and Deborah McCauley criticize malestream Jewish-Christian dialogue for being unable to avoid religious triumphalism in their treatment of this issue because it is “delimited by the hierarchical structures of religious

29 von Kellenbach 1994, p 3
30 von Kellenbach 1994, p 28
31 von Kellenbach 1994, p 30
32 Daum & McCauley 1983, p 149
33 Greenberg 1990, p 4
34 Plaskow 1991, p 99
institutions”.35 The key question for feminists is, they say: “Just what do these concepts and the religious reality they foster – concepts such as ‘covenant’ – mean in terms of human experience?”36

A male-centred understanding of covenant is detrimental, Daum and McCauley argue, 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.”37 They highlight two themes in covenant theology which are especially problematic for women: the salvific significance of the shedding of male blood (by circumcision and the blood sacrifice of Jesus, respectively);38 and the marriage metaphor, the historical assumption of which is women’s subjection to men.39

A feminist understanding of covenant could “refocus […] from ‘election and exclusiveness’ to ‘responsibility and inclusiveness’”, responsibility being “hyphenated to read ‘response-ability’, the ability to respond.”40 The interpretative matrix for covenant should be hesed (steadfast, loyal love) instead of hierarchy, Daum and McCauley conclude.41

When it comes to the exegesis of the Scriptures shared by Jews and Christians, Christian feminists have had to learn not to take the easy way out by perpetuating anti-Jewish stereotypes.42 However, there are also many positive lessons to learn from the creative Jewish tradition of text interpretation. For example, the midrash is a genre taken up by feminist theologians. But a lot remains to be done in this area.43

35 Daum & McCauley 1983, p 163
36 Daum & McCauley 1983, p 163
37 Daum & McCauley 1983, p163
38 This has been further developed in Ahlstrand 2002
39 Daum & McCauley 1983, pp 164-165
40 Daum & McCauley 1983, p 166
41 Daum & McCauley 1983, p 167
42 In feminist biblical commentaries there are conscious efforts to deal with this, and allow greater complexity. Examples of this are Edna Brocke’s “Do the Origins Already Contain the Malady” in A Feminist Companion to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament (Brenner 1996); Judith Plaskow’s “Anti-Judaism in Feminist Christian Interpretation” in Searching the Scriptures Vol 1 (Fiorenza 1993-1994); Katharina von Kellenbach’s “Overcoming the Teaching of Contempt” in A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible (Brenner & Fontaine 1997); Ilse Müllner’s “Lethal Differences” in A Feminist Companion to the Bible/Judges (Brenner 1999) ; Schottroff et al 1997; Schottroff 1995.
43 Chana Safrai, in a discussion in ESWTR Yearbook 1997, has pointed out how the Jewish “culture of controversy” and acceptance of diversity of opinion could help feminist theology come over the notion that criticism is by definition destructive. (Safrai 1997) At a course on gender in the three monotheistic religions at the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem in 1999, we were all very impressed with biblical scholar Marcie Lenk’s feminist appropriation of Jewish interpretation techniques. Unfortunately, this is not something that seems to have been taken up by Christian feminist scholars.
Daum and McCauley take the issue of abortion as a case study of how, when informed by Jewish interpretative tradition, feminist exegesis of Exodus 21:22-23 can help to create a more balanced Bible-based approach than that of fundamentalists.\textsuperscript{44}

Jewish scrutiny of feminist Christology like that of Judith Plaskow referred to above,\textsuperscript{45} can force Christian feminists to deepen their Christological thinking. Katharina von Kellenbach also argues that when Christian feminists can no longer use the “Jesus-was-a-feminist” slogan uncritically, this can force them to legitimate their feminism through references to their own experience, rather than to semi-fundamentalist Biblical arguments. “No-one becomes a feminist because Jesus was one”, she states.\textsuperscript{46}

There are other issues where Jewish and feminist critique can come together. Mary C. Boys brings together Delores Williams’ womanist critique of the theology of the cross with the complicity of this theology in exacerbating anti-Judaism. In the history of anti-Judaism, the cross is the symbol of the charge of deicide, and plays a part in the charges of ritual murder.\textsuperscript{47}

**Feminist Anti-Judaism as a Test Case**

Another approach to confronting feminist anti-Judaism is as a “test-case” of how deeply patriarchal thought-patterns are ingrained even in feminists.\textsuperscript{48}

Confronting feminist anti-Judaism, says Judith Plaskow,

> is part of a process through which we face the fact that \textit{there is no reason} why becoming a feminist should suddenly free us from the other forms of hatred that mark our world or the groups to which we belong; that without continual self-examination and vigilance we are as likely to use feminism to perpetuate other forms of domination as to overcome them; and that feminism at best commits us to struggle against traditional forms of dominance, it does not guarantee that we will be successful.\textsuperscript{49}

To Plaskow, the issue of Christian feminist anti-Judaism is part of the larger question how feminists can learn to appreciate and celebrate diversity.\textsuperscript{50} Thus, being on the watch against anti-Judaism is to be done not just on behalf of the Jews, but as being essential for the development of feminist theology.

\textsuperscript{44} Daum & McCauley 1983, pp167-173
\textsuperscript{45} Cf. section 5.1.1
\textsuperscript{46} Von Kellenbach 1987, p 45
\textsuperscript{47} Boys 1994
\textsuperscript{48} Wacker 1987
\textsuperscript{49} Plaskow 1991, p 100, italics in original
\textsuperscript{50} Plaskow 1991, pp 99-100
5.2 A Heated Debate in Germany

Having taken place mainly in the USA, the temperature of the anti-Judaism debate was heightened when it reached Germany in the late 1980s. Here it was sparked by a review by Katharina von Kellenbach of Gerda Weiler’s *Ich Verwerfe im Lande des Krieges* in *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* where she severely criticized Weiler for exhibiting an unreflected anti-Judaism in her biblical research on matriarchy.

Von Kellenbach herself comes from a German family, where the unmentionable family secret was an uncle’s complicity in the Holocaust. It was an encounter with a fellow woman student in the USA, who was studying to become a rabbi, that made von Kellenbach realize that her perception of Judaism was distorted. This background compelled her to take her chosen community, that of feminist theology, to task about the issue of anti-Judaism.51

The debate raged in three issues of the German “journal for religiously interested women” *Schlangenbrut* in 1987. It would eventually lead to a firm stand on the part of German Christian feminist theologians against anti-Judaism through seminars and publications.52 The *Schlangenbrut* debate raises some interesting issues, and I will therefore relate it in some detail.

No. 16 contained an article by, and an interview with, American Jewish feminist Susannah Heschel in which she was critical of Christian feminist theology; there was also a call for conscientization about anti-Semitism in feminist theology by Nicole Zunhammer; and reports from dialogue events that had involved attacks on feminist theologians, especially Gerda Weiler, who, according to the authors of the articles, were not presented in a nuanced manner but were rather vilified. They felt that the discussion should have been held inside the feminist movement before being let out to a public that was hostile to it.53

The latter sentiment was echoed in the many letters the editors received in response to this issue – never before had there been so many, or such strong, reactions.54 The next two issues continued the theme of anti-Semitism. All letters were published, and the editors followed up the theme with an interview with, as well as an article by Gerda Weiler, who declared her

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51 Von Kellenbach 1994, pp 1-14
52 Two seminars with Christian and Jewish feminists were arranged at the *Kirchentag* 1989 and 1991, two anthologies were published: Christiane Schaumberger’s *Weil wir nicht vergessen wollen... zu einer Theologie im deutscher Kontext* and Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz’ *Verdrängte Vergangenheit, die uns bedrängt*, a manifesto against anti-Judaism by leading feminist theologians was published in *Schlangenbrut* No 21. An example of post-Holocaust feminist theology is Britta Jüngst’s *Auf der Seite des Todes das Leben: Auf dem Weg zu einer christlich-feministischen Theologie nach der Shoah.*
53 Gummel 1987, p 23
54 Röckemann 2004, p 38
willingness to be questioned by and learn from Jewish feminists;\textsuperscript{55} and articles by Katharina von Kellenbach and Marie-Theres Wacker, where they argued for the necessity for feminists to deal with anti-Judaism.

The letters to the editor came mostly from goddess-oriented feminists, and included a vociferous defence of Gerda Weiler, denouncing the criticism of her work as “a monstrosity” (ein Ungeheuerlichkeit).\textsuperscript{56} The scholars who were critical of Weiler were accused of using the sensitive issue of anti-Semitism to denigrate her work in particular, and feminist theology in general,\textsuperscript{57} of projecting their own German guilt-complex onto others,\textsuperscript{58} and it was seen as especially aggravating that von Kellenbach had published her review in a “Männerzeitschrift” (men’s journal).\textsuperscript{59}

Some letters exhibit incomprehension of Susannah Heschel’s identification with Judaism, implying that her solidarity with the Jewish community should come second to her solidarity with women.\textsuperscript{60} Heschel on her part, responded that she was disappointed, not to find a sisterhood that could acknowledge that there is not just one road, but many, for feminists to take.\textsuperscript{61}

Four themes recur in the letters. First: if there is a justified charge of anti-Judaism against feminist theology, the discussion should be kept internal to the movement, in order to avoid the defamation of feminist theology in public debate. Secondly: misogyny and anti-Semitism must be analyzed as two sides of the same problem, i.e. as consequences of patriarchy. Thirdly: the critique of Gerda Weiler is a symptom of women’s internalised self-hatred, their propensity to identify with their oppressors. Fourthly: as the Hebrew Scriptures are part of Christian women’s heritage, they must have the right to criticize them for being patriarchal without being restrained by accusations of anti-Judaism.

The debate in \textit{Schlangenbrut} is typical of a radical feminism that has not yet had to question the idea of a universal sisterhood. By the late 80s American feminists had had to face the critique from not only Jewish, but also Black and Hispanic feminists, who would not see their womanhood as the primary category, but claimed that ethnical belonging was just as important, if not primary. Now German feminists faced the challenge of diversity, and on a topic that German history made extremely sensitive. In

\textsuperscript{55} Rieger 1987b. In a later edition of her book, Weiler has made corrections inspired by this critique
\textsuperscript{56} Schlangenbrut 1987a, pp 34, 36
\textsuperscript{57} Schangenbrut 1987a, p 34
\textsuperscript{58} Schlangenbrut 1987a, p 34; 1987b, p 31
\textsuperscript{59} Schlangenbrut 1987b, p 30
\textsuperscript{60} Schlangenbrut 1987a, pp 31, 33, 34, 1987b, p 37
\textsuperscript{61} Schlangenbrut 1987b, p 29
addition, this was a time, when in the recent *Historikerstreit* revisionist historians had attempted to free Germans from the guilt of the past.62

The debate exposed a painful dilemma: though oppressed groups have a lot in common, they also may have interests that clash, making cooperation difficult. Here we have two vulnerable parties: a newly-born feminist theology, struggling for its place in academy and church against conservative forces who want to defame it, and the Jewish community with centuries of experience of persecution. The ideas of self-hatred and identification with the oppressor appear in both groups, as a reality, but also used as an accusation against those who are perceived as betraying the group by criticizing it.

In those positions, criticism is difficult to give and to receive. There is not as much “hearing into speech” as “non-hearing into accusations-and-defence”.

5.3 “Postcolonial” Repercussions

The dilemma of two vulnerable parties, who combine shared agendas with conflicting interests, is exacerbated when it comes to womanist and Third World feminist theologians, and not least the Palestinian-Israeli question. On the one hand, Third World and Black women share with Jewish feminists the dual commitment to women’s liberation and their ethnic community, on the other there might be clashes between the interests of these ethnic groups, as well as difficulties with Biblical interpretation. When it comes to the conflict between Palestinians and Israeli’s, the conflicting interests are more obvious, but we shall also see that women of the two communities have unique opportunities for dialogue.

5.3.1 A Roundtable on Postcolonial Bible Interpretation

The problems are illustrated in a Roundtable Discussion on “Anti-Judaism and Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* Spring 2004.63 Jewish feminist Amy-Jill Levine challenges Christian Third World feminist theologians about the anti-Judaism she claims has “infected” their biblical interpretation.

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63 In the discussion, Amy-Jill Levine admits to using the word ”post-colonial” somewhat inaccurately, in that the theologians she mentions do not work in a post-colonial theoretical framework but rather a liberationist one, but they do so in a post-colonial situation. I use the word in the headline in this latter sense, and therefore put it between inverted commas.
Levine expresses her disappointment that “feminists conscientiatized by colonialism” do not recognize the mechanisms of “othering” of Jews in the New Testament and Christian interpretative tradition.  

She gives a plethora of examples of how feminist theologians from the Third World reiterate all the anti-Jewish stereotypes in feminist theology described above. But it is not only “basic Western anti-Jewish argument, it is the colonizer’s rhetoric”, Levine argues. The colonizers characterize colonized culture as monolithic and static, distinguish themselves from indigenous practices and values, exaggerate gender inequality to show its own beneficence, offer false comparisons, misrepresent and ridicule cultural practices – and these feminist theologians do the same towards Jewish culture.

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.

Levine explains this in Bourdieu’s terms: “systemic injustice is part of […] the ‘habitus’, and thus it invariably threatens to co-opt those who oppose it”. This is what happens when “readers identify the evils of their own circumstances as an elitist Judaism, which both they and Jesus oppose”.

Respondents to Levine’s challenge were Kwok Pui-lan, Musimbi Kanyoro, Adele Reinhartz, Hisako Kinukawa and Elaine Wainwright. Basically, the question is: can anti-Judaism/anti-Semitism be subsumed under all evils that come with kyriarchy, or does it fall under its own category, and must be highlighted as such? Is anti-Judaism/anti-Semitism a unique phenomenon?

For Levine, Reinhartz and Wainwright, Jewish and Christian First World women, anti-Judaism is a special case which takes on an ontological quality, a “disease” in Levine’s words, which Reinhartz points out is spreading now to worldviews where it was formerly absent, and, according to Wainwright, there is a “profound anti-Judaizing of the psyche”. In her closing reply,
Levine finds that the responses from the Third World women confirm that her “diagnosis” was correct, and fears that not even the symptoms can be alleviated.\textsuperscript{71}

For the Third World women, however, anti-Judaism is only one of the many evils that plague the human community, and one for which they refuse to take any responsibility. Anti-Semitism is not on the agenda of African women, who for 15 years have been cooperating across religious boundaries in the Circle of Concerned African Theologians, argues Kanyoro. If Levine reads anti-Semitism into their work, “she is reading herself into a fight where it does not exist”.\textsuperscript{72}

African people identify with the Jewish people through their closeness to the “Old Testament”, and this identification can be a problem, Kanyoro admits, “because they critique Jewish biblical culture in the same way they critique African culture” and “[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”.\textsuperscript{73}

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.\textsuperscript{74}

Apparently Kanyoro can see the problem with this appropriation of Hebrew Scriptures, but she refuses to acknowledge its urgency for Levine. Partly I interpret this as an emotional reaction: resentment at the indifference shown by the rest of the world for the enormous problems facing Africa, while the suffering of the Jewish people in the Holocaust is still the ultimate paradigm of suffering. Kanyoro makes a comparison with 9/11: while it was a terrible event, it is not the “defining moment of history for everyone” – likewise, the Jewish fate under the Nazis “should not become the basis on which all theological works are read”.\textsuperscript{75}

Kanyoro urges Levine and other feminist theologians to “engage African women on the subject of African pain instead of only reading their own pain into African women’s theological literature”, and concludes with the hope that “if we stay long enough, talking at this table, Levine and I might learn together to have compassion for each other’s suffering”.\textsuperscript{76}

Kinukawa echoes this perception that Jewish feminists are too preoccupied with their own issues to be willing to listen to others,\textsuperscript{77} and

\textsuperscript{71} Levine 2004, p 126
\textsuperscript{72} Kanyoro 2004, pp 106-107
\textsuperscript{73} Kanyoro 2004, p 108
\textsuperscript{74} Kanyoro 2004, p 109-110
\textsuperscript{75} Kanyoro 2004, p 110
\textsuperscript{76} Kanyoro 2004, p 111
\textsuperscript{77} Kinukawa 2004, p 118
Kwok also acknowledges the emotional aspect of the debate when she invites Levine to “enter into conversation about the kind of pain and suffering of the majority of women of the world as described by the authors she cites”.\(^{78}\) The issue at hand is to make Third World women’s voices heard, and Kwok expresses a concern similar to that discussed in connection with the *Schlangenbrut* debate, that “Levine’s and other white female scholars’ critique of anti-Judaism in these writings might lead to the further marginalization of these voices”.\(^{79}\)

Kwok, who has in many instances shown great sensitivity to Jewish concerns and pointed out the intersection of anti-Judaism, sexism and colonialism,\(^{80}\) also brings the debate to an analytical level, as she offers some constructive suggestions for how the perceived anti-Judaism in Third World women’s writings can be understood in another way through post-colonial theory. The fact that they identify “the Jews” in the Bible text, and not the Romans, with their oppressors can be attributed to the fact that

in a colonial setting, the oppression of the colonialists is often not felt intimately and immediately, for the colonialists, members of the upper class, rarely mix with the people. It is the disciplinary power of the indigenous elites employed as colonial agents and accomplices that is most keenly felt.\(^{81}\)

She further suggests that post-colonial criticism, which “focuses on the impact of the empire […] and its representations in the text”, can “provide a corrective to the one-sided blaming of ‘the Jews’”.\(^{82}\)

Kwok also argues that post-colonial theory can reveal that the claim that “Jesus was a feminist” has its roots in the “save brown women” rhetoric of the missionaries.\(^{83}\)

In this Roundtable, there is a simultaneous intellectual willingness to understand and grapple with the issue of anti-Semitism in “post-colonial Biblical interpretation”, and an emotional resistance against it. This emotional resistance is partly attributable to the fact that Third World women do not feel the complicity in actual anti-Judaism that Western women do, and partly to their experience of being marginalized by Western discourse. In a context of race discourse, they also perceive Jewish women as being white.\(^{84}\) I accept their protestations that the texts are in no way

\(^{78}\) Kwok 2004, p 104  
\(^{79}\) Kwok 2004, p 106  
\(^{80}\) Cf Kwok 1992b, 1995a, pp 71-95; 2002b, pp 77-78; 2005 pp 93-99  
\(^{81}\) Kwok 2004, p 105  
\(^{82}\) Kwok 2004, p 105  
\(^{83}\) Kwok 2004, p 102; The expression “white men saving brown women from brown men” was coined by Gayatri Spivak to characterize the colonizers’ rhetoric about gender.  
\(^{84}\) During the Apartheid era in South Africa, Jews were classified as whites
intentionally anti-Jewish, and would suggest that the term “potential anti-Judaism” is especially appropriate when it comes to Third World feminist theology.

Though the Third World women’s responses in this roundtable are reminiscent of the German women’s in Schlangenbrut – the fear that feminist theology might be derogated and marginalized, the insistence on the right to criticize the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as the high emotional pitch of the argument – it is important to keep the different contexts in mind. While the German women were refusing to take responsibility for a historical burden that could justifiably be argued was theirs to shoulder, the Third World women protested against imputed guilt for which they had no cause to take responsibility. On the other hand, the present circulation of The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion all over the world, not just in the Arab world but also in Latin America and Japan shows that anti-Semitism is gaining a foothold even in the Third World.

The question of “ownership” of the Hebrew Scriptures gets a new twist in the Third World context. Is the Hebrew part of the Bible primarily a Jewish or a Western product? Post-colonialism provides a critique of the Western/colonialist interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, shedding light on how sacred texts can be used and abused.

I interpret Amy-Jill Levine’s concluding response as a reaction to the emotional content of the responses which prevents her from appreciating their suggestions for interpreting the texts and understanding the mechanisms behind their perceived anti-Judaism. As the examples of Jewish-Palestinian dialogue in Chapter Three show, the emotional content in dialogue must be acknowledged. Acknowledging it makes it possible to transcend it. Though Levine expresses despair about the possibility of dialogue, I find there is enough of constructive suggestions and expressed willingness to go on talking, to be hopeful about the future of this encounter.

If this encounter is handled constructively, Third World feminist theologians’ participation in Jewish-Christian dialogue can be seen in terms of a “third space”, which could free the dialogue from the constraints of guilt and defensiveness that hamper the European context. Postcolonial

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85 Mukti Barton states that “Antisemitism has never been part of the history of Christians in the Indian subcontinent” (Barton 1999, p 140) and claims that because of this, Asian feminist theology is capable of going beyond Western antisemitism in dealing with Hebrew scriptures. Another example from Asia is an article in Voices from the Third World, where Sarah Anderson Rajarigam speaks of the “Jewish, Black and Dalit Holocausts”, treating the Jewish Holocaust as one among many atrocities humans have inflicted upon each other (Rajarigam 2004).

86 www.adl.org/special_reports/protocols/protocols_contemporary.asp, Anti-Defamation League Homepage

87 The concept “third space” is attributed to Homi K. Bhabha, and refers to the space “in-between” cultures, or in between positions of duality.
theory can expose the intersection of colonialist discourse, Christian triumphalism and anti-Judaism.

5.3.2 Womanist Parallels

The appropriation of the Hebrew Scriptures also an important issue also in womanist theology. Delores Williams is one of Katharina von Kellenbach’s targets in *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, for her interpretation of the Hagar story.

In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams uses the Genesis story about Hagar as paradigmatic for African-American women’s experiences of racism and sexism. Von Kellenbach, however, finds that

the theological embrace of the Egyptian slave who suffers under her Hebrew mistress leads to a troubling role reversal: the former victims, the Israelites, become slave-holders, while the former victimizers, the Egyptians, are now represented as/by a “female slave of African descent”.

She also argues that Williams’ pointing out “the fact that she does not name her God in accord with their [Sarai and Abram’s] patriarchal traditions” (1993:25) is potentially anti-Jewish.

This is a very clear-cut example of the clash between the interests of two oppressed groups, and of an interpretation that is liberating for one group can be used against the other.

Must not a person whose history involves her ancestors being held as slaves have the right to identify with a slave woman in her inherited Scriptures? When the Genesis text states that Sarah and Abraham were actually slave-holders, do we really in the long run do the Jewish community a favour by bypassing or hiding this fact? Is not rather the fact that the Bible shows how the roles of victims and perpetrators can change over history, something that is vital for feminist and other liberative theologies? Must Hagar’s independent naming of God be seen as anti-Judaic rather than as a celebration of the diversity within the Bible, and of an oppressed woman’s strength in naming her own experience?

While I do find von Kellenbach oversensitive in this case, it must also be said that she points out that Williams wrote this text at a time of “tensions

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88 von Kellenbach 1994, p 87
89 von Kellenbach 1994, p 88
90 Williams is not the only feminist theologian who has made use of the Hagar story, cf Tamez 1986 who interprets the story from a Latin American perspective; Levine 2001b who puts the story into a Christian-Muslim-Jewish dialogue perspective; and Barton 1999 who makes Hagar paradigmatic for women’s dialogue even beyond the “People of the Book”. Cf section 6.1.4 below
between the Black and Jewish communities and of an increasing acceptance of theories which blame Jews for much of the slave trade”. While this could only be a flagrant example of “guilt by association” – von Kellenbach produces no evidence that Williams was involved in any anti-Jewish rhetoric – it again highlights the complexity of these issues.

This increasing anti-Semitism among the Black population in the USA is testified to in a chapter in Letty Cotton Pogrebin’s Deborah, Golda and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America. There she describes her experiences from a Black-Jewish women’s dialogue group, where they among other things were struggling with the anti-Semitic rhetoric of some Afro-American leaders, and the difficulties Afro-American women had in condemning them.

Many of the Roundtable issues echo in Pogrebin’s text. There we find the same “competition in suffering” – is slave trade or “Holocaust” worse? – and the same fear of being vilified as a group when criticized for anti-Jewish statements by members of the group, as well as fear on the part of Black women of being marginalized by the ability of Jewish women to push their agenda.

Pogrebin’s text is a testimony to the complexity of issues concerning different doubly-oppressed groups, but also to the strength that comes out of grappling with them in a context where the common experiences as women and the separate experiences of the Black and Jewish communities are held in tension so that “after hours of wrangling and feuding, we can still look forward to the next meeting and leave each other with a hug”.

5.3.3 Jewish-Palestinian Dialogue

Letty Cotton Pogrebin gives her chapter on Jewish-Palestinian dialogue the title “The ‘P’ Words”, referring to Palestinians and Peace, indicating what a contentious issue this is in the American Jewish community, as well as in Jewish-Christian dialogue. As we have seen in Chapter Three, feminist interfaith dialogue involving Jews, Christians and/or Muslims cannot avoid the Israeli-Palestinian issue; discussions can be extremely difficult but also rewarding.

One example of Jewish-Christian dialogue with a clear pro-Israeli bias is the Women of Faith in the 80s conferences, the papers from which are published in Women of Faith in Dialogue. One of the impetuses behind these dialogues was the experiences of Jewish women at the U. N. Decade of

91 von Kellenbach 1994, p 89
92 Pogrebin 1991, pp 275-311
93 Pogrebin 1991, p 284
94 Pogrebin 1991, p 329
Women conferences in 1975 and 1980, when Palestinian women put their agenda forward. Although the introductory chapter states that in the conferences there were conflicting convictions about Israel, there are several contributions supporting Israel, claiming that “anti-Zionism is a new garb for an old pathology”, but none giving the Palestinian perspective.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, who, as we have seen, analyzed Christian anti-Judaism and urged the churches to radically re-think their theology in the light thereof in *Faith and Fratricide*, is also a champion of Palestinian rights. After the publication of *Faith and Fratricide*, she was for some years engaged in Jewish-Christian dialogue. However, she eventually felt that in these dialogues she was being co-opted in a hidden pro-Israeli agenda. She then engaged in the Palestinian Human Rights Campaign, and with her husband, Herman Ruether, wrote *The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israel-Palestinian Conflict*, which she claims made her “a pariah in the official Jewish-Christian dialogues”.

Many people found it hard to understand how she could maintain everything she had said in *Faith and Fratricide* while at the same time criticizing Zionism and the policies of the State of Israel. Ruether views the two books as complementary, and claims that the same basic principles underlie both, that is, principles of justice: “religion should be used to foster justice and mutual flourishing of both communities, not the domination of one over the other”.

Katharina von Kellenbach is of a different opinion. In *The Wrath of Jonah*, she says, Rosemary and Herman Ruether deploy the strategy of “trivializing” anti-Judaism, when they put Jewish fear of Palestinian attack on a par with Palestinian suffering under Israeli occupation. She further repudiates as “universalizing” the Ruethers’ argument that “concern about Jewish suffering” must be grounded in “concern for all human suffering”.

*A Passion for Life: Stories and Folk Arts of Palestinian and Jewish Women* is a project that engendered interesting reflections by Kristin Metz in an article in *JFSR*. The project, which took place in the USA, consisted in women of Palestinian and Jewish origin creating an exhibition of life stories and folk art from their respective communities. The project goals included: “explore the potential for communication that might be inherent in the

95 Powers 1987, p 5
96 Topping 1987, p 124. Other essays in this volume supporting Israel – though not always uncritically - are those of Umansky, Gillen and Gibel
97 Gross & Ruether 2001, p 58
98 Gross & Ruether 2001, p 59
99 Ruether 2000, p 72
100 von Kellenbach 1994, p 135
101 von Kellenbach 1994, p 136
102 Metz 1990
parallel/similar position of women in the two cultures” and to change the stereotypes of Palestinians and Jews.\textsuperscript{103}

While these goals were eventually achieved, and the exhibition was a great success, the process revealed that “cross-cultural communication required greater personal risk and engendered more hurt, fear, and confusion than they had ever anticipated”.\textsuperscript{104}

Issues reminiscent of those described above in the Roundtable emerged. The women discovered that a word could carry different, even opposite symbolic meanings for the two communities.\textsuperscript{105} They expressed frustration at not being heard by the other women, and, in Metz’ analysis, they were “unable to hear the support offered by the Other”\textsuperscript{106}, much as I found the participants in the Roundtable on postcolonial biblical interpretation could not “hear” each other.

But in spite of all the difficulties, they were able to work together. Metz attributes this to the fact that the project could allow differences, and also provide opportunities for relationships, which developed into friendships. This was possible, according to the facilitators, because they were working towards an end product, which distinguished them from a dialogue group. The common concrete goal forced them to compromise and to rely on each other.\textsuperscript{107}

In Metz’ analysis, the remarkable thing about the project was how it dealt with differences. The participants could accept that the two groups have different social and political locations, and therefore different needs, which might even be opposed, and this entailed “accepting the possibility of other meanings for places, words and events which have guided one’s actions, one’s emotions and one’s beliefs”.\textsuperscript{108} The participants became involved in a process of changing and redefining what constitutes meaning in their lives. It was a question of “creating the conditions in which both groups can begin to incorporate the implications of the Others’ perspective”.\textsuperscript{109}

The project succeeded, according to Metz, in “bringing to the surface what Michel Foucault calls the ‘subjugated knowledge’ of the marginalized”.\textsuperscript{110}

In Metz’ analysis of this project, we recognize three themes from earlier chapters. We have seen an example of how women’s dialogue is a dialogue from below, and how there was an emphasis on developing relationships

\textsuperscript{103} Metz 1990, p 132
\textsuperscript{104} Metz 1990, p 131
\textsuperscript{105} Metz 1990, p 144
\textsuperscript{106} Metz 1990, p 145
\textsuperscript{107} Metz 1990, pp 146-148
\textsuperscript{108} Metz 1990, p 149, italics in original
\textsuperscript{109} Metz 1990, p 149
\textsuperscript{110} Metz 1990, p 151

202
And again, we find the feminist critique of conventional dialogue, the insistence that to be worthwhile, it must centre on concrete life issues.

In connection with this, a remark by Judith Plaskow about dialogue is pertinent. In an article in *JSFR* she claims to be “a firm non-believer in Jewish-Christian dialogue” in the sense of “dialogue for its own sake”, which she finds too often breeds dishonesty, defensiveness, guilt, or breast-beating, none of which is particularly useful for dealing with anti-Judaism.111

Like the participants in the Women’s Interfaith Journey and the Faith Renewed conference maintained that dialogue must entail “talking about something”,112 Plaskow denounces “talking about talking with each other”,113 which, in her experience, is what conventional dialogue amounts to.

### 5.4 Conclusion: Stumbling Blocks and Stepping Stones in Feminist Jewish-Christian Dialogue

The example of feminist Jewish-Christian dialogue highlights the complexity of feminist approaches to interfaith dialogue: the possibilities and perils, the need to acknowledge the emotional component in dialogue and the reality of shared and conflicting agendas. It also illustrates the importance of taking difference seriously, and the benefit of having a concrete task as a basis for dialogue. As the debate on anti-Judaism enters the Third World, post-colonial discourse can provide new perspectives.

The “stepping stones”, the unique possibilities of feminist approaches to Jewish-Christian dialogue, include the shared agendas of an exodus from the kyriarchal captivity of religious traditions, and of exposing the connections between anti-Judaism and misogyny. Thus, women’s feminist experiences provide common ground, but women’s traditional experiences play a part, too, as the project described by Metz shows. Explorations of feminist interpretations of concepts common to the two traditions, such as “covenant” have been pursued, but much remains to be done in this area.

The “stumbling blocks” include anti-Judaic tendencies in Christian feminist theology, and the related question of “ownership” of the Hebrew Scriptures and the right to criticize them. The question of anti-Judaism is complicated by the fact that two oppressed groups are, as it were, competing in suffering. This is especially the case when it comes to Afro-American or

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111 Plaskow 1991, p 99
112 Cf section 3.3.2 above
113 Plaskow 1991, p 99
Third World women. The complexity of kyriarchal power relations are made apparent: factors of gender, ethnicity, class and geographical locations interact, there is not only one centre, and the roles of victims and perpetrators are not fixed.

The discussions related in this chapter confirm Women’s Interfaith Journey participant Annie Namala’s conviction that there always is a “key issue” that must be dealt with in interfaith dialogue.\(^{114}\) However, we have also seen that there may be conflicting key issues. In this case, the question concerns the understanding of anti-Judaism. For many Jewish, as well as Christian feminists in the West, this is the key issue, the “test case” for feminist theology, whereas for Third World feminist theologians, it is a minor issue among many more pressing concerns, and to put it high on the agenda is seen as an example of Euro-centrism.

One way of resolving this dilemma could be to take Metz’ analysis of the folk art project seriously: acknowledging and affirming different agendas, or “key issues”. This would mean that Third World theologians should respect that for American and European Jewish feminists, anti-Judaism is the key issue, and in solidarity take it seriously, just as Jewish feminists should respect that Third World theologians appropriate the Hebrew Scriptures to shed light on their key issues. The explanation for the relative success of dialogue projects involving Jewish/Israeli and Palestinian women could be on the one hand that there is a real task to deal with in a concrete situation, on the other hand that it is so apparent that they have different agendas, though they share the longing for peace.

Post-colonial theories can also be helpful by pointing out the power mechanisms that pit oppressed groups against each other, and the relationship between colonialism, anti-Semitism and the subordination of women.

Another fruitful approach for Christian feminist theologians to the accusations of anti-Judaism would be to examine it not chiefly for their Jewish sisters’ sake, but as a way of scrutinizing and deepening their theology, as a quest for truth. Third World theologians might feel justified in using the Hebrew Scriptures as parallels to their indigenous customs whether they really are so or not, but will they really be doing valid theology on false presumptions? Allowing for differences can only contribute to greater complexity and depth.

This again is especially true when it comes to the crucial issue of Christology. Judith Plaskow’s observations on Christian feminists’ difficulties in handling this may be painful to take in, but all the more important to take seriously.

\(^{114}\) Cf. section 2.2.4 above
Rosemary Ruether’s insistence that confronting the structure of anti-Judaism should be done not only in solidarity with the Jewish community, but as an essential task of revitalizing the Christian tradition for its own sake is very important. The structures that underpin anti-Judaism are also detrimental to women: the loss of the prophetic voice, the reification of dialectics into dualisms etc. It is a matter of keeping two critical agendas together, but I find that “guilt and breast beating” are still more prevalent than constructive theologizing.

Much has been done in feminist biblical scholarship, but this area has not yet risen above the level of guarding against anti-Judaism. There is still a lack of constructive dialogue on how Christian feminists can responsibly appropriate the Hebrew Scriptures as theirs. Applying the principle of allowing different agendas could be a way of developing an exciting cooperation between Jewish and Christian scholars. What would a Christian feminist exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures, that has learned from Jewish interpretative tradition and distanced itself from a patriarchal and anti-Judaic Christian history of reception, but maintains a Christian agenda, look like?

As we have seen, the debates in *Schlangenbrut* and *JFSR* had a high emotional content. The experiences of dealing with conflict at the women’s conferences described in Chapter Three, as well as Metz’ analysis of the folk art project, could help in acknowledging the emotional element and disentangling it from the intellectual content of the debates.

The critique of malestream dialogue that we encountered in Chapter Two and Three recurs in the material on Jewish-Christian dialogue. Learnings from feminist approaches to Jewish-Christian dialogue, that are applicable to the wider interfaith scene, include the acknowledgement of shared and different agendas, as well as the complexity of power relations where various forms of oppression intersect, and it is not always clear who is victim and who is perpetrator.
Asian feminist theology poses a double challenge: It is a challenge to both
Asian and Western malestream theology, as well as to Western feminist
theology. Chapter Three contained an overview of how religious plurality
has played a part in Asian feminist theology through regional conferences.
We will now take a closer look at this theology.

The relevance of treating “Asian theology” as a unified whole has been
discussed in Chapter One. “Asian theology” derives its specific character
from relating to the Asian religious and socio-political context. Furthermore,
Asian feminist theology is characterized by being a “movement” with its
own journal and resource centre, factors that contribute to a certain
commonality. At the same time however, Asian feminist theology is
internally diverse and contains different distinct voices.

We will now first get acquainted with central themes in Asian feminist
theology, and then specifically in the works of some of these distinct voices:
Gabriele Dietrich, Chung Hyun Kyung, Kwok Pui-lan and Wong Wai-ching.

6.1 Asian Christian Feminist Theology – an Overview

Feminist theology in Asia is a strong movement, that took off comparatively
early and has been able to secure an institutional basis. CCA’s Women’s
Desk was established in 1981, the journal In God’s Image published its first
issue in 1982 (by comparison Schlangenbrut started in 1980, and the Journal
of Feminist Studies in Religion in 1985), and the Asian Women’s Resource
Center for Culture and Theology (AWRC) was founded in 1988. But before
these events, Marianne Katoppo had already published Compassionate and
Free, the first “Asian woman’s theology” in 1979.

Almost every text on feminist theology in Asia starts with a justification
for the use of the word “feminist”, defending it against accusations of being
a “western” concept with no relevance for the Asian context. A special effort
is made to prove that feminism is not contrary to the notion of motherhood.
Typically, Mary John Mananzan and Sun Ai Lee Park argue that
“(f)eminism […] is derived from the experience of women giving birth, and nurturing their children and family”.¹

Unlike Black and Hispanic feminists in the USA, who call themselves womanist and mujerista, Asian feminists have chosen not to create a concept of their own.² One reason for this is the lack of a common language other than English.³ It is the political implications of the word feminism, that it is “theology from the perspective of women in struggle”⁴ which makes them stick to this concept in spite of its “western” connotations.⁵

Asian feminist theology is a movement that should be seen in the context of various liberation movements, and as a part of the women’s movement. It is produced in the context of women’s groups, for the benefit of “ordinary women”. In God’s Image is a very readable journal, mixing theological articles with life stories, poems, political analyses and a wealth of art expressions. Asian feminist theologians often stress the creative nature of Asian feminist theology: it is expressed not only in words, but in art, drama, song and celebration. It is done “with passion and compassion”.⁶

It must be emphasized that Asian feminist theology is above all a liberation theology. For the purpose of my dissertation, I will highlight “the many religions” theme, but the primary concern for Asian feminist theologians is “the many poor”. Most issues of In God’s Image deal with violence against women, trafficking, migrant workers, globalization, ecology etc., and this is the backdrop also for what they say about religious plurality. The main reason for engaging in interfaith dialogue is to join with women of other faiths in the struggle against oppression.

It is important to remember that many Asian feminist theologians do not hold academic degrees in theology. Much more than is the case in the West, Asian feminist theology is a contextual, praxis-oriented theology, that has developed in workshops among ordinary church women. Most of those who publish articles in the Christian women’s magazine In God’s Image for example may be Bible women, pastors or religious sisters with degrees in social sciences, but no higher theological education. Such education is not as readily available in Asia as in the West, and this is especially the case for women, to whom Catholic seminaries are often closed.

¹ Quoted in Gnanadason 1989a, p 17
² Young Lee Hertig has proposed yinist feminism as an “Asian-American alternative”, but this does not seem to have caught on. Cf Hertig 1998.
³ Kwok 2000, p 9
⁴ Gnanadason 1989b, p 117
⁵ Kwok 2000, p 10
⁶ “With passion and compassion” is the title of an anthology of Third World women’s theology (Fabella & Oduyoye 1988), and the expression recurs in many writings of Asian feminist theologians.
However, the number of feminist theologians who do hold degrees in theology is increasing, many of them having obtained these at universities in the West, among them Chung Hyun Kyung, Gabriele Dietrich, Kwok Pui-lan and Wong Wai-ching, who will receive special attention in this chapter.

The importance of studying Asian religions and dialoguing with their followers is stressed in all presentations of Asian feminist theology. There is a general consensus to make use of what is “liberating” and “life-affirming” in all religious traditions, while acknowledging that they are all steeped in patriarchy. There is, however, a certain gradation, with “popular religion” at the top of the ladder and Confucianism on the bottom rung. The latter is seen as not only promoting patriarchal and hierarchical values, but also, especially in the form of neo-Confucianism, as underpinning capitalism.7

There has been a conscious effort among Asian feminist theologians to create a specifically Asian theology, in spite of cultural differences. This means that deities and concepts like the Indian *Shakti*, Korean shamanism and Japanese bodhisattva *Kwannon*8 have left their national moorings and become universal Asian feminist resources. Since the 1990s, however, the earlier emphasis on commonality has increasingly given way to affirmation of diversity.9

In 1995, Mary John Mananzan wrote an assessment of 10 years of Asian feminist theology. Here, she presents five hermeneutical principles for Asian women:

1. the full humanity of women
2. the integrity of creation
3. the feminine creative principle as life-giving and life-enhancing
4. the prophetic and liberative voice of women in liberation movement
5. the solidarity of women10

The challenges for the future, according to Sr. Mary John, are focused on religious plurality. Asian feminist theologians should enter into a “deep and serious study of primal religions as well as of Asia’s great religions”, and initiate live dialogues with women of these religions.11

This is a task which Sr. Mary John has engaged in herself, in the feminist interreligious TARA research forum. The forum consists of a core of ten women from different religious backgrounds, who meet annually.

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7 Kwok 1995b
8 There are many spellings of this name: *Kuan-yin, Kwan In* etc, as she appears not only in Japanese but also in Chinese and Korean Buddhism. I will follow the spellings used by the different authors.
9 Kwok 2000, p 40
10 Mananzan 1995, p 44
11 Mananzan 1995, p 48
presentations from the conferences are published. The most recent of these publications is the anthology *Gendering the Spirit*.12

6.1.1 Womanhood, Motherhood and Mangala

One of the most striking differences between Western and Asian feminist theology is the strong emphasis on and positive valuation of motherhood in Asia. While Western feminist theologians do not rate “Mother” very high on a scale of images for God,13 and wrestle with an ambiguous notion of motherhood,14 you find hardly any bad mothers in Asian theology.

Motherhood is almost synonymous with womanhood, and is not exclusively tied to the biological function of mothering. Like “Asia”, it has a symbolic function. Stella Balthazar writes:

> Women’s spirituality is centered in the heart of their capacity to be mothers. The intuitive, the compassionate, the sacrificing, the life-sustaining attitude of mothers must be re-appropriated by women […] The re-appropriation of the mother concept is not only for the women. It primarily applies to the re-appropriation of God as Mother from which flows that society too should become mother-building, a community of persons. Every man must also be a true mother.15

Aruna Gnanadason associates the “feminine principle” shakti with “the Great Mother”, and quotes Swami Vivekananda, who predicted

> that the hope for all creation lies in ‘the resurgence of the Mother into the consciousness of the world’s population, after patriarchal religions had forced her into concealment in the unconscious’.16

However, quoting Mary John Mananzan and Sun Ai Park, she warns that “there can be a danger of condoning the traditional self-effacing masochism of women reinforced in the glorification of motherhood”.17 Therefore, she argues, “feminist hermeneutics must give a new definition to the creativity of motherhood and redefine what the ‘feminine’ means – as a source of life wherever there is death”.18

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12 Ahmed 2002
13 Cf Winter 1994, p 177-179, (interestingly enough, Black women did not fall into this pattern), McFague 1982, pp 177-179
14 White feminists’ uneasy relation to motherhood could be the subject of a dissertation of its own. For a discussion on this, see Tatman 2004, p 317
15 Balthazar 1991, p 181
16 Gnanadason 1989a, p 15
17 Gnanadason 1989a, p 17
Idealization of motherhood is, of course, not an exclusively Asian phenomenon. So is the Asian concept of motherhood identical with that of the “angel of the home” in 19th and early 20th century Europe and USA? While there are definitely similarities, I think there is something more to it.

In the quotations above, we find that according to Asian feminist theologians, motherhood is a metaphor for creativity and spirituality, but it must be reclaimed and redefined. Women through their capacity (but not necessarily concrete experience) of bringing forth new life have a special understanding of this, but it is a human, not a uniquely female, quality.

It is not by chance that the emphasis on motherhood is especially strong among Indian theologians. Motherhood is a strong symbol in India, whose sacred rivers are referred to as mothers, and with its goddesses, who are often, but not exclusively, called mothers. Ursula King has observed that the Indian goddesses who are worshipped as ‘Mother’ are not usually the ones who have children in Hindu mythology. This indicates that “Mother” is a symbol that goes deeper than reproduction and biological functions.

Another Indian concept, that I find is vital for an understanding of particularly Indian, but also Asian feminist theology in general, is mangala. Mangala can be translated as “auspiciousness”, a quality associated with “goodness, prosperity, wellbeing, health, happiness and creativity” and with “all that creates, promotes and maintains life”. This quality is a manifestation of the female principle shakti and is embodied by married women, but also by the devadasis, temple dancers who are symbolically married to the deity.

According to Frédérique Apffel Marglin, who has especially studied the devadasis, the Indian worldview can be said to represent two pairs of opposites: purity and impurity, and auspiciousness and inauspiciousness. The principle of purity and impurity is hierarchical, connected to the public realm, and devalues women, whereas the principle of the auspicious and inauspicious is non-hierarchical, connected to the domestic realm, and in this
realm women are “the creators and the maintainers of life, the sources of prosperity, well-being and pleasure”.24

Mangala is connected with sexuality and manifested only in married women. By performing vrata, rituals that often involve sacrificing her own comfort and well-being to the gods, thereby obtaining good karma, the Hindu wife procures success and well-being for her husband, by transferring her karma to him. This is an explanation for the miserable fate of the Hindu widow. She has lost her mangala, as she has failed to keep her husband alive.

“Health, wellbeing and all that creates, promotes and maintains life”. This is a summary of the Asian feminist project. This is what womanhood and motherhood stands for, and it is these qualities that are to be sought and promoted in theology. Asian feminists reclaim the good qualities of womanhood, while severing them from the connotations with a patriarchal system, applying them to society at large. Mangala should be exercised to benefit men, women and children, and it is made the norm not only for womanhood but for all human existence. Mangala, I argue, is a crucial key to Asian feminist theology.

To understand this more fully, we must take a look at how Asian goddesses and views on femininity are appropriated by Asian feminists.

6.1.2 Goddesses and Feminine Principles

In recent decades, women’s studies in religion and feminist theology have displayed a rising interest in Asian goddesses in, and there is a lively debate on whether or not the goddess “is a feminist”.25

The Goddesses of the Indian pantheon have, however, not made significant inroads into Asian Christian feminism. There may be several reasons for this. One explanation is that contrary to Western feminists, who can have an idealized view of goddess worship, they can see with their own eyes that the worship of goddesses does not automatically go along with a strong position for women in society. Another is that most Indian feminist theologians have solidarity with Dalit women on their agenda, and Vedic goddesses are seen as part of Brahmanic, oppressive religion. As we shall see below, Gabriele Dietrich has taken a greater interest in Dalit goddesses of the “little tradition”. Another aspect of this is that Hindu goddesses, especially Durga, have been appropriated by the women’s section of the Hindutva movement.26

In spite of this, there have been some attempts to reflect on the significance of Hindu goddesses. One of the more elaborate is Indian Old

24 Marglin 1985, p 300
25 Cf. Erndl & Hildebeitel 2000
26 Mendonca 2004, Jeffery 1998 For an explanation of hindutva, see section 2.1.2 above
Testament scholar Monica Melanchton’s comparison of the wisdom goddess *Sarasvati* with the Biblical Wisdom *Sophia* tradition. As we shall see below, the maleness of Jesus has not been as much of a problem for Asian feminists as it has been in the West. Melanchton, however, still thinks Asian women need “the possibility of experiencing a mediator whose sex will not be a hindrance to our total identification with the mediator”27 and should be bolder in imaging Jesus in female metaphors, and accepting a notion of the resurrected Christ who transcends sexual differences. She asks: “is it beneficial to urge and encourage women in India to reflect on the possibility of the divine as a goddess?”28

Melanchton finds many parallels between Sarasvati and Sophia: both are present at the beginning of creation, personify wisdom and knowledge, protect the righteous and bestow riches and wealth on them. They have both been repressed by the patriarchal system and are hence unfinished personalities.29

A problem with both is that they are products of a socio-cultural milieu that is elitist and intellectual, a fact which casts doubts on their relevance for the poor, and their relationship to suffering and death is unresolved. But Melanchton suggests that the unfinished status of Sarasvati and Sophia allows for creative imagination, and their suppression in tradition corresponds to women’s experiences of invisibility, marginality and repression.30

“The fact that Sarasvati symbolizes knowledge, which is denied to women, should become a driving force for women to claim her and own her in order to empower themselves”, argues Melanchton, and proposes that Sarasvati “could be an entry point through which Indian women could understand the divine personification of Sophia in the Hebrew and Christian traditions”.31

Among Hindu feminists, Lina Gupta has reclaimed the fierce, dark and transgressive goddess *Kali* a source of empowerment for women.32 As we will see below, Chung Hyun Kyung finds a source for Christian feminist theology in Kali. Santanu K. Patro, like Melanchton teaching at Gurukul Theological Seminary in Chennai, has written a comprehensive study on the possible significance of Kali for Indian women. Patro draws on sources which claim that the Kali tradition was originally non-Aryan and non-Brahminic, and emphasizes the traditions of “religion as practiced” around

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27 Melanchton 2003, p 3
28 Melanchton 2003, p 11
29 Melanchton 2003, pp 13-14
30 Melanchton 2003, p 14
31 Melanchton 2003, pp 14-15
32 Gupta 1998
Kali. In this manner he can claim Kali as a counter-force against “brahminisation”, a phenomenon, he argues, that affects not only Hinduism but also the Christian churches in India when they practice caste division and dowry, and denigrate women.33

Kali, says Patro, suggests an “alternative womanhood [which] is empowering, transformative and liberative”, and “not only fights for dignity, equality and liberty of women, but also strives to eradicate the social evils, religious prejudices and poverty that are part of Brahminical structure”.34

Catholic theologian A. Metti, scc, finds that the church in India must on the one hand overcome the negative impact of Hindu goddesses who reinforce women’s domestic roles, and on the other learn from the transformative aspects of Kali.35

It is Kali, who appears menacing and cruel but stands for rebirth after death and for fresh life from pain and suffering, who reflects the status of the lower class women, independent in her position, not dependent on any marital status.36

Aruna Gnanadason, programme executive and team coordinator for women’s issues at the WCC, connects to Kali traditions that downplay her violence, and stresses that she, like other goddesses, intervenes to restore peace, to protect and preserve.37 She further highlights the symbolism of blood sacrifices in the Kali cult, and connects it to various fertility cults connected with women’s menstrual blood. Gnanadason boldly argues that Christian feminist hermeneutics must

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\text{go back to India’s past and reclaim this powerful symbol of creativity of women, drawing inspiration from blood – that which cleanses and prepares the environment for new life. ‘This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many…’ (Matt. 26:28).38}
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This connection of women’s menstrual blood with the blood of Christ has also been elaborated by Gabriele Dietrich.39

More than goddesses, it is the “feminine principles” shakti and prakriti that have caught the imagination of Asian feminist theologians. Shakti stands for energy, and prakriti for matter, both of which are aspects of the divine.

33 Patro 2003, p 116
34 Patro 2003, p 129
35 Meuthrath 2005, p 5
36 Metti 2004
37 Gnanadason 1990, p 51
38 Gnanadason 1993, p 41

214
Goddesses are perceived as manifestations of shakti, and women are also seen as sharing in the nature of shakti. The male principle is *purusha*, consciousness. Without the shakti of the goddess who is his consort, the male god could not exist. But it is his purusha that realizes the matter and energy of the female. The female shakti needs to be harnessed by the male principle (the goddess by the god, the woman by the man) lest her energy becomes destructive. This is a world view built on the complementarity model, and an essentialist understanding of gender, which we recognize from Pieris’ theology. Swedish historian of religion Eva Hellman calls this “cosmological essentialism”.40

Complementarity, however, does not play a great part in the theology of Asian feminists. They are generally not interested in men and maleness.41 They pragmatically reclaim the positive qualities associated with the feminine in a holistic manner. When they speak of complementarity, it is as a counterforce to Western hierarchical or antithetical dualisms, stressing the interconnectedness of body and spirit, light and dark, etc. but they seldom draw male and female into the schema.

It appears that they draw on the *Shakti puranas*, a marginal tradition that reverses the androcentric perspective of *Vishnu* and *Shiva puranas*. In the *Shakta* tradition, the Great Goddess, *Devi*, is identified with ultimate reality, the foundation of everything and the superior divinity.42 This is seldom spelled out, as most texts by Asian feminist theologians only make general references to shakti as “the feminine creative principle”, “inner source”, “spiritual energy” etc, rather than give analyses of the concept, but my impression is that they understand it in a monist non-complementary fashion more aligned with Shakta tradition than with mainline Hindu traditions.43

Similarly, Mukti Barton, tutor in Black Theology at Queens Foundation, Birmingham, U.K., draws on the Bengali *bhakti* tradition44, which, she claims, “encouraged Bengalis to transcend the stereotypical gap between masculinity and femininity” and where emotions were seen as the vehicle to access divine love, so that “one of the characteristics that present day Bengali men are proud to own is being emotional, a quality often seen as feminine in the West”.45

40 Hellman 1998, p 58
41 The problematization of masculinity in Western gender studies is conspicuously absent in Asia, but an article by Khamla Basin in a recent festschrift to Gabriele Dietrich could be a sign of an approaching paradigm shift, cf. Bhasin 2004
42 Hellman 1998, pp 51-53
43 Aruna Gnanadason explicitly refers to this tradition, Gnanadason 1991, p 35; 1994, p 77
44 Bhakti is the Hindu tradition that emphazises devotion to God
45 Barton 1999, p 35
Asian feminist theologians often incorporate shakti into the Christian tradition, as when Sri Lankan Franciscan Missionary of Mary, Marlene Perera urges women of Asia to “touch this Spirit within and among us so that we may let loose this ‘shakthi’, the Spirit’s power into the world, that the shoot may come forth from the stem of Jesse”.46 Aruna Gnanadason makes the same connection between shakti and the Holy Spirit when she writes: “The Great Mother breaks out of all that has bound her and frees, creates anew and liberates all creation ‘which has been groaning as a woman in travail’. Shakti emerges triumphant.”47 At the 2004 EWA conference, Dr. Pushpa Joseph, fmm, outlined a shakti theology based on tantric philosophy.48

_In God’s Image_ is the name of the magazine published by AWRC. To affirm that they are created in God’s image is important for Asian feminists. I interpret their interest in reconnecting to Hindu goddesses, and especially to the notion of shakti as ultimate reality, as a way of strengthening this affirmation.

6.1.3 “People’s Religion”: Religion as Practiced

The greatest non-Christian source for Asian feminist theologizing is, however, not “religion as prescribed” but “religion as practiced”. As we have seen in Chapter Three in the context of Asian Christian women’s conferences, there is a growing interest in what is variously labelled “people’s/popular religion”, “indigenous (women’s) spirituality” or “folk religiosity”.

Korean feminist theologians took an early interest in indigenous folk beliefs and practices. Korean theologians in general have taken a great interest in shamanist practices. They have studied them as the religion of the _Minjung_,49 which could be appropriated as the main source of Minjung theology. The concept han, meaning bitterness, grief and broken-heartedness, is central as an expression of the people’s sufferings under oppression. Through the _kut_ ritual the han-ridden spirits of the dead were appeased or released, a process called _han-pu-ri_. However, some Korean theologians have also pointed out that shamanism is not unambiguously liberative, highlighting the similarities between shamanism and the religiosities of evangelical Christians in Korea, in that they are

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46 Perera 1992, pp 235-236, italics and spelling as in original
47 Gnanadason 1989a, p 16;
48 Joseph 2004. Tantra belongs to the esoteric traditions in Hinduism
49 Minjung is the Korean expression for the oppressed people, and Minjung theology is the Korean version of liberation theology.
“individualistic, family-oriented, and conservative, and interested in health, wealth, success, and blessings”.50

In the late 1980s, the Korean Association of Women Theologians (KAWT) conducted a study on goddesses and feminine images of the divine in Korean folk beliefs. They found a variety of types of goddesses that embodied different aspects or functions. From this material, as a resource for creating a Korean feminist theology, the Korean theologians deduced knowledge about Korean women’s lives both in their capacities as creating and preserving life, and as oppressed, and of their spiritual needs as expressed in goddess lore.51

Australian theologian Sandy Yule has written a creative fictitious dialogue on Shamanism and Christianity in Korea, that reflects her own efforts to understand shamanism from a Christian point of view. She stages a dialogue between a male Korean philosopher, a female Korean shaman, a male Korean conservative protestant, a female Korean progressive protestant and a female Western philosopher. Themes that surface in this “dialogue” are Christian and Eastern understandings of worship, how to understand the spirits that appear in the shamanistic ritual, the similarity between shamanism and Christian charismatic practices, and the vulnerable status of the shaman.52

In the Philippines, feminist theologians have taken an interest in the indigenous religion (more or less wiped out by the Spanish colonizers), where women babaylans played an important role as religious leaders; as well as the women-centred semi-Christian cults which started in the 19th century and are still thriving. These cults build on Roman Catholic foundations, but recruit to the Trinity a fourth person, the Great Mother, have women priests, practise communitarian living, and are millenarian, awaiting the Age of the Mother, which is to supersede the Age of the Father and the Age of the Son.53

Lalrinawmi (Rini) Ralte, teaching at United Theological College, Bangalore, wrote her D. Min. dissertation on the impact on women of Mizo culture and religion. The Mizo are a tribal people in North-East India, from which Ralte herself comes. Ralte found that women originally were given a very important place in Mizo society and religious life, testified to in oral tradition and songs. This relatively strong status of women was retained even within patriarchal society, but the advent of Christianity strengthened the patriarchal structures.54

50 Suh 1992
51 Korean Association of Women Theologians 1990, p 52
52 Yule 1996
53 Ligo et al 1995, pp 222-224; Ligo 1998; Mananzan 2002
54 Ralte 2002, Yamashita 1999, pp 5-6
An input from Japan is Yuko Yuasa’s theological work utilizing the Noh drama. She highlights a female demon of jealousy and anger, Hannya, which is one of the masks in the Noh drama. Hannya’s anger, Yuasa argues, is an expression of women’s anger at injustice, at being silenced and objectified; it is a protest and a prayer for healing. She has created a Noh drama, Hannya Miriam where the Biblical character Miriam is interpreted with the Hannya mask to show her anger when she is stricken with a skin disease as a punishment for criticizing Moses.55 This is an example of how popular religion can be utilized to express anger. We shall see below how Chung Hyun Kyung uses this kind of beliefs to draw attention to aspects of religion that are downplayed in Christian tradition.

What Asian feminist theologians above all seek in “People’s religion” is the connectedness to nature and a holistic approach to life. Eco-feminism is a growing concern for Asian feminists.56 The Chipko movement in India, where women “hug” trees to prevent them from being chopped down, and other women’s actions to protect the environment, as well as the works of Vandana Shiva are important sources of inspiration.57

Japanese theologian Akiko Yamashita draws on research from the Philippines and Indian tribal communities when she argues that Asian feminist theology must come from “life dialogue” with women of other faiths. She criticizes Chung Hyun Kyung’s appropriation of shamanism as being “too Western and uniquely Christian-centric”. In her experience, Korean shamans express indignation towards Christians who “take everything from us as if theirs, especially our music and its instruments”.58

This appropriation is inimical to interfaith dialogue, Yamashita argues. She advocates a “life dialogue”, which is a deep encounter with the other, and where the teachings of different religions are encountered and compared in a concrete context. This “life dialogue” is going on among women in Asia “simply out of necessity”, but, Yamashita complains, “it has not yet been theologised as Asian women’s theology”.59

I think Yamashita is right to say that there is a lot of appropriation but not much real dialogue going on between Asian feminist theologians and their sisters in other religions. She is one of the few who does not only make sweeping statements about the value of interfaith dialogue, but argues forcefully that it should be implemented.

55 Yuasa 1999
56 Aruna Gnanadason’s recent D. Min. dissertation, which has unfortunately not been available before the completion of this book, outlines an Asian eco-feminist theology.
58 Yamashita 1999, p 6
59 Yamashita 1999, p 7
Another warning voice is Kang Nam Soon, who criticizes “the strong tendency of romanticizing and idealizing traditional Korean religions and cultures”\(^{60}\) in Korean feminist theology. Kang sees a “strong tendency of universalization and oversimplification”\(^{61}\) in Asian feminist theology. She finds that although Asian feminists present the Asian worldview as complementary and interactive as an alternative to the dualistic Western worldview, in reality \textit{yin-yang} and other similar symbolisms are “arranged in hierarchical relationships of superiority and inferiority, goodness and evil”.\(^{62}\)

Kang claims that Asian women are so thoroughly oppressed that they do not have the “dangerous memory” which Sharon Welsh sees as a significant factor in liberation theology. They have memories of suffering and exclusion, but not much of freedom and resistance. In her view, the “culture of survival”, celebrated by many feminist theologians, has been an obstacle to women’s resistance.\(^{63}\) This dangerous memory must be created through “self-criticism and \textit{healthy scepticism}”.\(^{64}\)

### 6.1.4 Scriptures and Storytelling

“In many Asian cultures”, states Kwok Pui-lan, “the spoken words are considered more sacred than the written text”.\(^{65}\) Story-telling is central to Asian feminist theology: the telling of women’s real life stories, re-telling of Bible stories, the life stories and the Bible stories merging and informing each other. “Oral transmission and interpretation often have a more fluid understanding of the boundaries of the ‘text’”\(^{66}\), says Kwok. The methodology of story-telling enables Asian women to appropriate the Bible as their text. It is the interaction of life and text that is central, so much so that Chung Hyun Kyung says: “we are the text, and the Bible and the tradition of the Christian church is the context of our theology”.\(^{67}\)

While the Bible is central, “Asian feminist theologians recognize that God’s revelation is found not only in the Bible and the Christian tradition but also in other people’s religious experiences, recorded in their sacred scriptures, myths, stories, legends and symbols”.\(^{68}\) The focus, however, is more on myths and symbols than on a study of the scriptures of other

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\(^{60}\) Kang 1995, p 29
\(^{61}\) Kang 1995, p 22
\(^{62}\) Kang 1995, p 25
\(^{63}\) Kang 1995, pp 24-25
\(^{64}\) Kang 1995, p 30 (italics in original)
\(^{65}\) Kwok 2000, p 53
\(^{66}\) Kwok 2000, p 54
\(^{67}\) Chung 1991, p 111
\(^{68}\) Kwok 2000, p 67
religions. A remarkable exception, as we shall see below, is Mukti Barton’s studies of Islamic scriptures.

Bible texts are often interpreted in terms of the Asian heritage, and heroines from the Bible put side by side with those of Asian myths and legends, as well as real women, as when Aruna Gnanadason writes:

We celebrate our sisters Abigail, Durga, Kali, Sr. Alice, Fatima, Madhu Kaur, Shantha, Mary, Shiprah, Puah, Vashti, Esther, Rani, Rameeza, Hagar, Sarah... women, the many women of the Bible, the women of Asia, who would resist with total vulnerability and powerlessness the power of aggressive and brutal military might.69

Asian feminist theologians take a special interest in Bible stories which deal with questions of multiple identities, oppression because of race, gender, class or religious belonging. Two such stories are those of the Syrophoenician/Caananite woman of Mark 7:24-30 and Matt 15:21-28; and Hagar’s story in Genesis.

Asian feminist interpretations of the story of the Syrophoenician woman highlight that Jesus was capable of changing his mind through listening to a woman, point out that religious plurality existed in Jesus’ time, and that God’s grace is not only for Christians.

One example is Hope Antone’s reading of the text in an interfaith perspective. We assume that the woman became a Christian after Jesus had healed her daughter, but there is no hint of this in the text, argues Hope Antone:

Rather than assuming that she became a Christian, why can’t we think and accept the fact that she could have continued in her own form of worship and religiosiy? [...] It would seem that for Jesus, neither he nor his religion mattered except to the extent that the other had experienced God’s healing grace through him.70

Antone uses this story as biblical support for religious pluralism. She finds Jesus to be “conscious of the reality of plurality as well as of his own particularity” and letting this consciousness result in “a desire to learn from differences and in understanding oneself through and with the other”. Secondly, Jesus chose to engage in an honest dialogue, where he “took the risk of learning from the woman”. And finally, in exclaiming “Woman, you have great faith!” Jesus affirmed that

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69 Gnanadason 1990, p 53
70 Antone 2003, p 66
a woman of another religion and ethnicity is capable of such an awesome faith, a faith that can teach even the greatest of teachers and evangelize the greatest of evangelists.71

Kwok Pui-lan has done a postcolonial reading of this text, to which we shall return below.

The Hagar story is another story favoured by womanist and Third World women theologians from all parts of the world,72 not least among Asian feminists. Asian women can identify with Hagar because she had to travel overseas to earn a living, was trampled on by men and oppressed by other women, lost the sovereign right to her body, was forced into pregnancy, and was unable to either stay or go away.73 Like them, she was the property of others, and experienced how inequality, opposition and distance can breed violence even among women and pit them against each other.74

The most interesting use of the Hagar story from an interfaith perspective is that of Mukti Barton. She wrote her doctoral dissertation on scripture as empowerment for Christian and Muslim women in Bangladesh. The focus of her study is the work of a Christian women’s centre in Bangladesh, which she herself had worked with. At this centre, the women learned from Muslim feminists’ way of reading the Qur’an in a liberative manner. Barton herself had extensively studied Islamic scriptures in the original languages, not only the Qur’an but also Hadith.75 As far as I can tell, the instance of Christian women learning from Muslim women how to interpret religious texts for emancipation is unique in Asia.

Barton has studied Hagar’s story in the Bible and in the Hadith. Being the children of Abraham is not enough for establishing solidarity between Jews, Christians and Muslims, the ancestral status of Sarah and Hagar must also be recognized, says Barton. Hagar can help adherents of these religions to remember why they see themselves as the chosen people of God: because they belong to, or are called by their founders to live in solidarity with, the minjung: “Bangladeshi women, the Hagars of today, the poorest of the poor, reclaim their Judaeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, because they recognise the God of the poor through their scriptures”.76

Like other feminist theologians, Barton points out the similarities between Hagar’s fate and that of marginalized women today. She focuses especially on the relationship between Sarah and Hagar as paradigmatic for the

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71 Antone 2003, p 67
72 E.g. Tamez 1986, Williams 1993
73 Lung 1997
74 Kabo 2001
75 The Hadith is the collection of traditions about the sayings and doings of the prophet Muhammad
76 Barton 1999, p 144
differences in power and status between women. While Hagar is oppressed by Sarah, Sarah is “both physically and psychologically under the tight control of the patriarchal society”, and she is one of those who run the system for those at the top of the hierarchy.77

In the relations between western and Asian women, western women are seen in Sarah’s role and Asians in Hagar’s. But in Bangladesh, Christian women can be seen by Muslim women as a Sarah, as they are associated with the Christian West, “bearing the sin of fellow Christians as well as the tremendous responsibility of challenging oppressive forms of Christianity”.78

Barton uses the Hagar story as a paradigmatic story for Muslim-Christian dialogue and Jewish-Muslim-Christian dialogue, but claims that it also opens up for dialogue with women of other faiths: “She can be seen symbolically as a black feminine figure with one foot in Africa and the other in Asia.”79 It is also possible, Barton claims, to identify Hagar with shakti of the tantric tradition in Bengal: “Shakti is also symbolised by a black woman in the tantric traditions that have inspired resistance movements in India, constantly subverting patriarchal religious culture”.80

6.1.5 Christology

“Who do you say that I am?” Asian women enthusiastically give their own answers to the Christological question, as if Jesus had posed it for the first time today. The answers are varied, inspired by Western Christian tradition as well as by Asian traditions and their own life experiences, but they generally reject exclusive claims about Jesus, both because they see that as an expression of a colonialist mindset, and because of its incompatibility with the Asian notion that there are many saviour figures. Rather than the uniqueness of Christ as the only saviour, they seek the distinctiveness of Jesus as one of many epiphanies of God.

The "suffering servant” is the traditional image with which Asian women can most readily identify, but they also deem it also dangerous to glorify women’s suffering, and that it is important to “differentiate between the suffering that is imposed by an oppressor and the suffering that is the consequence of one’s stand for justice and human dignity”.81

Jesus as Liberator is an image Asian women share with liberation theologians from all continents. Especially in the Philippines, he is seen as

77 Barton 1999, pp 101-102
78 Barton 1999, p 138
79 Barton 1999, p 151
80 Barton 1999, p 152, italics in original
81 Chung 1995b, p 227
“a fully liberated human being”. But there are also images of Jesus fetched from the Asian context, such as “a priest of Han”, that is a shaman who is a healer, comforter and counsellor. They also use mother images such as that of the mother hen in Matt 23:37, and, as we have seen above, they make a connection between Jesus’ shedding of blood and women’s menstrual blood and the blood shed in childbirth.

According to Kwok Pui-lan, Asian feminists’ Christological understanding must be sought in dialogue “between the Christian understanding of Christ and other soteriological motifs found within their cultures and histories”. As we shall see below, she has paid attention to non-Christian perceptions of Christ in the Chinese context. Stella Balthazar proposes seeing Jesus as an embodiment of shakti, “the energizer and vitalizer”, arguing that “[i]t is a serious limitation to express the resurrected Christ in purely male or patriarchal terms.”

As we have seen, Monica Melanchton promoted an understanding of Jesus as Sophia, biblical Wisdom. Other Asian feminist theologians have also taken up this approach, and Kwok points out that this “creates new possibilities for dialogue with other ancient wisdom traditions in Asia”, as “[t]he figure of the sage or teacher rings a bell in the Asian mind, much more so than the figures of the Messiah, the priest or the suffering servant”.

Cynthia R. Chapman has compared Gordon Kaufman’s Christology with Christologies of Asian feminists, capturing the distinctive character of Asian feminist Christologies, as well as their relevance for western theology.

She finds that Kaufman’s “understanding of the incarnation as the ‘Christ community’ characterized by healing, reconciliation and humanizing love resonates well with Asian women’s formulations” but that there is a difference in emphasis. This, she argues, has to do with their assumed audiences.

Kaufman’s assumed audience is the Western church, and his Christology is devoted to “countering the remnants of the Chalcedonian Christ”. Asian feminists speak to an audience that has no such preconceptions of Christ, and “can ignore and even casually dismiss the problems related to the two nature doctrine”. The Asian cultural and religious worldview prompts Asian feminist theologians to focus “not on the man Jesus but on the Jesus

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82 Kwok 2000, pp 82-86
83 Chung 1995b, pp 234-241
84 Kwok 2000, p 79
86 Kwok 2000, p 92
87 Chapman 1991, p 154
88 Chapman 1991, p 154
89 Chapman 1991, p 155-156
community and the interrelationships that existed therein’.90 They put special emphasis on the role of women, and “devote considerable energy to characterizing a relational and epiphanic understanding of the ‘Christ event’ and therefore they have no problem identifying where Christ is made manifest today”.91

The relative (compared to Western feminists’) indifference of Asian feminist theologians to the maleness of Jesus is attributed by Chapman to this bypassing of the Chalcedonian formula: it is only in terms of such a Christology that the maleness of Jesus is a problem. In their view, Western church doctrine has turned “a historical accident into an ontological necessity”.92 The presence of goddesses in Asian religions, and the conviction, guided by the Asian understanding that there must be many saviour figures, that Jesus is “neither the single nor the full disclosure of God”, means that “his maleness does not present a problem for Asian feminist theologians”.93

To a much higher degree than Kaufman does, Asian feminists exegete specific texts, which they find empowering to women, and they name and become involved with “emerging Christ communities” among the poor of the Philippines and the minjung of Korea. While Kaufman’s theology remains abstract, “uncompromised and unstained by the messiness of human existence”, Asian feminists “take the risk of bringing theology to a level of concrete human struggle”.94 Chapman’s conclusion is that Asian feminists can enrich Kaufman’s Christology “in the form of grassroots, Biblical hermeneutics and theological praxis”,95 thus providing “the kind of concrete clarity which Kaufman seeks”.96 Kaufman’s more theoretical theology can, on the other hand, “provide tools for bringing clarity to the struggle of Asian women”97.

6.1.6 Asian Feminist Spirituality

The preference for the word “spirituality” is not a trend that is not only confined to the West (see Chapter One). “Spirituality” is a frequent word in the writings of Asian feminist theologians, a word preferred above “religion”
or “theology”. Mary John Mananzan characterizes “Asian women’s emerging spirituality” as follows:

It is creation-centered rather than sin- and redemption-centered. It is holistic rather than dualistic. It is risk rather than security. It is a spirituality that is joyful rather than austere, active rather than passive, expansive rather than limiting. It celebrates more than it fasts; it lets go rather than holds back. It is an Easter rather than a Good Friday spirituality. It is vibrant, liberating and colorful.

This description fits in with the general picture of “feminist spirituality” as outlined in Chapter One. It is, however, rather ironic that a description of a “holistic” spirituality relies so heavily on dualisms. Though it is not spelled out, the underlying meaning of these dualisms is that the reverse side is what characterizes “male, western” spirituality.

The distinctly “Asian” character of this spirituality is that it is understood as transcending religious boundaries, with a stress on the political dimension:

Asian women of all faiths together are engaged in a common spiritual search for a new society. They transcend with ease narrow divisions of faith, caste, cultural identity, and ideology to reflect and act on issues of importance.

“A spirituality that sustains us in our struggles” is a significant title of an article by Aruna Gnanadason. The struggle is the context, and there is a sense in which feminism itself is seen as a kind of spirituality. Renuka Sharma describes the women’s NGO conference in Beijing 1995 as a spiritual experience:

Somewhat like shakti herself disseminating, flowing between the swirls of Chinese silk that participants purchased and swirled around in spite of the rain, bog and mud, a spirit undaunted arose from the collective assembly. An ecstatic high, a shamanic collective trance lifted us all from the mundane matters of funding, left-right politics [...] the gift of knowledge, of Sarasvati herself became immanent.

This experience was especially poignant in the “shrine of the Feminine” on the conference site:

98 Behold I Make All Things New, p 48
99 Mananzan 1996, p 347
100 Gnanadason 1989, p 17
101 Gnanadason 1991
102 Sharma 2001, pp 236-237
The tent was busy, yet contained; a sense of peacefulness. A right wing fundamentalist religious group literally was feeding women from the right and left, of different persuasions, who had previously jousted on the streets, sweets. [...] Here difference was not to be a war cry but one that could contribute, no matter how little, to solidarity. It was this old fashioned word that describes best for me this feminist spirituality of the day. Action spirituality based on the notions of sorg, connectivity, a telos of bodily care and immediacy, an eros of sentiment that arose from the pitch field of combat. [...] An evolving tradition of activist spirituality that is based in the earth of life. A movement that transcends religions and feminist activism.\textsuperscript{103}

Action, connectivity, bodily care: this description resembles the atmosphere of the women’s conferences in Chapter Three, and Sylvia Marcos’ remark about a movement which is “neither secular nor religious but in-between”.\textsuperscript{104}

6.1.7 Mealtable and Marriage as Metaphors for Interfaith Dialogue

While Asian feminist theologians’ engagement with religious plurality mainly appears to be a matter of principles, intrareligious dialogue, and appropriation, it also includes some original and constructive suggestions for the development of interfaith dialogue.

Astrid Lobo Gajiwala is a medical doctor, who is also involved in feminist theology. She is a Roman Catholic Indian, who is married to a Hindu. Being deeply hurt by her church’s view that “my marriage is not a sacrament”,\textsuperscript{105} she has reflected on how marriage can be a metaphor for interfaith dialogue, but also a concrete example of a living dialogue from which the church could learn:

The living out of the interfaith marriage covenant however, demands a dialogue of life that can be more challenging than the Ashram experience. There is no freedom to opt out, no independent choices, and sadly, little or no support.\textsuperscript{106}

Interfaith families, she claims, have a potential to serve as “basic human communities that foster communal harmony”.\textsuperscript{107} Her understanding of her husband’s religious belonging is that “he shares my faith but not my beliefs”.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{103} Sharma 2001, pp 237-238
\textsuperscript{104} Cf. section 3.2.2 above
\textsuperscript{105} This is the title of one of her articles: Gajiwala 1994
\textsuperscript{106} Gajiwala 2001, p 119
\textsuperscript{107} Gajiwala 2001, p 122
\textsuperscript{108} Gajiwala 1994, p162
With the help of her “support system”, a group of Christian women and a priest she created a wedding liturgy that was meaningful for both herself and her husband and their families and friends. Astrid Lobo Gajiwala has published the ceremony as “a starting point for the creation of an authentic wedding service for interfaith marriages”, believing that

[to those of us who believe that all members of the human family participate in the mystery of Christ, it is indeed a challenge to transform this social custom into a sign of a union that is “built on common live that embraces all and has its roots in God who is love’ (Paul VI, Bombay, 1964).109

Gajiwala thus highlights the importance of feminist voices bringing in the lived experience of interfaith marriages into a discourse that is too often voiced by (in the case of the Catholic church, celibate) men from a dogmatic perspective.110

Hope Antone, who holds a doctorate in education from Union Theological Seminary, as well as degrees in theology and mass communication, and among other assignments is editor of In God’s Image, has written a study guide on religious education in a religiously plural context. Here she suggests “meatable sharing” as a metaphor for a pluralist approach to religious education. She points out that the table metaphor is frequently used by women to “drive their point that God’s hospitality is really for all people and the whole world”.111 She draws on her own literal experiences of sharing meals with her extended family, which has members from various faith communities, on Asian cultural practices of meatable sharing and parallels with these described in the Bible, especially Jesus’ meatable practices:

Jesus’ table community was an embodiment of an alternative social vision that was grounded in love and compassion, broke down walls of separation and exclusion, and created healing and reconciliation.112

Asian food, Antone says, has common ingredients and is prepared in similar ways, but there are also differences in ingredients, tastes and preparation between different countries. Food talk in Asia is closely related to spirituality, and readily transcends ethnic or religious labels. In the context

109 Gajiwala 1994, p 168
110 One example is a U.S. Catholic-Jewish consultation on mixed marriage in 2004, where all the Catholic participants were bishops, and three of the twelve rabbis were women. www.jcrelations.net/en/?id=2414 accessed 2005-09-20. Gé Speelman’s doctoral dissertation (Speelman 1998) uses interfaith marriages as examples of lived interfaith dialogue in a manner similar to Gajiwala’s.
111 Antone 2003, p 73
112 Antone 2003, p 80
of religious education and interfaith dialogue, food refers to “that which affirms, promotes and sustains life in Asia”.\textsuperscript{113}

Asian religious education must be a potluck meal prepared by sharing and the collaboration of educators from different religious communities; it takes an invitational approach and implies a methodology of “deep, honest, open, participatory, and dialogical sharing”.\textsuperscript{114}

Drawing on the experiences of the “Faith Renewed” conferences, Antone suggests that interfaith dialogue must transcend religion-centeredness and focus on life-giving values and issues such as human rights, justice and peace, gender justice, and sustainable environment. A dialogue that is focused on these values will enable participants to challenge their own religions to be transformed into the new religions that they were intended to be.\textsuperscript{115}

The theme of transforming traditions into “new religions” that we found in Chapter Three recurs again here. So does the awareness of power relations in dialogue. Antone admits that, like all metaphors, the mealtable metaphor can also be dysfunctional. She asks: How do we share table with religious fundamentalists? How can ethnic and racial groups, or groups divided along lines of class, gender, sexual orientation etc., where there are unhealed wounds after years of intolerance, come together? How can a dialogue with globalization be possible?\textsuperscript{116}

One solution to these questions, in her view, is that “it is people who will participate at the meatable. [...] It is not possible for institutions, religions or ideologies to be participants at the meatable”.\textsuperscript{117} People have the potential to change, and as it is people who create institutions, they can also bring about changes in them. It takes a lot of faith to make dialogue work, says Antone, and again, Jesus is her model: “and we know what happened to him as a result of his ministry. Through him we also know that it is not impossible. It is just challenging and difficult!”\textsuperscript{118}

\section*{6.1.8 Male Responses to the Feminist Challenge}

Most Asian feminist theology is written by women. There are, however, a few male theologians who have made statements about the importance of feminist perspectives on theology. As we have seen in Chapter Three,
Wesley Ariarajah was impressed by, and has reflected on, his experience of
the Toronto conference.

Stanley Samartha appreciated the potential of feminist theology in Asia
early on. In an essay from 1986 he shows himself to be well acquainted with
Asian feminist theology, and especially stresses that it is, and ought to be
even more, interreligious:

Thus the quest for a specifically feminist hermeneutics in Asia might fulfil a
larger purpose in the story of God’s liberation of both women and men in the
totality of a reconciled humanity.\(^\text{119}\)

Samartha has reiterated the importance of feminist theology for holding
together three important issues in contemporary theology: the struggle of
oppressed people, a positive theology of religions, and ecology.\(^\text{120}\)

Peter C. Phan, in an article on “Jesus the Christ with an Asian face” pays
special attention to Asian women’s Christology, especially how it is
characterized by the notion of theology as “God-Praxis”.\(^\text{121}\)

Indian theologian John D’Mello argues in an article in *Vidyajyoti* for a
“feminization of the church”, by which he means an increasing feminist
consciousness among the people of God, or “a process whereby the Church
acquires an egalitarian, mutually respectful, cosmopolitan, cross-cultural
consciousness”.\(^\text{122}\) By insisting on the importance of “wholeness”, feminist
theology is “the starting point for other liberation theologies, for
interdisciplinary theologies and for a network of contextualized
theologies”.\(^\text{123}\) D’Mello draws extensively on the works of Western feminist
theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza
and Elizabeth Johnson, but does not mention any Asian feminist theologians
in his article.

Another Indian theologian who has taken an interest in “God as feminine”
is Joseph Sebastian. He has written a comprehensive study of female images
of God in Hindu and Christian traditions, proposing an introduction of
feminine images for God in the context of inculturation in India.\(^\text{124}\) Like
D’Mello, he draws on several Western feminist theologians, but I have found
only one Asian feminist theologian (the artist Lucy D’Souza) in his
bibliography.

\(^{119}\) Samartha 1986, p 108
\(^{120}\) Samartha 1994
\(^{121}\) Phan 1996
\(^{122}\) D’Mello 1999, p 120
\(^{123}\) D’Mello 1999, p 127
\(^{124}\) Sebastian 1995
Kang Nam Soon has criticized Western feminists for the tendency to treat Asian feminist theologians as an anonymous, homogeneous entity, but apparently this is also done by Asian male theologians. Another example is a recent assessment of Indian theologies by Felix Wilfred, which does not mention a single feminist theologian by name.

As we have seen above, Santanu K. Patro has taken a special interest in the goddess Kali as a resource for Indian feminist theology.

Aloysius Pieris has made an attempt to formulate a feminist theology of his own, which he builds on a model of complementarity. Fire and Water is the title of the book where Pieris develops his version of an Asian feminist theology. “Fire and water” stands for a complementary duality, where fire symbolizes the male and is the characteristic of Christianity, while water is the female symbol, which corresponds to Buddhism. We recognize the orientalist stereotype of the West as male and the East as female.

In Love Meets Wisdom, Pieris similarly sees love (agape) as the Christian paradigm, and wisdom (gnosis) as the Buddhist paradigm, which are complementary. In Fire and Water, he claims that “the female impulse is agape, the male is gnosis.” As I have argued elsewhere, this gender differentiation is very misguided. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Wisdom is personified as a woman, quite like the Buddhist prajna and Prajnaparamita. The Buddhist concept of love/compassion, karuna, on the other hand, is male. If there is a gender dualism in these concepts, it should be the other way round. But as in the Christian sapiential tradition sapientia and caritas are both depicted as female, the duality does not work very well.

The same holds true for fire and water. One of the sources Pieris quotes for the symbolism of Buddhist stupas “insists that all the [four elements] constitute the feminine principle” but in spite of this he prefers to associate earth and water with the female and fire and wind with the male.

The complementarity of religions is one the foundations of Pieris’ theology of religions. Another is the dialectic between cosmic and metacosmic religions. Like many others, Pieris observes that women and female symbolism plays a greater part in cosmic than in metacosmic religion. Thus, he claims, the cosmic worldview must be the framework for Asian feminism. As we have seen, Asian feminists have shown an increasing interest in what Pieris terms cosmic religion. Pieris builds this into a dialectical-complementary gender-differentiated construct, which is

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125 Kang 2004
126 Wilfred 2004, pp 152-153
127 Pieris 1988b
128 Pieris 1996, p 53
129 Egnell 1996, pp 46-49
130 Pieris 1996, p 20
131 Pieris 1996, p 59
decidedly essentialist. He does disavow “simplistic gender stereotypes”, but it is hard to take those disclaimers seriously when he states that

> The cosmic is dialectical, with male and female forces (gnosis and agape) interacting in its journey toward self-transcendence. This is not an undue “genderization”, but a description of the subliminal instincts of the human psyche.133

Like D’Mello and Sebastian, he does not enter into dialogue with his women colleagues. He rather repudiates what he calls the “false starts” of feminism, making sweeping statements about Asian feminism without references to any works by Asian feminist theologians except Gabriele Dietrich. The only other feminist theologians he refers to are Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Mary Daly.

Pieris’ attempt at doing feminist theology raises the question whether men can be feminists.134 In my opinion, they can, but a male feminist’s first obligation is to listen and learn from women feminists. It is a question not only of decency and humility, but of epistemology. Men’s only access to women’s experiences, which, as I have argued in Chapter One, are the basis for feminist theology, is through listening to women’s stories. The importance of women’s experiences as the point of departure for feminist theology is made abundantly clear after reading Pieris’ work. He builds it on a construct, where he forces concepts into a male-female complementarity, not on a lived reality. Pieris, with reference to Mary Daly, coins the term gyne-ecology, and I think would be an apt word for him to use, instead of annexing the word feminism.

As far as I can see, Asian feminists have not taken Pieris’ construct on board, neither have they entered into a debate on it. On the contrary they carefully avoid a male-female complementarity.

6.2 Gabriele Dietrich – a Materialist Analyst

Gabriele Dietrich is an Asian feminist theologian of the first-generation, the elder among my four chosen theologians. She was born in 1944 and grew up in former West Berlin, Germany, was active in the students’ movement during the 1960s and holds a PhD in History of Religions. She has lived in India since the 1970s and is a naturalized Indian citizen. She now claims that the only German identity which has stayed with her is “the collective

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132 Pieris 1996, p 54
133 Pieris 1996, p 61
134 For a discussion of the problems involved in being a ”male feminist”, see Sjöberg 2004, pp 21-23
historical responsibility for the holocaust and all that followed from it”, a
history which “is also helpful to understand many of the contemporary
events in South Asia”. Since 1975 she belongs to the faculty of Tamilnadu
Theological Seminary. She is an activist in the Women’s Movement and has
been engaged in supporting workers’ unions and environmental movements.
As she has lived her adult life in India and is involved in the academic and
political life of the country, I do not hesitate to call her an Asian
theologian.

She has mainly published essays and articles, many of them collected in
the volumes Reflections on the Women’s Movement in India: Religion,
Ecology, Development and A New Thing on Earth. Recurring themes in her
works are ecology, communalism, religious reform, Dalit rights and the
struggle of poor and oppressed communities, always with a feminist analysis
of every issue. Some of her articles are purely political, with a strongly
Marxist analysis, others include a theological analysis of political matters,
some are theological reflections on biblical themes, though always
contextualized into the Indian situation.

Gabriele Dietrich states very clearly that feminist theology, contrary to
the claims of its critics, is not a Western concept, but is rooted in Asian
cultural traditions and is very relevant in Asia. But it is also transcending
boundaries:

In this situation, discovery of women’s protest traditions in all religions and
cultures establishes a type of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue quite
different from conventional forms of dialogue.

6.2.1 Communalism and Religious Reform

Gabriele Dietrich is very engaged in the question of how to counteract
communalism, and has analyzed the connections between communalism
and patriarchal controls in society. She asks, with the title of one of her
articles: “Can the Women’s Movement be a force against communalism?”
She states that women are the primary victims of communal riots. They are
the rape victims, they lose husbands, their household work is directly
affected by the disruption of normal life, with scarcity of water, fuel and
food. At the same time, to the dismay of the women’s movement, large

135 Ralte 2004, p 24
136 Cf. section 1.6.3 above
137 Dietrich 2001, pp 88-89
138 For an explanation of the term “communalism”, cf. section 2.1.2
139 Dietrich 1989
140 Dietrich 1992a, p 20

232
numbers of women have been co-opted into “communal and fundamentalist mentalities and interventions”.\textsuperscript{141}

So far, she has to admit, the women’s movement has not been a very strong force against communalism. She finds several reasons for this. The first is that the women’s movement in India has not been able to become a mass movement with a base in the slum areas. This would be an absolute requisite for it to be a force against communalism.\textsuperscript{142}

But she also finds fault with the women’s movement in its analysis of women’s lives. It has been a secular movement, where religion mainly has been seen as an oppressive force, a superstition that would fade away. The role of religion in women’s lives has not been taken seriously. Church women have not interacted with the secular women’s movement, and religious women have remained on the margins of it. At the same time, it has harboured unconscious majority communalist assumptions.\textsuperscript{143}

Thirdly, Dietrich claims that the women’s movement has failed to understand the complexity of women’s situation in the patriarchal family:

[W]omen in their very power of birthing and nurturing have not just been passive victims of violence but also a crucial lifeline, not only for the continuity of life itself but also as a key to tradition and cultural identity.\textsuperscript{144}

The connection between the production of life and cultural controls is the key to understanding women’s co-optation into communal organizations. By highlighting women’s role as “vestiges of culture” women are empowered within the patriarchal framework: they can come out into public life without risking the securities that the patriarchal family offers.\textsuperscript{145}

Gabriele Dietrich maintains that the women’s movement must engage in the question of religious reform. With religious reform, she means

a reform which enables individuals and groups to participate in secular political processes […] without being forced to abandon the faith-dimension of their religious identity. Besides, genuine religious reform crystallizes the humanist content in a religion in such a way that non-believers or people of other faiths can relate to this humanist content in their own rights.\textsuperscript{146}

This quotation makes Dietrich’s view on religious plurality clear: there is a humanist content in every religion, which can, and should, be made accessible to everyone.

\textsuperscript{141} Dietrich 1998 p 23
\textsuperscript{142} Dietrich 1998 pp 26, 28
\textsuperscript{143} Dietrich 1998
\textsuperscript{144} Dietrich 1998 p 37
\textsuperscript{145} Dietrich 1998 pp 35-37
\textsuperscript{146} Dietrich 1992a p 14
In the task of religious reform aimed at “making accessible the humanist content in religion” Gabriele Dietrich finds forerunners from different religious traditions. M.M. Thomas, Swami Agnivesh and Ashgar Ali Engineer are leaders of the Christian, Hindu and Muslim communities respectively, who according to Dietrich uphold the ideal of religious humanism while being committed to peace and justice from within their own religious tradition.

In the religious humanism developed by these scholars, however, the feminist dimension is lacking. Religions can contribute to building peace and justice. But they can also be destructive. A feminist critique of religion is necessary.

Dietrich distances herself from the “religious apologetics” that hold that “originally’ all religions were rather favourable to women and only ‘implementation’ was lagging behind”. One cannot escape the task of analyzing religious sources “with methods of materialist history writing i.e. connecting any statement on women with their actual position within the mode of production within the time in which the statement is made” and also how religious symbols are appropriated by different classes. Most traditions do have a hidden “protest potential”, but the traditions cannot be embraced in their entirety:

Real life and liveable values involve a more painful process of acceptance and rejection of contents that have to be tested in their potential to free or to oppress women.

A unity of women across religious boundaries is not easily achieved, but Gabriele Dietrich challenges the women’s movement to abandon the anti-religious stand and instead attempt to “appropriate religious history from below”:

Instead of allowing communalist forces to hijack women’s issues, we can as well try to discover our own religious history as women, across communal barriers, and on this ground dismantle the communalist claims of religious and political leaders.

6.2.2 A Materialist Understanding of Motherhood

Motherhood is, as we have seen, an important concept in Asian feminist theology – but also in communalist discourse. Gabriele Dietrich has devoted

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147 Dietrich 1992a p 21  
148 Dietrich 1992a p 25  
149 Dietrich 1992a pp 26-27  
150 Dietrich 1992a p 32

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some effort to analyzing and demystifying this ambiguous concept. It is at this point that her non-Asian origin shows. Mangala is not a part of her cultural mindset. Being born during the last years of the German Nazi era, it is not surprising that she would be sceptical about the connection of motherhood to biology, nature and nation.

Dietrich views motherhood as a positive force in women’s lives, a source of strength and self-esteem. She is careful to avoid a biologistic attitude towards mothering, and analyzes it in terms of “women’s labour for the production and preservation of life”. 151 “Production of life” is a key word that allows Dietrich to keep the analysis of women’s specific situation within the materialist framework: “There is a link between the sustenance of life and women’s labour, not only the labours in child birth but also the daily work contribution”. 152

She theologizes on this, using the narrative of the “fall” where the naming of Eve, Chawah meaning “the mother of all living”, signifies “the flow of blessing which is upheld even in the face of death and threat of extinction”. 153 This topic of the Production of Life, she claims, “goes one step further and shows the ‘mothers of the Messiah’ in utter violation of the patriarchal codes of Israelite society”. 154 Dietrich refers here to the genealogy in the book of Ruth, which shows how both Ruth and Boas, who are to be ancestors of the Messiah, are the offspring of women’s very unorthodox ways of reproduction. Dietrich concludes: “The continued blessing over the good creation goes through the line of women, independent of the laws of patriarchy”. 155

She sees mothering in terms of social input, which can be done not only by physical mothers, but even by men, though historically it has mainly been in the hands of women. It is, she maintains “a crucial factor in humanizing society and creating the ground for production of life and for all the wider network of society and culture”. 156 This implies that there is power in motherhood and mothering, a power that patriarchy wants to curtail and appropriate. This is very obvious in the way Hindu nationalism is using the concept of motherhood when the Indian nation is depicted as Mother India being in danger of being raped by the Muslim “other”. 157

151 Dietrich 2001 p 190
152 Dietrich 2001 p 188
153 Dietrich 2001 p 187
154 Dietrich 2001 p 188
155 Dietrich 2001 p 189
156 Dietrich 1998 p 36
157 Dietrich 1998, p 41
All the same, Gabriele Dietrich claims “motherhood cannot be kept in subjugation by Patriarchy”. One way of releasing motherhood from the confines of patriarchy is to recognize God as Mother.

6.2.3 Goddesses and the Feminine Principle

Gabriele Dietrich states that in India, “goddess religion is alive and well, but on the whole safely subsumed under patriarchal structures” and consequently she has strong reservations against the appropriation of Hindu goddess imagery and the concepts of shakti and prakriti as “feminine principles”. Her principal objection is that goddess symbolism is heavily laden with commumalist connotations. Another reservation she has is that goddess symbolism is inaccessible to Muslims, and thus solidarity of women across religious boundaries could not build on this imagery.

However, Dietrich acknowledges that the image of the Goddess can be empowering:

On the other hand, the independent Goddess as a power over life and death furnishes a different image of motherhood, not linked up with individual fertility but with power and autonomy. She is not portrayed as a spouse and figures as protectress, mother of gods and kings and of the world. She is a father, mother, child and begetting.

There is a “protest potential” in goddess traditions, especially when the older traditions that have not been domesticated by patriarchy are unearthed. It is very much a question of who is appropriating the traditions and for what purpose. There is a clear class and caste aspect in this. The goddesses of the Hindu pantheon are very much the property of higher castes, while Dalits and Adivasis (tribal peoples) have their own goddesses.

When discussing Vandana Shiva’s use of prakriti and shakti, Dietrich comments that as long as they are

safely in the hands of Chipko women, they may indeed express a feminist ecological perspective and the concept of sacredness of life. Picked up by the cross currents of caste and middle class ideology, such concepts are open to communal manipulation.

Consequently, Dietrich finds more liberative potential in Dalit goddesses that in the Hindu pantheon. She has elaborated upon the myth of village

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158 Dietrich 2001, p 200
159 Dietrich 2001, p 103
160 Dietrich 1998, p 38
161 Dietrich 1992b, p 104-105
goddesses Mariammal and Ellaiyamal. According to the myth, a high caste woman and a Dalit woman were beheaded by a jealous man. However, they were revived again but their heads were attached to the wrong bodies. After that they became goddesses: Mariammal the goddess of small pox, and Ellaiyamal the goddess of boundaries. Dietrich interprets this story as being about transgression of caste boundaries, and how new power is derived from this transgression. She also remarks that it is Ellaiyamal, the goddess with the Dalit head and Brahmin body, which “most of all defies the existing order”. She further makes a connection between these boundary-crossing goddesses and the subversive and transgressing women in the genealogy of Jesus mentioned above.\(^{162}\)

However, when it comes to theologizing in dialogue with Hindu myths and spirituality, Gabriele Dietrich finds the stories of bhakti saints more fruitful than goddess mythology. She is fascinated by two bhakta women, Mahadevi akka and Meerabai (Mira), whose lives display a “structure of protest and transcendence”. Both of them fought against “the tyranny of social roles” when they turned their back on marriage and became wandering sages, dedicating their lives to the love of and union with their god. Dietrich finds parallels in the life stories of the women in the Jesus movement like the Samaritan woman and Mary of Magdala. What distinguishes the bhakti tradition is the eroticism, sensuousness and physicalness of devotion which is lacking in the Christian tradition. While admitting the difficulty of coming to terms with such sexual imagery for someone steeped in “missionary puritanism”, Dietrich thinks such images rooted in folk tradition should provide inspiration for feminist theology seeking new conceptions of God.\(^{163}\)

However, neither bhakti saints nor goddesses or feminine principles afford unambiguous heroines or models. Dietrich summarizes: “There is no ready-made, unambiguous ecological or feminist folk-tradition to fall back on. The process is dialectical and very painful.”\(^{164}\)

6.2.4 Struggle for Life

Gabriele Dietrich emphasizes the need to learn from the “day-to-day survival struggles” of poor women, of Dalits, Adivasis and other oppressed groups. Without romanticizing, being aware of oppressive structures even in traditional societies, here she nevertheless finds models both for a mode of production that is ecologically sound, and for a life-affirming spirituality.

When analyzing women’s spirituality among urban women workers, she finds a spirituality that is characterized by “their commitment to life itself

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\(^{162}\) Dietrich 2001, pp 245-246

\(^{163}\) Dietrich 2001, pp 103-112

\(^{164}\) Dietrich 1992b p 112
and the capacity to laugh and crack jokes in the most adverse circumstances”. It is an inter-religious movement where “specific expressions of faith remain low-key” and spirituality is expressed in the way daily routine is structured.\footnote{Dietrich 2001, pp 184-185}

In the struggles of the Adivasis in the Narmada valley against the damming of the river, she finds that religious barriers are overcome in the rituals and prayers that are performed at the site as an integral part of the resistance.

“Life”, then, emerges as a key word in Gabriele Dietrich’s theologizing:

> In my perception, it is this affirmation of life and affirmation of God’s good creation that the struggle of the women’s movement and thus the crucial forces of feminist theology are all about.\footnote{Dietrich 2001, pp 94-95}

### 6.2.5 Summary

Gabriele Dietrich picks up all the themes prominent in Asian feminist theology: motherhood, goddesses and feminist principles, an everyday spirituality where “life” is a key word, and the rootedness in action for social justice. But there is a difference in the way she treats them, it is more distanced and analytical, and has a clearer political perspective. She is something of “an outsider within”, having immersed herself in the Indian worldview, but still understanding it through her own cultural heritage.

For Gabriele Dietrich, interfaith dialogue seems to be a given, not as an end in itself, but as a necessary means for creating a theology that contributes to liberation, justice and affirmation of life. A feminist theology in India must be created in dialogue with women of different religions, uncovering the “protest potential”, the “transgressive” qualities in all traditions.

At the same time, she is very clear that all religious traditions are ambiguous, and warns against the dangers of romanticizing traditional ways of life or uncritically appropriating goddess imagery. One cannot view religion apart from the material realities of modes of production, caste or class. She finds a peoples spirituality grounded in women’s “production of life” that should be the starting point for creating theology.
6.3 Chung Hyun Kyung – A Theological Artist

Chung Hyun Kyung, who recently dropped her father’s name and calls herself Hyun Kyung,\(^{167}\) was born into a wealthy Korean family. Her biography can be seen as a story of alternating downward and upward mobility.

When she was ten years old, her father lost his wealth in bankruptcy, and the family moved to a poor neighbourhood. Hyun Kyung decided to get out of poverty, by means of education. However, after coming into contact with the politically radical student movement, she valued her background differently. But it was when she met her biological mother that her direction in life changed radically. She discovered that the woman she had called mother was not her biological mother. Her father had persuaded a poor widow to carry his child, as his wife could not conceive. When Hyun Kyung was one year old, her birth mother had to give her away, an experience which resulted in many years of mental disorder, that in turn led her only son to commit suicide.

Hyun Kyung describes the encounter with her birth mother as a baptism.\(^{168}\) Aloysius Pieris talks about how Christianity must be baptized on the Calvary of Asian poverty, and in the Jordan of Asian religions. For Hyun Kyung, this was not an intellectual exercise but a real-life experience.

Her exposure to religious plurality was part of her childhood. Her mother was a Christian, but her father a Confucianist, which meant that there were occasions of ancestor worship in the home, which she enjoyed. Her mother managed to integrate ancestor worship in her faith, and also visited Buddhist temples and fortune tellers. When Hyun Kyung met her birth mother, she found out that although she belonged to a very conservative Pentecostal church, she also mixed different religious beliefs to help her cope with life.\(^{169}\)

Having decided to do a theology that was accountable to the experience of “the despised women of Asia”,\(^{170}\) Chung nevertheless made an academic career which took her to the Union Theological Seminary, where she wrote her doctoral dissertation on Asian women’s theology, published as \textit{Struggle To Be the Sun Again}. During this time she was a teaching assistant to Aloysius Pieris, who taught her Zen meditation. She was then chosen to give one of the keynote speeches at the WCC 1991 General Assembly in Canberra.

\(^{167}\) I will alternate between “Chung” and “Hyun Kyung”, using Chung when I write of things she has published under this name, and Hyun Kyung for the biographical part, and for what she has said since she changed her name.

\(^{168}\) Chung 1991, p 4

\(^{169}\) Chung 1988a

\(^{170}\) Chung 1991, p 5
While the Canberra event, described in detail below, made her famous, it was also a push “downward”. In the aftermath of the turmoil, not only was her credibility as a Christian theologian questioned, she also lost friends and her marriage broke down. It was a “dark night of the soul”, for which she had not been prepared.\textsuperscript{171}

Nonetheless, Canberra also resulted in invitations to lecture all over the world, and to contribute to journals and anthologies. She was a professor at Ewha women’s university in Korea, and eventually, she obtained a chair at the Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Hyun Kyung’s next “breakthrough experience” happened at the dawn of the new millennium. After 100 days of intense meditation as a Buddhist nun in a Korean monastery, she walked for a year between Tibetan monasteries in the Himalaya. There she experienced a “rebirth” which she describes as moving from the question “What do I want in my life” to “What does my life want from me?”\textsuperscript{172} She decided to write theology that was accessible to ordinary women, in the form of “melodrama”.\textsuperscript{173} She returned from Himalaya with a 2000 page handwritten manuscript in Korean, which was published in three books: two volumes of autobiographical essays: \textit{In the End, Beauty Will Save Us All}, and \textit{Letter from the Future: Goddess-Spell According to Hyun Kyung}. These are in the process of being translated into English.

This latest development can be seen as Hyun Kyung’s final step in realizing what she described as her goal in \textit{Struggle To Be the Sun Again}: “to cross and then destroy the bridge called ‘theological higher education’, which stood between ‘them’ and ‘me’”.\textsuperscript{174} It is a downward journey in terms of leaving the ivory tower of academic theology (though she still has her position at Union), but an upward journey in terms of her becoming something of a celebrity in Korea, producing a TV show among other activities.\textsuperscript{175}

I have dwelt at some length on the biography of Chung Hyun Kyung, because she makes such extensive use of her own history and experiences in her theology, to which we shall now turn

\subsection*{6.3.1 Canberra 1991}

Canberra 1991 is the obvious starting point for writing on Chung Hyun Kyung’s theology. Not only because of the stir her WCC General Assembly

\begin{footnotes}
\item[171] Interview Hun Kyung
\item[172] Chung 2002, p.1
\item[173] Interview Hyun Kyung
\item[174] Chung 1991, p.5
\item[175] Interview Hyun Kyung
\end{footnotes}
presentation created in the ecumenical movement, making her instantly (in)famous, but because it captures so much of the essence of her theologizing.

This event has been described in detail so many times, that I find it superfluous to do so again. I will, however, argue that it was the style and language of her presentation that caused the outrage among the orthodox/Orthodox\(^\text{176}\) participants, rather than the content.

What then, did she actually say in her keynote speech in Canberra? As I read it, it was an essentially Christian proclamation of the Assembly theme “Come, Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation”, teeming with biblical references and reinforced with images from Asian religious traditions.

In the introductory invocation, she invited the participants to empty themselves “to prepare the way of the Holy Spirit”,\(^\text{177}\) and to take off their shoes as a sign of humility. Kenosis, humility and the taking off of shoes are certainly not peripheral to the Christian tradition. Next, she invited them to “listen to the cries of creation and the cries of the Spirit within it”, clearly reminiscent of Rom 8:22-27.

In her speech, she traced the Spirit in the Bible from creation through the Exodus to the resurrection of Christ and the founding of the church, but also in people’s struggles and the beauty of nature. She contrasted the “unholy spirit of Babel” with the “spirit of Pentecost”, and called for a grown-up faith, not an infantile faith which asks God to “fix up all our problems”. She then called for repentance, metanoia, a turning “in the direction of the wind of life, where the Holy Spirit is blowing”.

Besides the biblical core, she used Asian images of the divine to understand the Holy Spirit. The han-ridden spirits in Korea she interpreted as “agents through whom the Holy Spirit has spoken her compassion and wisdom for life”. Ki, life energy, is another way of understanding the spirit. And finally, the bodhisattva/goddess Kwan In captures the quality of compassion which is central in Chung’s understanding of God.

I argue that all of the above, if presented by a male elderly theologian, in an analytical manner with explicit Bible references, qualifications regarding which images were to be understood symbolically, and disclaimers of syncretism, might have evoked a polite discussion on an intellectual level, but hardly more than that.\(^\text{178}\) Not everyone would have agreed, but they would have listened in a different manner, and probably no-one would have

\(^{176}\) It was the representatives of the Orthodox tradition who protested formally against Chung’s presentation, but “orthodox” believers from other traditions were also critical. 

\(^{177}\) The quotations in the following section are taken, unless indicated otherwise, from Chung’s speech, Chung 1992

\(^{178}\) Lars Thunberg has come to the same conclusion in his analysis of Chung’s Canberra speech: the content did not necessarily contradict orthodox standpoints. Thunberg 1991
left the room. But Chung chose not to give an intellectual presentation, talking instead in a religious language that was poetical and metaphorical. She spoke from the “gut feeling”\textsuperscript{179} – and got a response from the “gut feeling” of her listeners. On the other hand, it is hard to distinguish between form and content – presented in a different manner, the content would not have been quite the same.

The ensuing debate within the WCC has been thoroughly discussed elsewhere, and I do not find it necessary to recount it here.\textsuperscript{180}

While Chung’s speech in Canberra scandalized orthodox theologians, it provided inspiration to feminist theologians, especially those from Asia. References to it abound,\textsuperscript{181} and it was a breakthrough which emboldened Asian feminist theologians to make use of indigenous religious resources.\textsuperscript{182} It was, however also a movement in two directions. Chung’s ideas did not come out of nowhere. As we have seen above, KAWT’s work on indigenous Korean religion is one basis for her theology, and she also spent a pre-assembly year conferring with Asian feminist theologians and women in grassroots organizations about what to say.

As I stated above, Chung’s speech at the WCC General Assembly captures essential traits in her theology. First, she makes use of the collective theologizing of Asian women. Secondly, the connection to Korean shamanism, Kwan In and Ki remains central in her work. Thirdly, the style of her presentation is typical. Chung is a synthesizer, not an analyst. She is creative, not systematic. She characterized \textit{Struggle To Be the Sun Again} as a sketch drawn “with large, fast strokes,”\textsuperscript{183} and now claims to be a “theological artist”.\textsuperscript{184} To a great extent, “the medium is the message” in Chung’s theology. It is therefore somewhat hazardous to analyze her work in an academic fashion.

6.3.2 Syncretism

After Canberra, Chung was accused of syncretism, a charge she has not felt any need to deny. On the contrary, she wholeheartedly endorses a “survival-liberation-centered” or “life-centered”\textsuperscript{185} syncretism, or, as she now prefers

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{179} Chung 1992, p 60
\item \textsuperscript{180} Cf \textit{International Review of Mission} Vol. LXXX Nos. 319/320 1991; Lettini 2001; Klas Lundström’s forthcoming doctoral dissertation will discuss the impact of Chung’s speech on the Gospel and Culture debate.
\item \textsuperscript{181} Cf Yamashita 1999; Talbot 1993; Tucker 1993; Ackerman 1994; Kwok 2000, p 25; Kwok 1995, p 57; Eck 1993, p 132; King 1993, p 143
\item \textsuperscript{182} Conversation with Elizabeth Tapia
\item \textsuperscript{183} Chung 1991, p xi
\item \textsuperscript{184} Chung 2002, p 1
\item \textsuperscript{185} Chung 1996a, p 33
\end{itemize}
to call it, “a synergetic dance of many religions”. Drawing on her own experiences, and encounters with “ordinary Asian women” she claims that “syncretism” is the normal way of being religious.

Chung’s statement “my bowels are shamanist, my heart is Buddhist, my right brain is Confucianist, my left brain is Christian” is famous.

The foundation for Chung’s syncretism is her conviction that “speaking of God is speaking of the unspeakable”, that when we “talk about God we really get into the place of mystery”. For her, all personalized images of God are images, that run the risk of distorting our understanding of God. As I interpret her, this is why she prefers using a plethora of images of God, all of which are to be seen as symbols which convey something of the unspeakable.

Three such images, which she calls her “new trinity”, are Kali, Kuan-yin and Ina. Kali stands for justice; while Kuan-yin symbolizes compassion and the Filipino earth-goddess Ina expresses her ecological concerns. She makes a special point that Kuan-yin is a bodhisattva, a human person who attains divine status through embodying wisdom and goodness. This kind of “incarnation from the bottom to top” she claims is the Asian paradigm, and she advocates a similar Christology from below.

Syncretism is Chung’s alternative to the pluralist model, which she finds too academic, Western and male [...] because it treats the different religions as neatly arranged entities in clearly marked categories labelled Buddhism, Christianity, Shamanism, Confucianism and the like.

This form of pluralism, she claims, only exists in academia. In Asian women’s reality, “the religions do not exist in that neat way under these name tags. There is a messy and fluid process of cross-permeation among the different religions”.

As an example of how this works, she tells the story of Jihe, a single mother whose only son is killed in a car accident by a powerful politician, who by the power of his status avoided charges. Jihe created a ritual for

186 Chung 1997, p 401
187 Like most Asian feminist theologians, Chung constructs “Asian women” as a subject. With Karin Sporre, I do not consider this to be an expression of standpoint feminism or non-historicized essentialism, because “a rich diversity of experiences from different Asian women’s societal practices are present in Chung’s text”. Sporre 1999, p 524, cf. also pp 261, 299-308
188 Chung 1996a, p 31
189 Chung 1994a, p 26-27
190 Chung 1994a, pp 27-29
191 Chung 1994a, p 28
192 Chung 1996a, p 31
193 Chung 1996a, p 31
herself, where she prayed to indigenous Korean gods as well as to Jesus that the politician would be punished, and shot an arrow through a picture of him. As the politician also believed in the power of such rituals, he acknowledged his faults and compensated Jihe for her loss.\textsuperscript{194}

This story is for Chung paradigmatic for the popular religiosity she encountered in her mothers’ lives, where what matters “is not doctrinal purity, but […] survival and liberation”.\textsuperscript{195} She interprets Christian theologians’ rejection of syncretism as “an admission of their theological imperialism”.\textsuperscript{196} She wants theology to “move away from the doctrinal purity […] and risk the survival-liberation-centered syncretism”.\textsuperscript{197} Is there any place at all for doctrinal purity in her theology? No, she answers flatly:

Because you know, I believe in impermanence of everything. Any doctrine which is not changing is not true. Real true doctrine is changing doctrine. According to context, according to people’s questions, according to existential or political issues, responding to questions of community, that’s theology. Doctrine sounds like stuffed animals in natural history museum.\textsuperscript{198}

Similarly, in Chung’s view, “the gospel” is not a fixed entity, the Jesus story was not finished with the closing of the canon. That is why Chung’s latest book is a gospel: \textit{Goddess-Spell According to Hyun Kyung}.

I got this idea when I first studied introduction to the Johannine gospel, that community did not know Jesus in person, the historical Jesus, they wrote that gospel out of authentic memories of Jesus, and not personal experience. I said I have authentical memory of Jesus of my community of faith struggling to have fullness of life.\textsuperscript{199}

This quotation reveals the kerygmatic nature of Chung’s theology. She understands herself as having a vocation, and does not hesitate to put herself on the stage. She sometimes jokes about “what a grand name I have given myself”\textsuperscript{200} but does not refrain from doing so.

However, the words “my community of faith” are also important in the quotation above. Chung is an individualist who picks and chooses her own brand of religiosity, but in her texts she puts great emphasis on the importance of community, and claims that a criterion of true religious experiences is that they are community-building. Her version of \textit{consensus

\textsuperscript{194} Chung 1994, p 29
\textsuperscript{195} Chung 1996a, p 33
\textsuperscript{196} Chung 1996a, p 33
\textsuperscript{197} Chung 1991, p 113
\textsuperscript{198} Interview Hyun Kyung
\textsuperscript{199} Interview Hyung Kyung
\textsuperscript{200} Chung 1996c, p 51
fidelium reads: “You have to make a decision about what makes Christianity Christian with the wisdom of your community”. On the other hand, it is not evident what kind of community she is talking about, or which community she considers herself to be a part of.

Hyun Kyung considers herself to be Buddhist and Christian. She does not see a problem in this dual belonging, but like Pieris has a complementary view of religions, comparing it to using both Chinese and Western medicine to heal different ailments. Whether Buddhists and Christians see her as part of their communities is another question. Her Zen master did initiate her temporarily into the monastery sangha, so in that sense she is part of the Buddhist community. And those Christian communities that invite her as a speaker see her as a Christian, though there would also be those who are of a different opinion.

What matters for Hyun Kyung and, she claims, for Asian women who live in this “synergetic dance of many religions”, is liberation, survival and healing. These are the norms, the criteria from which religious expressions should be validated. Heresy, she says, “is what is against life”.

Who, then, decides what is life-giving and liberating? Only “those who are actively searching to establish justice in society”, Chung says. Authority lies “in the life experiences of poor people, the majority of them women and children”, where God is to be found.

6.3.3 Shamanism, People’s Religions and Salimism

Chung shares Korean minjung theologians’ interest in shamanism. She views shamanism mainly from a gender perspective, as it “is the only religious context where women’s power and leadership has been sustained throughout Korean history, providing women-centered space”. She wants to treat shamans as subjects, not as objects for observation, and stresses that they are strong, very intelligent and creative women, but in spite of this have been ostracized in society and not enjoyed the status of officials of established religions.

Chung interprets shamanism primarily in socio-psychological categories: it is a question of internalised oppression, which expresses itself through bodily sickness. Shamans generally have had a hard life, and the sign of their vocation is that they get sick, and not until they undergo initiation they are.

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201 Chung 1996b, p 19
202 Lecture 2004-12-10
203 Zion’s Herald 2003, p 2
204 Chung 1988b, p 98
205 Chung 1988a, p 69
206 Chung 1988b, p 97
207 Chung 1988b, p 103
healed. In the ritual called *kut*, they act out and confront the ills they themselves and their clients have encountered.

As I understand Chung, she does not believe in the actual existence of spirits who appear and are appeased or reconciled in the *kut*, but neither does she explain it away in purely secular terms. Rather, she views it as a symbolical spiritual practice of liberation, which has both personal and political dimensions, and where God’s voice can be heard.208

From shamanism, Chung has moved on to an interest in what she calls people’s religion, popular religion, or people’s spirituality, in general. This, in her view, is where a renewal of spirituality must take its starting point. Her working definition of popular religion is

non-official, non-elite, eclectic and lived religion, which comes from people’s everyday need for well-being, protection and healing. It does not emphasize the importance of scriptures, literary tradition, institution, clergies or doctrinal purity. It is syncretistic and implicit in its nature.209

In the concept “popular religion” she brings together “religion as practiced” which with Carol Christ she calls “the underside of religion”; people’s transformation of mainline religion, when a religion is modified as it moves to another context, for example when the male bodhisattva Avalokitesvara became the female Kuan-yin in China; and finally what Aloysius Pieris terms “cosmic religion”.210

The qualities Chung finds in popular religion are that it provides a foundation for an ecological spirituality, that it is a form of resistance, and that it is focused on people’s needs in everyday life. She also views popular religion as holistic, in that it connects “cosmic spirituality and everyday needs of women’s life”.211 “Messy and fluid” are favourite expressions for the nature of popular religion.

She claims that when the Filipino people transformed the white Virgin Mary into a dark madonna they called *Ina*, which was their ancient name for the earth goddess, it was an act of resistance.212 “People are never passive recipients of sacred texts or given symbols”.213 The ecological resources she finds in cosmic spirituality are the reverence for “mother Earth”, the notion of the sacredness of land and reverence for all creatures, and the view of creation as a dynamic and integrated web of life.214

208 Chung 1998, p 30
209 Chung 2002, p 3
210 Chung 2002, p 3
211 Chung 1996b, p 18
212 Chung 1994a, pp 28-29, Chung 1996b, p 18
213 Chung 1996b, p 18
214 Chung 1994b, pp 176-177
As an eco-feminist, Chung sees the connection between “the rape of women and the rape of the earth [...] the violence of ‘power over’”. While she does use images like “the cosmos is God’s ‘womb’” it is the oppression of women and the earth that is in focus, rather than ideas about women’s closeness to nature and the natural cycles.

Chung does admit that popular religion is “an ambiguous religious practice which can both liberate and oppress people”, but she generally paints a very bright picture of it. Is there not a danger of romanticizing popular religion? No, she says:

We have not romanticized it enough, yet. We should romanticize it well enough to criticize them. Only thing we know is how bad they are. We need to fall in love first, and attend to all the bad things later. We must start to know them. When you have this critical mind, you will never fall in love.

It is also clear that for Hyun Kyung, it is not a question of going back and finding an original spirituality. The movement is forward: drawing on spiritual resources from people’s religions, and the liberative praxis of feminism and liberation movements, a new spirituality will be forged. She views eco-feminism as an alternative popular religion. Her term for this is Salimism, and her latest book includes a “Salimist manifesto”.

Salim is a Korean word meaning, literally, “making things alive”, or “life-giving”, and is commonly used for women’s household chores. It thus combines two of Hyun Kyung’s main concerns: women’s everyday life and the key word “life-giving”. She has formulated ten Salimist principles of life:

1. Forest, which stands for diversity
2. Water, which stands for transformation
3. Fire, which stands for what Audre Lorde calls “the power of the Erotic”
4. Air, for emptiness, simplicity and renunciation
5. Justice-Love, which is the principle of Jesus of Nazareth
6. Beauty, which according to a Native American Elder “will save us all”
7. Joy and Celebration, which is a way of knowing God

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215 Chung 1994b, p 176
216 Chung 1994b, p 177
217 Chung 2002, p 4
218 Interview Hyun Kyung
219 Chung 2002, pp 5-6
220 Chung quotes Latin American liberation theologian Diego Irrazaval, who claims that Andean people’s popular spirituality have made him change the traditional epistemology “faith seeking understanding” to “celebration seeking understanding”.

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8. Ant and Spider, which is the power of the common people to erode big structures and make connections
9. Seventh generation, which is again a Native American concept: we must think of how our decisions will affect the seventh generation after us
10. Compassion-Ahimsa, which is needed to forgive others and ourselves.

Hyun Kyung is apparently influenced by Aloysius Pieris in her views on “cosmic religion”. It is, however, interesting to note that she does not buy into his notions of complementarity. For example, while Pieris, as we have seen, puts much emphasis on the complementarity of earth and water as feminine symbols, and fire and wind as masculine symbols, there is no reference to masculinity or femininity in Hyun Kyung’s use of these symbols.

Hyun Kyung does not make extensive use of the yin-yang symbol, but when she does, it is striking that she downplays the male-female dialectic. In a “cross-cultural dialogue on the yin-yang symbol” with Peter K.H. Lee, she emphasizes that one must “be careful not to stereotype the yin and the yang” in terms of male and female qualities, and expresses her “reservations of people make a whole yin-yang philosophical system or speak of yin and yang as scientific categories”.

In her own use of the yin-yang symbol, she talks of a “cosmic Yin & Yang dance” of women’s search for reconciliation and peace in a creative tension between the following qualities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-attachment</th>
<th>Power of the Erotic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emptiness</td>
<td>Fullness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renunciation</td>
<td>Claiming Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Liberation</td>
<td>Political/Economic Liberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letting Go</td>
<td>Letting In</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I would characterize Hyun Kyung’s spirituality, as it appears in the Salimist paradigm and this yin-yang chart, as a totally women-defined spirituality, in the tradition of Asian feminist theologians described above. It honours the

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221 Chung & Lee 1990, p 142
222 Lecture at AMOR XII, www.pauline.or.jp/welcome/amor/english/amor.0908.html
political and spiritual significance of “women’s traditional experience”; it acknowledges the need to find a balance between *Via Activa* and *Via Contemplativa*, where it is especially important for women to acknowledge the right to claim power, both erotic and political; and it proclaims the right and capacity of women to be both water and fire. It is woman-defined in the sense that it does not take its starting point in distinguishing between masculine and feminine qualities, but makes a list of desirable qualities, stating “we can be all of this”. It is, however, not women-defined in the sense that it excludes men by definition – but it does not take responsibility for whether or not men want to include themselves.

6.3.4 Beauty

Beauty is one of the “Salimist principles”, and the title of one of Hyun Kyung’s latest publications is “In the End, Beauty Will Save Us All”, a quotation from a Native American Elder. The present direction of her work is to present theology in a creative manner, interacting with painters, dancers and musicians. Beauty is for Hyun Kyung the virtue for the 21st century:

In East Asia the most important virtues are truth, goodness and beauty. But I have a sense that in 19th century we were striving for truth, for enlightenment in the science, we want to know more, explore more. The 20th century the metaphor I want to use is goodness, like the liberation of the former colonized countries, civil rights movement, women’s movement, peace movement, all came out in 20th century. In the 21st century where there is so much diversity I think what can unify humanity, what can bring peace, is our common search for genuine beauty. Yes, truth will make us free, but truth also made us very afraid. Goodness made us grow up, but in accepting goodness we have been very guilt-ridden. But beauty is a flower which opens your heart, it is not morality, but it is an opening of your heart and soul. So, I see beauty as a metaphor which can heal all of us.223

With Rita Nakashima Brock, she observes that

the Asian way of problem-solving has “aesthetic direction” rather than “ethical direction”. […] In “ethical direction”, what is good or evil or what is right or wrong are the main concern. But in aesthetic direction, what restores balance and harmony is the most important concern.224

But beauty is not enough: “You can attain Beauty only when you embrace Truth and Goodness”.225 Hyun Kyung is aware that beauty without truth and

223 Interview Hyun Kyung
224 Chung 1995a, p 208
225 Chung 2002, p 1
goodness is an ambiguous concept. Capitalism, she says, has a destructive beauty: “the madness of capitalism is also very beautiful, very seductive for many people because it comes with the beautiful face of comfort, luxury and pleasure. How can you say no to this?”

In Chapter Seven we shall see how Pamela Dickey Young has developed the theme of truth, goodness and beauty in a similar manner.

6.3.5 Conflict

For all her emphasis on beauty, interconnectedness and holism, Chung Hyun Kyung’s worldview is not one of indifferent harmony. We have seen that oppression, liberation, resistance and struggle are also important concepts in her theology. In the yin-yang-dialogue, she resists a too simplistic view of harmony: “I am all for equality and harmony, but not without justice, not without struggles!”

She also distances herself from a “soft pluralism”, which “does not deal with serious economic and political power or differences. I call it lazy, selfish, immoral pluralism”. We must go beyond pluralism to transformation, because if patriarchal Buddhists and patriarchal Christians dialogue, “we have a nice patriarchal conclusion there”.

Some of the examples of “popular religion” upon which Chung builds her theology are very disturbing to a traditional Christian ethic. In the story of Jihe recounted above, the woman is calling for revenge, for the punishment of the politician who killed her son, and she is symbolically killing him every day.

Another story is connected with the goddess Kali. In Sri Lanka, Chung once encountered 3000 mothers of young men, who had been killed by the government, on a march toward a Kali temple. The names of the men who had killed their sons were read out aloud, and for each name they smashed a coconut on the ground as a sacrifice to Kali, saying “Kali, punish them”. Chung comments: “as an outsider, when I look at it, I really witnessed all these men’s heads smashed there”. She then enters into a discussion about revenge and reconciliation:

People say revenge is bad. In Christian tradition, we talk about forgiveness and reconciliation. I like reconciliation, but I want to know who says forgiveness and who says reconciliation, because when there is no change in power and oppression, talking about reconciliation and forgiveness is so

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226 Wylie-Kellerman 1997, p 29
227 Chung & Lee 1990, p 155
228 Chung 1997, p 400
229 Chung 1997, 401
230 Chung 1994a, p 27
superficial. So these poor women, what they needed was the strong justice of Kali.  

But revenge is not absent from the Christian tradition, she points out, and suggests that we reclaim the story in Acts where a couple perish because they have been hiding a sum of money from the community. As far as I know, no other feminist theologian, or any liberal theologian, has attempted to use this rather repulsive story.

Another example is the story of Soo-Bock, a Korean “comfort woman” during World War II. The “comfort women” were captured by the Japanese to serve as sex slaves for the soldiers. According to Chung, Soo-Bock survived all her hardships through the sheer determination to survive, by “the raw energy of life”. She ate as much as she could, she was obedient to everything the soldiers asked her to do, because she knew they were ready to kill. Compared with many other stories in Asian feminist theology, which often feature selfless women, who sacrifice themselves for others, this presents a rather unusual heroine, who only thinks of her own survival.

Chung interprets Soo-Bock’s fate with the help of Rita Nakashima Brock’s thoughts on “Loss of innocence and wilful nurturance”:

According to Brock, Western Christianity’s emphasis on innocent victim and oppositional relationship between good and evil is not helpful to solve the complex problems in women’s lives. Rather, losing childlike innocence and transforming it into the wilful nurturing of motherhood, which embraces the complexity of both good and evil, is more empowering to women.

Soo-Bock’s legacy is one of survival, forgiveness and acceptance, says Chung. “Her survival was her liberation. Her forgiveness was her best revenge, her acceptance was her best resistance.” Here, forgiveness and revenge, acceptance and resistance, are not opposites but concur in a dynamic interplay facilitating women’s agency. Women are not seen as victims, but as agents.

6.3.6 Summary

Chung Hyun Kyung’s theological method is synthesis. She picks up whatever she finds useful, not only from Korean and Asian culture, but from

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231 Chung 1994a, p 27-28, italics in original
232 Chung 1994a, p 29
233 Chung 1995a, p 208
234 Chung 1995a, p 208
235 Chung 1995a, p 206
236 For a more thorough analysis of the ethical implications of this text, cf. Sporre 1999.
all her encounters with people from all parts of the world, and merges them into her own theology.

Chung is a central figure in Asian feminist theology. She receives and gives inspiration. She shares the central concerns of her fellow feminist theologians: the centrality of justice and liberation, “life” as the criterion for judging religion, the openness to Asian indigenous religiosity, especially popular religion.

But she also has a very distinct voice of her own. She is more daring than most of her colleagues when it comes to promoting a “liberation-survival-centered syncretism” and creating a very personal theology with an innovative language that is reminiscent of Mary Daly, and where she makes use of both Christian and non-Christian resources.

However, for all her syncretism, Christianity is still the framework and point of reference in her work. When she uses sources from other religions, she invariably interprets them in Christian terms, there is a prophetic and evangelistic thrust in all she does – and when she summarizes her legacy, it is in the form of a “gospel”.

Many of the themes from Chapters Two and Three recur in Chung’s theology. “Messy” is a favoured concept for describing the coexistence of religions in people’s lives. She insists on an interfaith dialogue which takes account of power relations, which is concerned with questions of justice and liberation, and takes it starting point in religion as lived in everyday life. She does not shy away from conflict, or from acknowledging the ambiguities in religion. Storytelling and non-verbal expressions are central. The whole thrust of her theology is directed toward change: the aim of interfaith dialogue as well as of theologizing is the transformation of religion.

6.4 Kwok Pui-lan: A Postcolonial Theologian

Kwok Pui-lan’s parents were originally peasants in mainland China, but went as refugees to Hong Kong after World War II. Kwok was born there, and grew up as the third of seven children under poor circumstances. Already as a child she questioned the inequality between boys and girls in the patriarchal Chinese family. Her mother was a devout follower of folk Buddhist religion, but she herself joined the Anglican church as a teenager. Encouraged by her role model Huang Xianyun, one of the first women priests in the Anglican communion, she entered the seminary to study theology. She was concerned early on about women’s perspectives in theology, and eventually was introduced to the works of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary Daly. Other important influences were the student movement and the ecumenical movement.
Kwok became the first woman professor at her seminary. She taught a course on “Women and the Church”, and some of her students later formed the Hong Kong Women Christian Council. In 1984, she began her doctoral studies at Harvard University, where she met feminist theologians and scholars from different faiths. She also met with African, Latin American and Afro-American feminists, who encouraged her to search for her own heritage as a Chinese woman.237

In her doctoral dissertation, *Chinese Women and Christianity 1860-1927*, she held up Chinese women’s agency in the spread of Christianity in China, pointed out the cultural background that made Christianity attractive to Chinese women, and showed how the Christian message was “feminized” through interaction with Chinese culture and religion. She is now professor of Christian Theology and Spirituality at the Episcopal Divinity School in Boston. She considers herself to be “a Chinese feminist intellectual in diaspora in the U.S.”.238

Kwok Pui-lan’s publications also include *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World; Introducing Asian Feminist Theology; Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology; Postcolonialism, Feminism & Religious Discourse*, which she co-edited with Laura E. Donaldson, and *Beyond Anglicanism: The Anglican Communion in the Twenty-First Century* co-edited with Ian T. Douglas, as well as numerous articles and essays. Her early writings stand in the tradition of Asian feminist theology with an emphasis on women’s suffering and motherhood, with titles as “God Weeps with our Pain” and “Feminist theology: Passion from the womb”. More recently, she has reflected on Asian feminist theology with the help of Western and post-colonial theorists, and has profiled herself as an Asian feminist theologian who has made postcolonial theory her main interpretive tool.

6.4.1 On Being an Asian Woman Critic

Kwok Pui-lan problematizes her identity as an “Asian woman”. She rejects an “essence of ‘Asianness’”, and understands Asia as a social and cultural construct that is “multiple, fluid and changing”.239

The essentialist versus anti-essentialist debate in Western feminism is seen by her as “culturally specific, that is, deeply rooted in Greek metaphysics in the universalizing colonial discourse during the age of imperialism and in the current western controversy on language and its

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237 The material for these biographical notes is found in Fabella 1993, pp 84-87, Kwok 1988 and Erbele-Küster 2001, p 281
238 Erbele-Küster 2001, p 281
239 Kwok 1995a, p 24

253
Third World women, she claims, “understand women’s identity more in the context of political engagement, of defining the struggle of particular groups of women, of relating to a specific history, and of accountability to a certain people.”

Calling herself an Asian woman, Kwok concludes,

signifies the awareness that sees the construct of gender from a particular culture as a vantage point from which to look at the world and to act politically. This understanding of Asian woman is multilayered, fluid, and open to new and continual reinterpretation [...] It does not refer to a particular set of attributes or characteristics.

In a sense, you could say that Kwok has chosen to be an Asian to the same extent as Gabriele Dietrich. On the other hand, Kwok emphasises that an Asian woman theologian is an Other in relation to Western and Asian male scholarship as well as to white feminists. Such “multiple marginality” in Kwok’s view creates a “multiple consciousness” that enables “multiple readings and open new arrays of interpretation”.

Kwok is concerned with the gap between theory and praxis, which we have encountered on the part of the participants in the Women’s Interfaith Journey, but does not see the gap so much between men and women as between First World and Third World feminists. She asks whether there is “an international division of labor in feminist work, that is, will Third World feminists merely talk about stories of their lives, while First World feminists do theory?”

“Theory” generally means Western academic theory, says Kwok, but points out that Western theory cannot be superimposed on Third World realities, and that “people of color have always theorized”, though not in the form of Western abstract logic. So, while criticizing Western theory, Kwok insists on the importance of theory for Third World theology: “postcolonial feminists need to take each other’s works seriously and establish an alternative community of discourse so that we can encourage each other in theory building”.

6.4.2 Discovering the Bible

Though not an exegete, Kwok Pui-lan has done much work in the area of Bible hermeneutics. “Discovering the Bible in the Non-biblical word” is the

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240 Kwok 1995a, p 25
241 Kwok 1995a, p 26
242 Kwok 1995a, p 27
243 Kwok 2005, p 74
244 Kwok 2005, pp 74-75
title of an influential essay, later incorporated in a monograph with the same title. She chose the word “discovering” instead of “liberating” to signify an internal approach that is not dependent on western approaches: “Asian Christians must discover the Bible from perspectives that emerge out of their own contexts, and not through a western lens.”

Kwok criticizes the way the Bible was used by the missionaries, from Foucauldian, post-colonial and feminist perspectives:

The Bible thus served as a ‘signifier’ that functioned to support western beliefs in the basic deficiency of ‘heathen’ culture. [...] In a similar way, the phallus has been used as a signifier of the fundamental ‘deficiency’ of the female, a value superimposed on women by men in male psychological discourse. It is not merely a coincidence that missionary literature describes Christian mission as ‘aggressive work’ and western expansion as ‘intrusion’ and ‘penetration’.

The critique of Western academic theory recurs when Kwok analyzes Asian women’s biblical reflections found in In God’s Image. She admits to initially finding them “unacademic” but that she then realized she was using the norms of Western biblical criticism and did not ask “whether these women’s writings might reflect another logic, one that is not abstract, deductive and one-dimensional”. She found that

some Asian women used an oral form of interpretation that is pervasive in Asian religious life. These women have their hermeneutics; I could not hear or understand it, because I did not have the adequate tools to do so.

Asian Bible hermeneutics must be multifaith hermeneutics, which “affirms that truth and wisdom are found not only in the Bible but also in the cultures, histories and religions of other people”. Even so, for women theologians it cannot be a “hermeneutics of consent to the biblical story and the Asian story but rather a process of double hermeneutics of suspicion and reclamation”.

Kwok has coined the term “dialogical imagination” for Asian theologians’ biblical interpretation:

It is dialogical, for it involves a constant conversation between different religious and cultural traditions. It is highly imaginative, for it looks at both the Bible and our Asian reality anew, challenging the established ‘order of

245 Kwok 1995a, p 1
246 Kwok 1995a, p 9
247 Kwok 1995a, p 27
248 Kwok 1995a, p 66
249 Kwok 1995a, p 70

255
things’. [...] Dialogical imagination attempts to bridge the gap of time and space to create new horizons, and to connect the disparate elements of our lives in a meaningful whole.\textsuperscript{250}

Kwok claims that Asian theologians must “demythologize the sacred authority that is associated with the Bible”, and “debunk western claims that the Bible is the sole revelation of God”.\textsuperscript{251} She does not think that the Bible provides the norm for interpretation in itself. Here she differs from Rosemary Radford Ruether, who argues that the norm is the prophetic tradition of the Bible. Kwok finds that “the richness of the Bible cannot be boiled down into one critical principle”, and contests the assumption that “the prophetic principle can be lifted from the original context and be transplanted elsewhere”. With Tracy and Tillich, Ruether presupposes that there must be a Christian answer to all situations, and this “needs to be critically challenged in the light of the Third World situation today”.\textsuperscript{252}

She finds Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s hermeneutics more helpful in the Asian context, and claims that

The critical principle lies not in the Bible itself, but in the community of women and men who read the Bible and who, through their dialogical imagination, appropriate it for their own liberation.\textsuperscript{253}

But Kwok stresses that “communities of minjung differ from each other”\textsuperscript{254} and therefore there is no norm which can be applied cross-culturally:

Our truth claims must be tested in public discourse, in constant dialogue with other communities. Good news for the Christians might be bad news for the Buddhists or Confucianists.\textsuperscript{255}

Kwok argues that “women under multiple oppression have multiple identities, and they help us to interpret the Bible in a multidimensional way”. With Rita Nakashima Brock, she says that a person with multiple identities “has the capacity to search for multiple voices that affirm complex cultural meanings and identities, thereby creating a fluid multilayered self”. Such a self “seeks to construct meaning in a fragmented world, to experiment with different voices, and try out versions of these stories”.\textsuperscript{256}

\textsuperscript{250} Kwok 1991, p 305
\textsuperscript{251} Kwok 1995a, p 30
\textsuperscript{252} Kwok 1991, pp 311-312
\textsuperscript{253} Kwok 1991, p 312
\textsuperscript{254} Kwok 1991, p 312, italics in original
\textsuperscript{255} Kwok 1991, p 312
\textsuperscript{256} Kwok 1995a, p 93

256
An example of multiple identities appears in Kwok’s postcolonial reading of the story of the Syrophoenician woman. She draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s theories, which “expose the power dynamics underlying the manner in which colonized people are inscribed in texts and how they are consigned often to signify the Other in history”.257

Kwok Pui-lan’s statement that “good news for Christians might be bad news for Buddhists” corresponds to the insights we encountered in Chapter Five, from Jewish-Christian dialogue, that Bible texts which are liberative for women also can be interpreted as anti-Judaic. Jewish-Christian relations also plays a part in Kwok’s theology. Her postcolonial reading makes a connection between colonialism, sexism and anti-Judaism. The traditional interpretation has seen this as a story about the beginning of the mission to the Gentiles. In the scheme of the history of salvation, salvation was offered to the Gentiles when the Jews had rejected it, and this has been used in anti-Jewish rhetoric. According to Kwok, the missionaries used this story to show how Christianity should replace other religions: “In one broad stroke, anti-Judaism was linked with ethnocentrism and the colonial impulse”.258 Neither should we overlook the significance of humility as a virtue of a female Gentile:

In the colonial setting, the colonizers often regarded themselves as male and the colonized, female. The humility of a female Gentile in this story could be used to reinforce a passive, docile and obedient nature toward the dominant masters who came to conquer and rule. Just like the Syrophoenician woman, colonized peoples were expected to be subservient as [sic] loyal as a ‘devoted dog’.259

Further, Kwok highlights the Syrophoenician woman’s multiple identities. She is despised as a non-Jew and oppressed as a woman. But as a Greek-speaking woman, she comes from an elite urban class and is a potential oppressor of the people in Galilee. There is always “the Other within the Other”, and a postcolonial reading makes room for the differences among women.260

Kwok not only puts anti-Judaism into the postcolonial framework, she also points out that the concept “homosexuality” appeared in the 19th century as “part and parcel of the colonial discourse”,261 and that the association of homosexual acts with idolatry abounds in the Bible. She asks: “Do the religious Other and the sexual Other mutually constitute each other, serving

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257 Kwok 2000, p 60
258 Kwok 2000, p 61
259 Kwok 2000, p 61
260 Kwok 2000, pp 61-62
261 Kwok 2005, p 138
as placeholders for the boundaries of religion, purity, and sexuality?" Seeing this parallelism, Kwok finds it surprising that progressive Christian scholars question the Bible’s sexual, but not its religious, episteme.  

6.4.3 “Who Do You Say That I Am?”

It is Kwok Pui-lan who has highlighted this Christological question and insisted that there are Asian alternatives to the answer formulated out of Western cultural assumptions. Each generation must answer the question anew, she claims.

She has especially studied Chinese perceptions of Christ, and found that Chinese concepts of God differ so significantly from the Western Christian idea of a creator God outside and over against the world, that traditional anthropocentric Christologies and atonement theories make no sense to the Chinese mindset.  

Kwok has proposed two Christological models: “an organic model” and “Jesus/Christ as hybrid concept”.

The organic model is “a response to the growing ecological crises in China and other parts of Asia and […] an attempt to dialogue with Chinese religions”. To develop a feminist ecological model for Christ, she argues, we must “dare to use non-human metaphors”. There are ample sources for such a model in the New Testament, like the vine and the branches, bread of life, living water, and the hen protecting her brood.

Other elements of an organic Christology are the image of Jesus as the Wisdom of God, and a notion of Jesus as the epiphany of God, which allows for other manifestations or revelations of the divine. Jesus’ life and ministry remain paradigmatic for the Christian community, his death and passion are seen “within the larger context of his struggle for justice for all” and his resurrection “can be seen as a rebirth, a regeneration that gives hope”. Such a Christology is linked to a view of sin as “the breaking down of the interconnectedness of all things”, while salvation “entails right relationship with one another, caring for the planet, compassion for the weaker links in the chain of life, while constantly remembering that human beings are part of nature and the natural process”.

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262 Kwok 2005, p 139  
263 Kwok 2005, p 139  
264 Kwok 1992a, pp 29-46; 1993  
265 Kwok 2000, p 89  
266 Kwok 2000, p 91  
267 Kwok 2000, p 91  
268 Kwok 2000, p 93  
269 Kwok 2000, p 93  

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Kwok’s latest contribution to Christology is her reflections on the hybridity of the concept of Christ.\(^\text{270}\) Jesus/Christ, she claims, is the most hybridized concept in the Christian tradition:

The space between Jesus and Christ is unsettling and fluid, resisting easy categorization and closure. It is the ‘contact zone’ or ‘borderland’ between the human and the divine, the one and the many, the historical and the cosmological, the Jewish and the Hellenistic, the prophetic and the sacramental, the God of the conquerors and the God of the meek and the lowly.\(^\text{271}\)

In postcolonial theory, Kwok points out, hybridity is not just the mixing of two languages or cultures, but a concept that deals with colonial power. Through hybridity, denied knowledge enter into the dominant discourse, expose myths of cultural priority, destabilize binary oppositions and critique rigid boundaries.\(^\text{272}\)

Kwok has studied the relationship between Christology and the colonial imaginations, and has found that the quest for the historical Jesus “is a quest for cultural origin, national identity and racial genealogy”, prompted by the encounter with the “natives” of the colonies, which “created anxiety and necessitated the quest for a European self-identity”.\(^\text{273}\)

Kwok points out that the first quest for the historical Jesus also took place in the context of “the suppression of ‘the other’ within – namely, the Jews”, and again highlights the connection between colonialism, anti-Judaism and feminism.\(^\text{274}\)

The first quest took place in colonialist Europe, the second, Kwok observes, in a United States “trying to create a Pax Americana”, where the natives are inside the metropolitan centres. The ensuing Christologies, like Jesus the Hero of Friedrich Strauss and the New Age guru of contemporary America, represent examples of cultural hybridization. She also suggests that, with its scientific pretensions, the current quest for the historical Jesus may be “a displaced and repressed quest for white male identity”.\(^\text{275}\)

While the quests for the historical Jesus unwittingly produce hybridized images of Jesus, Kwok holds up consciously hybrid images from marginalized communities: the Black Christ of the Afro-American community, the Corn Mother of American Indians, the shakti of Asian feminists, Jewish theologian Susannah Heschel’s notion of Jesus as a

\(^{270}\) The concept “hybridity” is a concept in post-colonial theory introduced by Homi Bhabha

\(^{271}\) Kwok 2005, p 171

\(^{272}\) Kwok 2005, pp 170-171

\(^{273}\) Kwok 2005, p 172-173

\(^{274}\) Kwok 2005, p 173

\(^{275}\) Kwok 2005, p 174
“theological transvestite” and Marcella Althaus-Reid’s Bi/Christ who relates to a problematization of sexuality.276

There is no original or privileged understanding of Christ, states Kwok. The notions of contextualization and indigenization still assume a Christian essence that can be indigenized. “Deconstructing the white and colonial constructs of Christ as hybrids allows marginalized communities to claim the authority to advance their own Christological claims”.277

6.4.4 A Postcolonial Theology of Religious Difference

Like Chung, Kwok wants to move beyond pluralism. She does so by introducing postcolonial theory into religious studies and theology, to create a “postcolonial theology of religious difference”.278 Her critique of the interfaith dialogue scene concurs with that of the participants in the projects described in Chapters Two and Three, but is elaborated within the postcolonial framework.

Kwok wants to “examine the discourse of theology of religions within the context of rising American imperialism and to see how religion is reconfigured to align with current political interests”, focusing on pluralist liberal and progressive theologians, as the agenda of the Christian right is “quite evident”.279

The pluralist paradigm, Kwok states, emerged when “the West was forced to face the diversity of culture and traditions in the postcolonial period”. After World War II, the notion of difference was moved from the biological to the cultural realm. This created ambivalence between the liberals’ desire to acknowledge diversity of cultures, and a “remaining cultural assumption that Western culture is the most advanced”.280

In the discussions of religious pluralism, this, she argues, led John Hick to gloss over differences, which “smacks of the patronizing tendency of white liberals”. George Lindbeck’s rhetoric of emphasizing religious difference, on the other hand, “comes close to a defense of American foreign policy” and could reinforce the myth of “clash of civilizations”.281 In chapter Seven, we shall see how this critique of Hick and Lindbeck for not being able to deal adequately with difference, recurs among Western feminist theologians such as Maura O’Neill and Jeannine Hill Fletcher.

276 Kwok 2005 p 174-185
277 Kwok 2005, p 182
278 Kwok 2005, p 189
279 Kwok 2005, p 197
280 Kwok 2005, p 198-199
281 Kwok 2005, pp 199-200
The pluralist position, says Kwok, rests on a construction of “religion” and “world religions” that has Christianity as its norm, and privileges male elitist traditions, ignores intrareligious difference and neglects women’s voices. In interreligious dialogue “a handful of Third World elites, usually all males, are invited to speak to a largely white Christian audience” and discussions “are mostly determined by the interests of Christianity”. Such dialogue, for all its good intentions, “can be used to preserve the status quo and camouflage the real differences between Western dominant powers and Third World societies”.282

Kwok’s alternative interreligious discourse, a postcolonial theology of religious difference, asks different questions compared to malestream theology of religions. Instead of questions about universal truth, universal experience, salvation etc, framed within Christian concerns, a postcolonial theology of religious difference must begin with the question “How do we deal with the fact that Western Christian theological discourse about religious difference is constructed in such a way as to justify a hierarchical ordering of religious traditions, which always puts Christianity on the top?”283

A postcolonial theology of religious difference should operate in the interface between religious studies and cultural studies, and “examine how Christianity constructs difference in various historical epochs, taking into consideration the contestation of meaning, the shaping of the imagination, and the changing power relations”.284

Kwok shares Amina Wadud’s apprehension about the word “diversity”285 when she makes a distinction between difference and diversity, where difference has stronger connotations of being produced within certain power structures.286

Another issue for a postcolonial theology of religious difference is the transformation of religious symbols and institutions in a globalized world characterized by migration. Hybridized religious identities are shaped when people of religious faith move to new contexts, and these “cannot be pinned down by fixed and reified notions of ‘religion’”.287

Feminist scholarship within a postcolonial theology of religious difference should focus on “how patriarchal relations in the religious arena intersect with and are transformed by colonial and other unequal relations”.288 They should also on the one hand analyze why women engage

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282 Kwok 2005, pp 202-203
283 Kwok 2005, p 205
284 Kwok 2005, p 205
285 Cf. Chapter 4 above
286 Kwok 2005, pp 42, 205
287 Kwok 2005, p 206
288 Kwok 2005, p 207
in fundamentalist movements, and on the other lift up women’s interracial and interfaith initiatives for peace and justice as “beacons of hope”.  

6.4.5 Summary

While being a part of the Asian feminist theology movement, Kwok Pui-lan’s socio-geographical location in the US allows her to cross-fertilize Asian resources with developments in the Western academy. She has firmly brought postcolonialist discourse into Asian feminist theology and theology of religions.

Her theology is more analytical than that of many other Asian feminist theologians, but her analysis never puts down their theology, elevating it instead by locating it into a theoretical framework. Much of what is implicit in Asian feminist theology, like the view of the biblical canon and Christological approaches, is spelt out by her in post-modern and postcolonial terms.

But she also criticizes white feminists and post-modern theorists for their ethnocentricity, connecting to the Asian insistence on praxis, contextuality and accountability.

Kwok Pui-lan is unique among Asian theologians in her sensitivity to anti-Judaism, and making the connections between anti-Judaism, colonialism and gender stereotypes. Partly this sensitivity can be attributed to her location in the US, where she has come into contact with Jewish feminists like Judith Plaskow, and the Jewish-Christian dialogue.

6.5 Wong Wai-ching – a Post-modern Critic

Wong Wai-ching Angela is the youngest of this quartet of Asian feminist theologians and represents a third generation. She is a native of Hong Kong, where she is a professor at the Chinese University. She received her PhD in religious studies from the University of Chicago Divinity School. She is active on the Asian ecumenical scene, e.g. as member of the presidium of Christian Conference of Asia 2000-05 and as co-moderator of the Congress of Asian Theologians 1999-2003.

She has published articles in English and Chinese in various theological journals, mainly dealing with identity issues from post-colonial and gender perspectives. Her magnum opus so far is “The Poor woman”: A Critical Analysis of Asian Theology and Contemporary Chinese Fiction by Women (2002). Here, she develops a theme that recurs in much of her work: that

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289 Kwok 2005, p 208

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Asian theology in general, and Asian feminist theology in particular, needs to free itself from a nationalist discourse and engage with post-colonial theory.

6.5.1 “The Poor Woman”

“The poor woman” is Wong’s catchword for what she is critical of in Asian feminist theology. Asian women, she says, are generalized into the icon of “the poor woman” who on the one hand is a victim of the imperialism of the West, and on the other a heroine who fights for the liberation of her people in the face of adverse circumstances. This construction of the Asian woman comes from the nationalism that guided Asian theology when it was first formulated during the era of independence struggles and nation building.

Wong acknowledges that the commitment to nationalist and people’s movements in Asia, and the efforts in indigenization and contextualisation, were necessary and invaluable for the development of an Asian theology that wanted to disassociate itself from colonialism and the kind of Western theology that underpinned it. All the same, she contends that Asian theologians now need to grapple with the fact that Asian theology

remains in many ways dependent on the very structures it sets out to dismantle. […] Asian theological texts very often invert the structure of binary distinctions between Occident and Orient, without necessarily questioning the validity of such dualism itself.290

Asian Christian identity, Wong claims, is composed of two major aspects: the construction of a cultural and historical identity of Asia in opposition to the West, and a theological self-representation of Asians as both victims of Western imperialism and revolutionaries in national political movements.291

In the recovery of historical identities, there is a danger of romanticizing traditions and neglecting the sexism and oppressiveness they also contain. Wong joins Korean theologian Kang Nam Soon in issuing a warning against the tendency among Asian feminist theologians to uncritically draw on popular beliefs in goddesses that in reality underpin patriarchal values.292

Due to the emphasis on the difference between East and West, Wong argues, Asian theology falls into the trap of orientalism, which on the one hand reinforces the dominance of Western discourse, and, on the other, does not take account of the differences and conflicts within Asian reality. Neither does it take account of the tension between tradition and modernity in post-

290 Wong 2002, p 3
291 Wong 2002, p 29
colonial Asia. While appropriating Western material techniques, the newly independent countries wanted to revive their spiritual culture, thus creating an outer-inner dichotomy. In this dichotomy, “woman” became the embodiment of this inner identity, which was to be maintained in the home, unaffected by the profane activities in the male-dominated outer world.293

This veneration of “woman” as a sign of national identity is prominent in Asian theology. Wong gives many examples of how both male and female Asian theologians describe women as victims of all but unbearable suffering, and at the same time struggling courageously for justice. This stereotype of “the poor woman” does not allow “the richness and multiplicity of women’s experience to come in and enable a reformulation of a theological discourse in Asia”.294

Interestingly enough, in view of the Asian discourse on motherhood discussed above, Wong has actually used a story about “bad mothers” for a Bible study. This is the story of the cannibal mothers in 2 Kings 6:26–31 which she interprets in the context of rising numbers of child abuse in Hong Kong. Having recently become a mother herself, she finds these stories horrific and “un-maternal”, but does not shy away from discussing them.295

6.5.2 Multiplicity of Women’s Experience

In order to allow for the multiplicity of women’s experience in theology, in The Poor Woman Wong analyzes the works of two women fiction writers from Hong Kong. These writers do not identify themselves as feminists, yet Wong with the help of French feminist theorists Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous finds in their writing an écriture féminine that explores a world of dissonances and silences described by women themselves, one that tells of the complicity and multiplicity of women’s agency, arising out of women’s negotiation with the highly commercialized and politicized culture of Hong Kong.296

In this fiction by Hong Kong women writers, instead of the stereotyped “poor woman”, Wong finds “the multi-layered conflicts and contradictions faced by women in actual life circumstances”,297 “a space that is chaotic,
disorganized and non-transparent”, 298 “the freedom of a ‘dubious’ self […] or ‘multiple’ selves”. 299

The reality in Hong Kong, as described in fiction and apparently experienced by Wong herself, defies the stereotyped images of “Asianness” and the East-West dichotomy. Identity cannot, as in the nationalist discourse, be forged simply by digging into ancient cultural traditions, but identity is a process whereby one has to take advantage of whatever resources are available and continue to wrestle and negotiate with them. When it comes to the identity of women, this process is even more chaotic and fluid. 300

Like Kwok Pui-lan, Wong makes use of the concept “hybridity”. Hong Kong, she states, is situated at the crossroads between tradition and modernity, which calls for a “politics of hybridity”. She quotes Homi Bhabha, who claims that by mimicking colonial culture, the colonized subjects subvert the assumption of colonial identity. 301 Using the concept hybridity allows Wong to avoid the East-West dichotomy while at the same time resisting Western dominance.

Hong Kong is not unique, Wong points out, rather it is representative of the current development in Asia. Thus these “hybridized” cities should be a new site for doing theology in Asia.

Wong speaks from her own experience of being an urban professional woman of Hong Kong, having nothing in common with “the poor woman” of Asian feminist theology. She “indigenizes” outside the established nationalist anti-colonial discourse, defying C. S. Song’s rejection of Hong Kong 302 when she dares to embrace the culture of Hong Kong for the autonomy it offers to women:

Despite so much criticism to capitalist societies and colonialism in Asia, a Westernized Hong Kong woman like myself finds immense opportunities exactly because of such background. What the “Western” culture and colonial institution have provided me with are an enormous space to seek economic independency and thereby a high degree of self-autonomy. Similarly, despite a series of problems arising from China’s opening to foreign capitalist investment, women from poor rural areas of China are taking their chances as well. 303

298 Wong 2002, p 84
299 Wong 2002, p 86
300 Wong 2002, p 95
301 Wong 1997, p 38
302 Cf.. section 1.6.3 above
303 Wong 2001a, p 6
Women in Asia today are caught in multiple dilemmas, says Wong: between “the advantages and exploitations of modern economy and the “security and hardship of the old economy”, between a traditional/collective and a modern/individual ethos, between the demands of competitiveness and nurturing qualities in working women. These contradictions make women’s identity fluid and in process. Women are not only victims of, or heroines in the struggle against, global capitalism, they also negotiate it in order to make it work for their own benefit.

6.5.3 Critique of Asian Feminist Christology

In Wong’s view, Asian feminist Christological discourse has relied heavily on the ideology of “the poor woman”. The suffering, self-sacrificing, struggling Asian woman has the suffering, self-sacrificing, victorious Jesus as her role model. Essentially, the Jesus of Asian feminist theology is the “exemplary liberator, the exceptional comrade and new lover of Asian women”. In order to have redemptive significance for Asian women who do not identify with “the poor woman”, Christology needs to be re-assessed and reconstructed.

Again, instead of constructing a unified Asia, Asian feminist theologians should state a “space of differences”:

It is a space posing difference, transgression, and access a refusal of the deadening sameness ascribed by the dominating system. In the case of Asian theological discourse, it will be a space affirming a politics of “neither” East “nor” West but both, a politics not of “either-or” but “in-between”. It is a space which welcomes the politics of women who engage themselves daily in resistance and negotiation with their complicit and multiple identities of being women Christians of Asia.

The only way to construct a relevant Christology in this “space of difference” is to embrace the diversity of Christologies in the New Testament. Using Ricoeur’s literary analysis of biblical texts, Wong is able to bring out the heterogeneity, dynamism and asymmetry of the Gospel narratives, opening up “new possibilities of being-in-the-world”.

Wong gives an example of a useful Christology in the work of Japanese New Testament Scholar Hisako Kinukawa, who finds that in Mark, Jesus is

304 Wong 2002, p 112
305 Wong 2002, p 106
306 Wong 2002, pp 109-110
307 Wong 2002, 115
repeatedly challenged by women to become a “boundary breaker”, so that the encounters become transformative experiences for both parts.  

Asian feminist theologians have felt the need to distance themselves from Western feminist theology, and therefore have never been able to take the question of the maleness of Jesus seriously, claims Wong. Also, they have been reluctant to address the question of female sexuality, because it is seen as a “Western issue”. These are crucial issues in Christology, and Wong thinks that Asian feminist theologians would do well to dialogue with their Western counterparts, but she also finds indigenous resources. In Chung Hyun Kyung’s image of Christ as a shaman, “we may examine how a shaman priestess’ embodiment of divine power can contribute to a development of an incarnational theology for women in Asia”.  

6.5.4 Intercultural and Interreligious Interaction

Wong’s apprehension about appropriating Asian spiritual resources such as goddess traditions is not to be seen as an over-all rejection. On the contrary, as we have seen above, she wants to develop Chung’s notion of Jesus as shaman. She also, in much the same vein as Chung, tells a story of a Christian woman who besides participating in church activities also took refuge in Kuan Yin, of whom she had a statue at her bedside. Wong concludes:

I believe this is a strange story to tell in our churches, but it is not a strange story in the experience of many people in our countries and our cultures.

Wong’s own grandmother was a devoted believer in Kuan Yin, and she now regrets that after her baptism as a teenager, she hurt her grandmother deeply by refusing to go on helping with the worship of Kuan Yin. For herself, however, she prefers to seek female symbolism for God in the biblical Wisdom tradition. Wisdom woman shares with Kuan Yin and other goddesses the power of procreation and sustenance, the power to preserve and enhance life, but as I understand Wong she finds in Wisdom something that goes beyond women’s roles as wives and mothers. Wisdom is God’s call to people, the mediator of revelation, and was a partner of God in the creation of the world. In Wisdom, women of Asia can recognize their own perseverance to find and create room in which to live and grow. At “the table

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308 Wong 2002, pp 117-118
309 Wong 2002, 120
310 Wong 2001b, p 7
311 Wong 1998, p 25
312 Wong 1998, p 26
of Sophia” they can gather and share their stories of how they find the power of creativity.313

In contrast to most Asian theologians, who perceive globalization mostly as a threat, Wong sees it as an opportunity to move away from the homogenizing discourse of the nation state, and rediscover the plurality of local cultures and traditions, around which “communities of resistance against the totalizing forces of globalization” can be built. There are indigenous resources for culture and spirituality, but they are diverse and in conflict. A new understanding of culture and tradition challenges one to seek identity formation in a process of struggle and conflict, on the borderline between ‘worlds’ that are in tension with each other. It means constantly engaging in intercultural and interreligious interaction and communication, allowing the greatest inclusivity of the ‘others’ into oneself, whether they are nationally, racially, ethnically, religiously, socio-economically, or sexually different.314

6.5.5 Reception of Wong’s Critique

The reactions to Wong’s critique have been mixed. Hope S. Antone reviewed the book favourably in CCA News, finding it “a valuable contribution of Asian and Asian feminist theologising”.315

Elizabeth Tapia, however, in a response to a keynote address by Wong Wai-ching at the 1997 Congress of Asian theologians, appears less ready to take her criticism on board. In her presentation, Wong delivered a postcolonial critique of Asian theology that summarized her thoughts as outlined above. Tapia somewhat condescendingly said she appreciated Wong’s contribution “as a young and articulate woman theologian”. But she then took on the role of an advocate of “the poor woman”, saying:

However I do not understand some of your terminology like “metonymized”, “disparateness” and “hybridity”. I guess I am used to simple storytelling of women’s struggles for identity and justice and expressions of joy. I therefore found it hard to follow some of your discussion.316

She expressed some reservation against the concept “post-colonialism”, asking how a postcolonial theory would “work or not work in a neo-colonial context”. Neither could she agree with the description of the concept of Asianness as a “fictional reconstruction of our identity”.317

313 Wong 1998, p 27
314 Wong 2001b, p 6
315 Antone 2002
316 Tapia 1997, p 51
317 Tapia 1997, p 51

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Kwok Pui-lan, who has no problems with Wong’s terminology, still finds that Wong “tends to oversimplify the ideas of individual feminist theologians and the development of Asian feminist theology in general”. She points out that both Chung, Mananzan and she herself have presented a more diverse portrayal of Asian women than Wong admits, and suggests that “Wong herself might have inadvertently created the binary construct while trying to fit the ideas of Asian theologians into her mould”.318

She further expresses some reservations about the application of postmodernism to the Asian context, pointing out the “it is necessary to distinguish between a Western habit of ‘essentialising’ and ‘homogenising’ (as most clearly seen in the colonial enterprise) and the womanist and Asian cultural construction of the self, which are rooted in and understood through the communal experience”.319

Kwok is right that Wong oversimplifies, but at the same time, Wong, living in contemporary Hong Kong, has a different outlook that enables her to see that the complexity and plurality of the reality in Asia is even greater than the previous generation has realized. It remains to be seen whether Wong will influence the younger generation, and whether they can make use of her thoughts without losing the commitment to doing theology for “ordinary women” or the consciousness of living in a “neo-colonial” era, which are so precious to Tapia’s generation.

6.5.6 Summary

Wong Wai-ching is, like Kwok Pui-lan, well read in post-modern and postcolonial theory, and uses them to analyze Asian feminist theology and the situation of women in Asia as she perceives it. But she is far less loyal to Asian feminist theology than Kwok, and her accusations against her colleagues can be seen as a form of “matricide”.320

Wong’s voice is that of a new generation, challenging the old for being caught up in a nationalist discourse that hampers the development of a theology that is relevant and liberative for women who are living in a world more complex than this discourse allows for.

In what could be labelled as a “Western individualistic” way, she takes her starting point in her own experience of being an urban professional woman in Hong Kong, who cannot identify with the image of Asian womanhood, “the poor woman”, that is presented in Asian feminist theology.

318 Kwok 2002b, p 62
319 Kwok 2002b, p 63
320 On “matricide” among feminist theologians, cf. Tatman 2004
With the aid of both Asian post-colonial critics and European theorists, she analyzes Asian reality in “hybridized cities” like Hong Kong, and finds multiplicity, complexity, tensions and conflicts. She dares to acknowledge both the positive and the negative sides of globalization and capitalism.

We encounter once again the theme of “the messiness of actual existence” in Wong’s theology, where terms like fluidity, chaotic, transgressive, boundary-breaking, dissonance, difference and hybridity are central. Like many other feminist theologians, she maintains that theology should take its starting point in what life is actually like, rather than in how it is ideologically supposed to be.

While not specifically addressing interfaith issues to a high degree, her emphasis on hybridity and difference provides openings for a theology of religions. There are no “pure” indigenous traditions to draw on, but that does not mean that non-Christian traditions should not be resources and dialogue partners in doing theology. On the contrary, they are already part of people’s religious lives and should be acknowledged.

6.6 Conclusion: An Audacious Enterprise

Asian feminist theology is praxis-oriented and audacious in its bypassing of traditional doctrine and appropriation of religious and cultural resources. “Pragmatic” is a word I would like to use in a positive sense, to characterize the theologizing of Asian feminists. They use the best available resources, no matter from what tradition, to forge a theology that empowers women to “create, promote and maintain life” and work for the wellbeing of all.

“Life” is a key word in this theology. The norm for assessing any theology or religious tradition is whether it is “life-affirming” or “life-denying”. This entails that “religion as practiced” in everyday life takes precedence over the dogmatic concerns of “religion as prescribed”.

As the intended audience of Asian feminist theology is “grass-roots women”, it may, as Kwok Pui-lan has pointed out, appear un-academic and simplistic. There is, however, often more analysis and research behind it than the creative presentation reveals.

As Cynthia Chapman pointed out, Western theology can learn a lot from Asian feminists’ grass-roots biblical hermeneutics and theological praxis, and, I would add, from their situating theology firmly in the interfaith context.

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321 This is not unique for Asian feminists. As I have shown in an article (Egnell 2003), “life” emerges as a norm in much of Third World feminist theology.
Asian feminist theologians do not subscribe to the notion of religions as self-contained wholes, stressing instead their “messy” and fluid character. This allows them to take what they find useful and reinterpret it in new contexts. Especially striking is the way they avoid inscribing their construction of gender into a complementary paradigm, while keeping a “cosmological essentialism” in their views of womanhood. They claim the power of shakti but bypass purusha. By identifying the ground of existence as female, they construct themselves as “same”, and as created “in God’s image”.

It would add to the significance of this enterprise if this method was spelled out more clearly, the philosophical problems around such a reconceptualization were discussed, as well as their choice of tradition within Hinduism.

I wonder, however, whether it may not be somewhat problematic that their interfaith praxis takes the form of appropriation and intra-religious dialogue more than of actual dialogue with women of other faiths. It is not for me as a Western woman to question Chung Hyun Kyung’s multifaith intestines, but it should be problematized to what extent Asian women, who have grown up in a Christian context, as many of the Asian feminist theologians have done, automatically have a deep knowledge of Asian religions. There might be a lesson to be learned here from Jewish-Christian dialogue, where, as we have seen, Christian feminists have learned not to assume that biblical texts hold the same meaning for the two communities, and to acknowledge differences.

There are many reasons, discussed in Chapter Three, for the relative lack of interfaith dialogue among Asian women, but the appropriation of symbols from other religions by Christian women could be perceived as arrogance, and be an impediment to such dialogue. But this is my conjecture as a Westerner, and given the syncretistic nature of Asian religions, where Hindus may claim that Christians have no monopoly on Jesus, they might not see a problem in Christians appropriating Hindu concepts.

The insistence of participants in women’s interfaith projects that interfaith dialogue must entail “talking about something”, deal with lived reality and take power relations into account, is spelled out in Chung Hyun Kyung’s critique of “lazy pluralism” and Kwok Pui-lan’s call for “a postcolonial theology of religious difference”.

It should also be pointed out that while Asian feminist theology is a grassroots movement, aimed at empowering women in the churches; it is still a movement that has not yet influenced church women on a big scale. Most Asian Christian women hold traditional views on their place in church and society, and have not heard of feminist theology. Although In God’s
Image is designed to reach “ordinary women”, it is not as widely read as it could be.

“Emerging” is a recurrent word in presentations of Asian feminist theology: “emerging spiritualities”, “emerging theology”. But Asian feminist theology has now “emerged”. It has come of age and must decide how to continue.

In the theologies of Dietrich, Chung, Kwok and Wong I find two different ways forward for Asian feminist theology, which should be seen, not as exclusive but complementary. Chung aims at reaching the many women with what Asian feminist theology has achieved so far. To her, communication with a broader audience is more important than academic credibility. The pragmatism of Asian feminist theology is epitomized in her launching of “theology as melodrama”. Dietrich stands for an even more down-to-earth and collectivistic connection to secular grass-roots movements.

Kwok and Wong, together with Kang Nam Soon and Akiko Yamashita, stand for a more critical and analytical approach, arguing for Asian feminist theology to move on and be more theoretically sophisticated. Kwok basically remains loyal to the “poor woman” paradigm, though she broadens the scope and pushes the boundaries through her engagement with postcolonial theory. She also puts Asian theology in contact both with mainstream western theology and with other “marginalized theologies”, and introduces the issue of anti-Judaism into Asian feminist discourse.

Wong Wai-ching goes one step further and moves Asian feminist theology firmly into the 21st century, pointing out that Asian reality is different now from what it was 20 or 30 years ago. That urban middle-class women should also be the subjects of theology, and globalization needs to be viewed in a more nuanced manner, are a few of her concerns, which the previous generation of theologians finds provocative.

Will Asian feminist theology be able to take up the challenge of Wong Wai-ching, and follow in the footsteps of Kwok Pui-lan’s postcolonial analysis, without losing its praxis-orientation, creativity and sense of accountability to ordinary women? How will Chung’s “free-lance feminist evangelism” relate to the work done by feminists who remain within church structures?

And will Western feminist theologians let themselves be challenged and inspired by the audacity in “widening the canon” and the praxis-orientation of their Asian sisters? In the next chapter we shall proceed to the achievements of Western feminists in the area of theology of religions.
7 Western Feminist Challenges
to Malestream Theologies of Religion

We shall now turn to Western Christian feminist theologians’ approaches to theology of religions. These can be seen in three different categories: works which criticize malestream theologies of religion and/or construct comprehensive feminist theologies of religion; essays which apply themes and concepts from feminist theory to the theology of religions; and essays which use concept from other religious traditions to develop feminist theology.

The rationale for combining feminism and theology of religions can be summarized in three points: 1) The feminist critique of malestream theologies of religion: the aim of interfaith dialogue cannot be realized as long as the dialogue remains within kyriarchal structures. 2) There are connections between sexism and religious exclusivism that must be exposed. 3) Feminist theology can enrich the field of theology of religions, and feminist theology is enriched by dialogue with other religious traditions.

I will structure this chapter according to this division, though of course the points overlap: the critique contains constructive elements, the critique is linked to the parallels between sexism and exclusivism, and there is an element of critique in the constructive project etc.

7.1 Feminist Critique of Malestream Theology of Religions

Ursula King enquires “whether the full potential of a ‘new season of faith’ can really come into its own as long as interreligious dialogue continues to include oppressive and exclusive aspects”.¹

Feminist theologians criticize malestream theologians of religions not only for being gender blind, but also, increasingly, for their inability to deal constructively with difference. We have already encountered Kwok Pui-lan’s critique of Hick and Lindberg.² She is joined in this critique by Jeannine Hill

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¹ King 1998, p 42
² Cf. section 6.4.4 above
Fletcher, and Hick was already a target of the feminist critique in what must be considered the first book on feminism and interfaith dialogue, *Women Speaking, Women Listening: Women in Interreligious Dialogue* by Maura O’Neill.

### 7.1.1 Critique of Androcentrism in Theologies of Religion

O’Neill examines the “androcentric, philosophical underpinnings” of interreligious dialogue that in her opinion exclude women. Inviting women to participate will not change anything as long as these underpinnings are in place. She criticizes the leading profiles in the theology of religions, especially John Hick, Raimundo Panikkar, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Leonard Swidler for being gender blind, and having a male subject in mind when they talk about the “human person”.

She criticizes Hick’s theory that transformation consists in moving from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness. In making this a universal paradigm, Hick falls prey to Valerie Saiving’s critique of the traditional conception of sin as selfishness, which she claims does not work for women, whose greater sin is self-abnegation. Hick has responded to this critique by saying that persons who lack “the ego-development and fulfilment necessary for a voluntary self-transcendence, the prior achievement of a self-fulfilled ego may well be necessary”.

This amendment does not satisfy O’Neill. First, she claims, Hick has misunderstood the feminist critique. It does not state that women lack a self, but that their temptation lies in their tendency towards negation of self. Secondly, it is insulting to suggest that women must develop a self to be able to transcend it. Rather, if “the dialectical relation of biology and culture has produced two different selves”, then the means for salvation or liberation could also be different.

Further, O’Neill takes Raimundo Panikkar to task for his refusal to change the phrase “The Christian is the Man of faith” (italics in original) in his contribution to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*. In a footnote, Panikkar gives linguistic reasons for his generic use of ‘Man’, and assures the editors that no discrimination is intended. O’Neill invalidates the linguistic argument, and questions Panikkar’s view that another word for man would “fragment… that being which stands between heaven and earth”. Her sense is that

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3 O’Neill 1990, p x
4 O’Neill 1990, pp 5, 13
5 Hick: An Interpretation of Religion, quoted in O’Neill 1990, p 27
6 O’Neill 1990, pp 27-28
7 Panikkar: Jordan, the Tiber and the Ganges, quoted in O’Neill 1990, p 47

274
either Panikkar is ignoring the two equal ways of being human, or he believes that woman cannot be knower in the same sense that man is, and, therefore, mention of her would detract from that being “who stands between heaven and earth.”

O’Neill points to the need to criticize hierarchical dualisms between culture and nature, or reason and nature, and reason and intuition. She goes against malestream theologians seeking a doctrine or unifying experience that can provide common ground for dialogue, as this presupposes an epistemology of distance between object and subject. Drawing on Anne Seller’s theory, built on experiences from women’s consciousness-raising groups, as well as Thomas Ommen’s critique of objectivism, she proposes “truth as conversation”, which opens for continued change and modification of understanding.

O’Neill’s focus is on the praxis side: women’s participation in interfaith dialogue. Women’s perspectives are needed in the dialogue. They are excluded because of the androcentric philosophical underpinnings of dialogue. The theoretical presuppositions of dialogue must change, but women must also initially “dialogue among themselves so that their uniqueness and self-definition can be established.”

Her constructive contributions in *Women Speaking, Women Listening* mostly consists in suggestions for how to make women’s dialogue meetings fruitful, with the wider aim of enabling women’s participation in interfaith dialogue, as we saw in Chapter Three. Her contention is that “the female way of being human differs from the male way and that this difference is a major issue in the world’s religions and cultures”.

This quotation indicates that O’Neill has essentialist leanings in her view on gender. Her standpoint appears to be that “there exists a dialectical and historical relationship between biology and culture”. While she is aware of the danger of recapitulating “old polarisations”, she uncritically uses the term ‘women’s ways of thinking and being’, and claims that the difference between male and female ways of being human is “more fundamental” than that between Chinese, African, Arab and European ways of being human.

This creates a problem for our understanding of her critique of androcentric philosophy: is it because of the philosophical construction of gender that women are marginalized in interfaith dialogue, or because they are

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8 O’Neill 1990, p 47
9 O’Neill 1990, pp 18-20
10 O’Neill 1990, p xi
11 O’Neill 1990, p x
12 O’Neill 1990 p 7
13 O’Neill 1990 p 29
14 O’Neill 1990, p 105
different? In my reading, O’Neill never really clarifies this, but oscillates between the two standpoints.

7.1.2 Difference, Hybridity and Identity

Part of Maura O’Neill’s critique concerned the universalism of Hick and others, the quest for a unifying experience. This critique gets a stronger emphasis in later feminist contributions, influenced by postmodernism and postcolonialism. Jeannine Hill Fletcher has articulated this critique in *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism*[^15] and in an article in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion.*[^16]

Fletcher, who is Assistant Professor of Theology at Fordham University, New York, takes her starting point in the mystery, the incomprehensibility and “overabundance” of God. This is where her theology begins, and where it ends. There is a similarity here to the insistence in Asian feminist theology that religious traditions and theologies must be “life-affirming”. She argues that awareness of God’s overabundance opens up the possibility that Christians can catch glimpses of God’s mystery by listening to people from other religious traditions.

Throughout Christian theology, from the apostle Paul over Pseudo-Dionysius and Thomas Aquinas to Karl Rahner, Fletcher finds a strong affirmation of God’s incomprehensibility: God is always beyond our grasp. But there is also the affirmation that God is uniquely revealed in Jesus Christ. Though both the affirmation of God’s incomprehensibility and the affirmation of revelation in Jesus Christ run through Christian history, she finds that the latter has often eclipsed the former.[^17] “Monopoly on Salvation” is the title of her book. This is a quotation from a Brahmin, whom the 17th century missionary to India, Roberto de Nobili, encountered. After a debate between the two, the Brahmin asked his fellow Hindus: “Has this man alone the monopoly of salvation?”[^18]

By reading Christian missionaries’ encounter with religious others – such as this of de Nobili – “against the grain” as suggested by postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, Fletcher finds “counter-affirmations”: testimonies to the strong faith of those who rejected Christianity and held on to their own religious traditions in the face of torture and death.[^19]

Affirmation of God’s incomprehensibility; affirmation of God’s revelation in Jesus; and listening to the counter-affirmation of the religious

[^15]: Fletcher 2005
[^16]: Fletcher 2003
[^17]: Fletcher 2005, pp 1-21
[^18]: Fletcher 2005, p 42
[^19]: Fletcher 2005, p 34-36
“other”, should be the pillars of a Christian theology of religions, according to Fletcher. While Christian theologians have had a problem with maintaining the balance between the first two affirmations, the main difficulty has been the third pillar. Even those who, like de Nobili, have tried to understand the culture and religious traditions of the other, have fallen short of listening fully to counter-affirmations about God.20

This difficulty remains in contemporary malestream pluralist theologies of religion, argues Fletcher. They stand in an “impasse of sameness and difference”, because they view difference as a problem to be overcome, not as a theological resource.21

The problem of the paradigms of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, as well as that of particularism is, she claims, that they “employ strategies of seeking sameness or defending difference”, strategies that “both function to distance otherness”.22

Fletcher subscribes to the questioning of religious “boundaries” of postmodern theories of culture, which we also found to be articulated in the dialogue projects in Chapters Two and Three, when she finds the major problem with all the positions on religious plurality to be that they “stem from the conceptualization of ‘the religions’ as bounded wholes”.23 Only by bypassing internal diversity can a categorization of “the religions” be made: “We see how categories control ‘the other’ by forming manageable populations but this categorization can succeed only by having similarly controlled the ‘otherness within’”.24

With Iris Marion Young, Fletcher understands that the definition of an identity as a closed totality “depends on excluding some elements, separating the pure from the impure”.25 When it comes to religious identity, this means that “the logic of identity forges intrareligious solidarity through the process of distancing otherness”.26

Feminism challenges this logic of identity, because women’s ways of being religious are part of this otherness which is distanced. Women do not always see themselves portrayed in the collective, and that may be one reason why feminists have been absent from the discourse on religious pluralism, Fletcher suggests. But:

With feminist patterns of thinking, we might reenvision the categories of the religions as each encompassing a wide diversity of forms and expressions, so

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20 Fletcher 2005, p 42
21 Fletcher 2005, p 77
22 Fletcher 2003, p 10
23 Fletcher 2003, p 13
24 Fletcher 2003, p 11
25 Young, quoted in Fletcher 2003, p 12
26 Fletcher 2003, p 12
that in intrareligious diversity we might find resources for rethinking interreligious solidarities.\textsuperscript{27}

One of feminist theory’s fundamental insights is, states Fletcher, that identities are not constructed on a singular feature, but are multiple and hybrid. In terms of Christian identity, this means that “one cannot ask what it means to be a Christian without recognizing that the answer is also conditioned by other identity categories”.\textsuperscript{28} She disputes George Lindbeck’s contention that to be a Christian means that one’s understanding of the world is uniquely shaped by one’s association with the Christian story. Such an understanding “ignores the dissonant ways actual Christians understand the claim they are making”.\textsuperscript{29} Such dissonances are not the result of lack of clarity in the message, or human inability to comprehend it, but of the fact that “each individual has multiple and mutually informing aspects of identity”.\textsuperscript{30} The dream of purity must be relinquished, and this “need not be mourned as the loss of cohesion or communal agreement”, but “the diversity within any given community allows for hybrid identities that can foster connections outside that particular grouping”.\textsuperscript{31}

Like Kwok Pui-lan, Fletcher finds hybridity a useful concept in a theology of religions, in that it accounts for the existence of “multiple religious belonging” common in non-Western cultures but also increasingly in the West: religious communities can be constructed in a new way.\textsuperscript{32}

The acknowledgement of hybrid religious identity, i.e. being a feminist and simultaneously belonging to a religious tradition, Fletcher argues, was the basis for the early collaborations between religious feminists, when they “identified patterns in feminist spirituality that transgressed the boundaries of religious traditions”, and “solidarity was forged in particularity”.\textsuperscript{33} This can also be applied to the projects and conferences described in Chapters Two and Three.

Similarly, engagement in issues of social justice out of different religious persuasions can be seen as connections across hybrid identities, where “elements of overlapping identities” provide sites of connection, while there are also “elements of difference that offer new ways of understanding the common task”.\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Fletcher 2003, p 14
\item Fletcher 2003, p 17
\item Fletcher 2003, p 15
\item Fletcher 2003, p 18
\item Fletcher 2003, p 19
\item Fletcher 2003, pp 21-22
\item Fletcher 2003, p 20 (italics in original)
\item Fletcher 2003, p 21
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
To sum up, Jeannine Hill Fletcher argues that by acknowledging internal diversity, we can avoid reifying differences between religious traditions. This is a way of getting beyond the impasse of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism and particularism in the theology of religions. It is achieved through her understanding of identities as hybrid, an understanding which also avoids reifying differences between men and women. She anchors her argument in praxis: the aim is to create resources for solidarity and social action.

7.2 Connections between Sexism and Religious Exclusivism

In Chapter Five we have already dealt with the second point regarding the rationale for feminist theologies of religion – connections between religious exclusivism and sexism – in the context of Christian-Jewish relations. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has pointed out the connection between sexism and anti-Judaism in the context of Christology, stating that the “theological frameworks that here produced Christian anti-Judaism as the left hand of Christology and divine masculinism as its right hand” must be reconsidered.35

But this problem has implications that go beyond Jewish-Christian dialogue. These have been explored most thoroughly by Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, now Professor emerita of the Claremont School of Theology, in an essay in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* where she argues that

> [a]bsolutizing one religion, such that it becomes normative for all others, is a dynamic with clear parallels to sexism, whereby one gender is established as the norm for human existence. Therefore the critique of sexism can be extended as a critique of religious imperialism.36

The feminist critique of sexism points to how men’s experience is universalized, thus rendering women’s experience invisible, subsuming it under the male norm, or vilifying it, projecting negative characteristics on women. The particular is made universal.37

The same mechanisms operate in relation to other religions, Suchocki argues, exemplifying with Hans Küng’s *On Being a Christian*. In this book, he acknowledges salvific elements in other religions as long as they are useful for Christian theology, or can be expressed in Christian terms. On the

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35 Fiorenza 1994, p 89
36 Suchocki 1987, p 150
37 Suchocki 1987, p 151
other hand he projects negative characteristics that are to be found in Christianity, onto other religions. As “the norm of masculinity is applied to women […]”, even so Christian norms are projected uncritically upon non-Christian religions."38

Similarly, Diana L. Eck has compared inclusivism to the generic use of “man”. Women can recognize inclusivist strategies through their own experience of language. Women are supposed to understand that “‘men’, of course, means ‘men and women’, except in those instances where it does not mean ‘men and women’”.39 Inclusivism is, she states, a “majority consciousness” in terms of power: “the inclusivist thinks of himself or herself as the norm and uses words that reduce the other to what is different: non-Christian, non-whites, non-Western”.40 The problem arises when this “majority consciousness” is “not tested and challenged by dialogue with dissenting voices”.41

In other words, it is a question of power. Through their experience and analysis of sexism, feminists are sensitive to power mechanisms also in the area of interfaith relations. “Truth claims have always been used as power tools: those who define truth retain power. To prevent people from affirming their own truth is to keep them powerless” states Gabriella Lettini in a discussion on syncretism.42 Lettini, who is currently Director of Studies in Public Ministry at the Starr King School for the ministry (GTU), has done research with the Gospel and Culture Study Project of the WCC. She was very critical of the way the official WCC documents after the Canberra Assembly avoided the power issue in the process around syncretism.

This insistence on keeping power mechanisms in mind also brings justice to the forefront as a feminist norm for interfaith dialogue. As a feminist, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki states, “one must radically affirm religious pluralism, but not without bringing a critical consciousness of wellbeing in human community to interreligious and intrareligious discussion”. Justice should, according to Suchocki, be “the fundamental criterion of value and the focus of dialogue and action among religions”43

Many recognize, however, that justice is not unproblematic as a criterion. Diana Eck recounts how at the first Women, Religion and Social Change conference, the Japanese participants were very puzzled by the concept

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38 Suchocki 1987, p 153
39 Eck 1993, p 185
40 Eck 1993, p 185
41 Eck 1993, p 185
42 Lettini 2001, p 155
43 Suchocki 1987, p 149

280
“justice”, for which there was no equivalent in the Japanese language. As we have seen in previous chapters, life, care, and well-being are other concepts that are seen as normative by the participants in women’s interfaith projects and among Asian feminist theologians, and there is an emphasis on ethics over against doctrine.

Rosemary Radford Ruether has consistently tried to hold together concerns for gender, racial and class justice, ecology and pluralism. She sees feminism as “part of a global challenge to the cultures of domination that define women, nature and non-white Western peoples and religions as the “other”. The critique in *Faith and Fratricide* against dualism and universalism, the reclamation of the “prophetic principle”, the understanding of the Christ-event as proleptic and paradigmatic, and the need for a radical re-interpretation, are all elements that reappear in Ruether’s feminist critique of theology. However, she has mostly kept her interests in these areas on separate tracks. An exception is an essay on feminism and Jewish-Christian dialogue, where she states that they both “represent challenges to the concept of a single universal biblical faith”. Both represent challenges to universalism, but while interreligious relations speak of different ways to experience the divine, feminism “speaks of new contexts where the divine needs to be localized”.

In *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet*, a joint work with Rita M. Gross, Ruether brings together her understanding of the connection between feminism and pluralism. The book is constructed as an exemplary women’s interfaith dialogue according to the criteria of Maura O’Neill: it starts with the authors’ life stories, their “Autobiographical Routes to/ Roots of Dialogue”, then sets out to explain “What is most problematic about my tradition” and “What is most liberating about my tradition”, as well as “What is most inspiring for me about the other tradition”. The whole conversation is framed in a concern for “the future of the planet”, in keeping with the emphasis we have seen throughout this dissertation on a dialogue focused on questions of justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

In the conversation, it becomes clear that though a feminist critique can be directed against both Buddhism and Christianity, the sexism does not work in quite the same ways: different things are problematic for Gross and Ruether in their respective traditions. For Rita Gross, it is the lack of women

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44 Eck 1993, pp 222-223. A similar discussion went on in the Nuns in the West II gathering: thubtenchodron.org/InterreligiousDialogue/nuns_in_the_west_II.pdf. Cf. also Chung’s arguments in section 6.3.4 above
45 Ruether 1998b, p 72
46 Ruether 1987, p 137
47 Ruether 1987, p 142
48 Gross & Ruether 2001
49 Cf. section 3.4.1 above
gurus in Buddhism, which is crucial because the teacher-student relationship is so important: “the male near-monopoly of the teaching role can be compared to the male monopoly of the deity role in traditional monotheism”.\textsuperscript{50} In her view, this male monopoly leads among other things to a low priority for nurturing and caring for relationships in the Buddhist tradition.\textsuperscript{51} For Ruther, it is the overall patriarchal reading of Christianity, that has “created a tightly knit and devastatingly effective system of theological symbols to enforce the belief that patriarchal hierarchy is the ‘order of creation’”.\textsuperscript{52}

Aspects they miss in their own tradition, they find in the other’s. For Gross, the prophetic voice, the emphasis on justice and righteousness, in Christianity; for Ruether, the theme of co-dependent arising, which serves to get away from the dualisms which, to her, have distorted Christianity’s worldview, an understanding of “letting go of the ego” that is less destructive to women than equivalents in the Christian tradition, and the cultivation of “mindfulness” as a way of creating a calm centre within oneself. Incidentally, the aspects admired by Ruether in the Buddhist tradition are the ones most cherished by Gross, and vice versa.

Gross ponders upon whether this “mirroring” of each other’s concerns is accidental, or whether others would come to the same conclusions. She suggests that, on the one hand, it might be “proof of John Cobb’s idea that dialogue promotes mutual transformation”, and on the other hand that their shared feminist orientation plays a role.

In connection with the latter comment, I would suggest that this could be seen as an example of a “pure” interfaith dialogue in the sense that almost all differences except religious affiliation are removed. In spite of having very different family backgrounds, Gross and Ruether are both white English-speaking women born and living in the US, both are academics who started as historians of religion and have to a large extent kept that view of religion in their theological work, they are prominent feminist theologians who share an engagement in peace, justice and environmental issues.

### 7.3 Enriching Theology of Religions and Feminist Theology through Interaction

The third point, enriching feminist theology through interfaith dialogue, and vice versa, has been illustrated in previous chapters, where I have shown

\textsuperscript{50} Gross & Ruether 2001, p 69  
\textsuperscript{51} Gross & Ruether 2001, p74-75  
\textsuperscript{52} Gross & Ruether 2001, p 100
how dialogue between Jewish and Christian feminists can enrich both traditions, and how Asian feminists make creative use of elements from Asian religious traditions.

Diana L. Eck, who has spent much time in India studying Hinduism, also reflects on how “Hindu expressions of Shakti might push us toward a wider and more challenging understanding of the Holy Spirit”.53 The connection with shakti underscores the feminine quality of the Holy Spirit, as well as the notion of the Spirit as life-giving energy. Shakti’s connection with nature is another quality that Christian pneumatology needs to develop.54 And finally, shakti’s manifestation as Kali can challenge Christians to be “open to the presence and power of God in places where it is uncomfortable to be”.55

In the following, I will trace some themes which recur in feminist approaches to religious plurality. When feminist theologians deal with religious plurality, they do not concentrate on topics usually connected with theologies of religion, like revelation, soteriology, the nature of truth etc. though these topics are implicitly touched upon. An exception is Christology, which is a major topic in feminist theology. The often overlapping and interwoven themes that frame feminist approaches to religious plurality are: the other; change; difference and diversity; experience; and relationality and interconnectedness. Though, for the sake of clarity, I treat them separately here, as we shall see, these themes overlap and are interrelated.

### 7.3.1 The Other

Being “the Other” is a theme that has occupied feminists since Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex. “Woman” is constructed as “Other”, that is not only as different but also as inferior, by a kyriarchal discourse that also “otherizes” people of a different ethnic belonging, sexual orientation and religious affiliation. In interfaith dialogue the question is precisely how to understand the religious other as neither threatening nor inferior.

Ursula King points out that the challenge of gender “is the challenge of otherness in a different guise […] in interreligious dialogue woman is again doubly other: she is of another faith and a different gender”.56

The intersection between feminism and interfaith dialogue at this point is also highlighted by Maura O’Neill, who asks “To what avail will religious

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53 Eck 1993, p 138
54 Eck 1993, pp 139-141
55 Eck 1993, p 142
56 King, Ursula 1998, p 45, italics in original
people communicate with the ‘other’ of other faiths when they have not yet learned to communicate with the ‘other’ [i.e. women] of their own faith?"  

Otherness – Emptiness

Paula M. Cooey, presently Professor of Christian Theology and Culture at Macalester College and engaged in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, has written a constructive contribution to the discussion of “otherness” in an essay where she compares the Christian concept of the “otherness of God” with the Buddhist concept of “emptiness”. “For me, coming to terms with the tension between the liberating qualities and the oppressing qualities of otherness in human life has required both feminist analysis and interreligious dialogue”, she states.

Through Buddhist and feminist thought, she arrives at an understanding of otherness as a resource for transformation, and a way of rethinking identity, especially “woman’s identity as woman”.  

The concept of otherness is problematic for women, Cooey argues, in that the association of otherness with transcendence has been positively valued, while it also “interacts with the concept ‘woman’ in ways that generate enormous suffering and conflict in women’s lives”.  

Woman is other in relation to man as self, and “defined as essentially other comes to represent all that androcentric consciousness fears and denies within itself but at the same time cannot live without. This includes the qualities of finitude, physical suffering, and sexuality associated with embodiment”.  

The concept of God as “wholly other” stems from the “biblical injunction against idolatry”, and plays a prophetic role. It “performs the critical function of relativizing the finite and destabilizing religious and political hierarchies”. Thus, it could play a positive role in encouraging “an identity freed from the need to defend itself or attack others, and freed for acknowledging its relatedness with others” as well as an “iconoclastic role” […] by challenging exploitative and exclusionary values and power structures”.  

However, there is a problem with the concept of God as “wholly other”, because God is posited as absolute. And the symbolic anthropomorphic, in reality andromorphic, representation of God means that “God is not exclusively other”. Instead,

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57 O’Neill 1993, pp 41-42
58 Cooey 1990, p 7
59 Cooey 1990, p 8
60 Cooey 1990, p 9
61 Cooey 1990, p 11
62 Cooey 1990, pp 15-16
63 Cooey 1990, p 17
[it] is as if “God” becomes the repository of all that patriarchal, androcentric consciousness seeks to be or to have, and cannot, […] for example, all powerful, all knowing, and not bound by time and space. […] The otherness of God, like the otherness of woman, becomes a demonic perversion, damaging to men and women alike.64

In other words, Cooey’s point is that God becomes more “other” to women than to men, because the concept “God” is constructed so that “man”, constructed as opposed of “woman” as the bearer of contingency and finitude, is more like God, who is eternal and autonomous.

To rescue the liberating qualities in “God as other”, Cooey suggests a dialogue with the Buddhist concept of “emptiness”, which she claims has the same iconoclastic, radically relativizing qualities. Emptiness, in Cooey’s understanding, “is a way of emphasizing ‘dependent origination’ which refers to the interdependence or interconnectedness of whatever is with all that is”.65 In contrast to the Christian concept of God, however, it lacks any kind of personification, which lessens the risk of reification or absolutization of the concept; rather it is “the means for dissipating the desire for such an Absolute”.66 It is this radical dissociation from the desire for absolutes, which Cooey wants to strengthen in the Christian concept of God as other.

“Change” is a key concept here, as a quality which is projected unto “the other”. Change, Cooey states, is central to human life, as to all sentient existence, but is hard for us to accept, and here the correlation of woman as other and God as other is crucial:

“Woman” constitutes the denial that change, particularly bodily change, is relevant, never mind central, to human identity and life. “God”, as eternal, interrelated, but disembodied self, represents the failed attempt to defeat change by projecting an unending ego.67

Cooey discusses the role played by otherness in the construction of identity. She argues that identity should not be discussed in terms of being or becoming a self over against an “other”, but rather in terms of being “brought into existence and sustained by forces outside one’s immediate control”,68 the self emerging from “a matrix of relations with others as a configuration of responses, an ever-changing agency”.69

Cooey suggests that Christian theology and practice should recognize the otherness of God as “present throughout creaturely or sentient existence”, an

64 Cooey 1990, p 18
65 Cooey 1990, p 13
66 Frederick Streng: Emptiness, quoted in Cooey 1990, p 17
67 Cooey 1990, p 21
68 Cooey 1990, p 20
69 Cooey 1990, p 21
otherness that refers to the “contingency of all existence, its differentiation, its interdependence, its sentience, and therefore its finitude”. In other words, we should accept contingency and change rather than try to escape them by absolutizing a concept of God that is transcendent and in control.

Understanding otherness as fundamental for one’s identity as Christian should then neither be an “idolatrous desire for the Absolute”, nor “being other-directed and other-defined”. Rather, an “awareness of otherness as constitutive of all existence […] widens and deepens the imagination and the resources upon which it has to draw to enhance life upon this planet”.

The way Cooey discusses “woman” places her in a constructivist tradition. It is the construction of woman as other than man that distorts relationships and our ability to live responsibly.

Cooey’s text is an example of dialoguing with non-Christian concepts as a tool for creating feminist theology. While it is a way of grappling with the ambivalence of the concept “the other” in Christian tradition, it also has a bearing on interfaith dialogue, about how we relate to “the other”.

7.3.2 Change

As we have just seen, “change” is a key concept in Cooey’s discussion of otherness. She understands change as a quality which is seen as threatening, and therefore projected as inferior on “the other”. “Change” was a key word in the conferences, as we saw in Chapter Three.

While John Cobb, Raimundo Panikkar and other theologians of religion argue that interfaith dialogue should lead to transformation, this is often understood in an individual sense, that is, the participants in the dialogue should be transformed, even if a transformation of religions is also envisioned. For feminists, while individual transformation is important, the stress is more on transforming the traditions themselves.

Lieve Troch writes of her experience of an interreligious women’s meeting: “I went home after this experience with […] an overwhelming feeling of having seen religion and theology being reborn”. And the Editorial in Daughters of Sarah’s issue on interfaith dialogue asks: “What does happen when Christian feminism meets other cultures and religions? Creative subversion may result.”

Maura O’Neill sees transformation as the aim of interfaith dialogue. Only in dialogue, will women be able to discern the really liberating elements in

70 Cooey 1990, p 21
71 Cooey 1990, p 22-23
72 Troch 1998, p 106
73 Finger 1994, p 5, italics in original

286
their tradition, a discernment “necessary for their transformation both personally and as a group”.

In *A Model of the Relationship between Religions Based on Feminist Theory* (1993) O’Neill provides an image for how religious traditions could change through acknowledging women’s ways of being religious; this has connections to the “religion as practiced versus religion as prescribed” model and the Asian emphasis on people’s religions, characterized as “messy”.

She draws up a picture in which religious traditions are represented by tall vertical rectangular boxes which, when placed next to each other, form a cube. The top half of each box would contain a clear liquid, a surface stratum representing the tradition’s dominant interpretation, and the lower half an opaque liquid representing “women’s ways of being religious”. The surface stratum, which is visible, is transparent and thus easy to analyze. The substratum is opaque, because women’s experiences are “messy” and not so easy to capture. In the substratum, furthermore, the walls are very thin, and relationships across this stratum – between religious traditions as understood by women – are readily formed.

Now, O’Neill says, the cube has to be turned upside down, and the divider between strata removed, giving rise to a new mixture of the two strata. This turning upside down of the cubes represents women’s participation in interfaith dialogue, which will then be a “transforming dialogue” through which “the post-patriarchal traditions that emerge will be able to communicate with other traditions more easily.”

I find this a fascinating image, and one that invites to further elaboration. What I would like to add is the notion that it is the pressure from the upper strata which makes the lower strata opaque and the walls permeable. That addition would emphasize that “religion as practiced” is not specifically a women’s tradition but a “people’s religion” engaged in everyday life issues in which women are in charge. It is women’s status as subordinated and oppressed that enables them to grab whatever means available, spiritual and material, to “make a way out of no way”, as Delores Williams puts it.

Moreover, all metaphors have their limitations, and I am not prepared to follow O’Neill when she says that “it is only when the density of the liquid in the cube is consistent, that is when there is a united world, that the eschaton will be realized”. This sounds like a too homogenous world.

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74 O’Neill 1993, p 52
75 O’Neill 1993 pp 40-41
76 O’Neill 1993, p 53
77 O’Neill 1993, p 53
78 Williams 1993, p 6
79 O’Neill 1993, p 53
which does not take the feminist concern for diversity and difference seriously.

7.3.3 Difference/Diversity

It is when difference and diversity are seen as a problem that the “otherizing” mechanism appears. As we have seen, how to embrace, instead of fearing, difference is a major concern in feminist theology. I have also highlighted the critique of malestream theologians for their reluctance to embrace difference in the theologies of Jeannine Hill Fletcher and Kwok Pui-lan, and the suggestion that by acknowledging internal diversity, we can avoid reifying differences between religious traditions.

The Trinity as a Model of Diversity

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki argues that the doctrine of the Trinity opens up for a radical appreciation of diversity, besides being a remedy for the masculinization of the image of God. “Not gender, not even maleness and femaleness together, but irreducible diversity characterizes the heart of the Trinitarian doctrine”, she argues: “This diversity cannot be restricted to male and female, but must be widened to incorporate the great breadth of diversity found within the whole created order”.80

Such a notion of God as triune means that the community of God does not dare “to set limits to the types of diversity it can enfold”.81 Such diversity may include, not only men and women of all races and cultures, but also differences of theological expression, and it must reach beyond its own borders. Suchocki’s vision is one of “the world as a community of communities, clustered around distinctive concepts, cultures and religions” which are not antagonistic but reach out “in dialogue to the others and all together look to a mutual task of seeing to the well-being of the whole created order”.82 Again, “the well-being of all” crops up as the goal for interfaith dialogue.

7.3.4 Experience

“Women’s experience” is a central, though contested category in feminism, as I have discussed in Chapter One. In the context of interfaith dialogue, we have seen in Chapters Two and Three that women’s experience of being “the other”, of being devalued and marginalized in their religious traditions, as

80 Suchocki 1990, p 68
81 Suchocki 1990, p 68
82 Suchocki 1990, p 69

288
well as not identifying completely with these traditions, is a ground for dialogue.

I will present four approaches to the concept of women’s experience in the context of religious plurality. In all of them, the emphasis is more on “experience” than on “women’s”. For Kate McCarthy, “experience” provides the concreteness which is lacking in a purely conceptual understanding of religious plurality. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki stresses that abstractions can distract us from understanding reality as it is experienced. Pamela Dickey Young locates the concept of experience in the “aesthetic dimension” of religion, and argues for “beauty” as a comprehensive value in religion, in much the same way as Chung Hyun Kyung does. Lastly, “women’s experience” is a central concept in Paula M. Cooey’s discussion on an understanding of conversion in feminist spirituality.

**Women’s Experience as Hermeneutical Key**

Kate McCarthy, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at California State University, has focused on “Women’s experience as a hermeneutical key to a Christian theology of religions”. She presents the dilemma in Christian theologies of pluralism as follows:

> how do we move toward a de-absolutized, pluralism-endorsing understanding of Christianity’s relation with non-Christian traditions without losing the distinctiveness of Christian identity and the solid foundation on which to base committed Christian praxis?

She argues that the feminist use of “women’s experience” could be a solution to this problem. There are three aspects of women’s experience across cultures that she considers particularly relevant: “the experience of otherness; a plurality of social location; and an embodied spirituality”. She specifically presents how these aspects appear in the work of four feminist theologians from different contexts: Carter Heyward, Ivone Gebara, Mercy Oduoye and Chung Hyun Kyung.

Carter Heyward, who consciously acknowledges her multiple identities as a “white Anglo Christian lesbian priest and academic” with ensuing accountability to different communities that may be in tension with each other, as well as Oduoye and Chung, drawing in their theology on their roots in African and Asian indigenous spiritualities, can provide foundations, argues McCarthy, for “a new kind of affirmation of religious difference. Women’s theological work suggests that a life lived at the margins […]

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83 Cf. section 6.3.4 above
84 McCarthy 1990
85 McCarthy 1996, p 163
86 McCarthy 1996, p 165
affords a perspective not granted to those who stand at the center”. 87 She further quotes Ivone Gebara:

The theological work of women reflects an ability to view life as the locus of the simultaneous experience of oppression and liberation, of grace and lack of grace. Such perception encompasses what is plural, what is different, what is other. 88

McCarthy comments: “Women’s experience offers a history of living the riddles of difference that theologies of religious pluralism thus far have failed conceptually to solve.” 89

Further, the theologians in question all draw on the experience of life in a woman’s body as a theological source. Heyward identifies God with “the erotic power that draws us into passionate interrelatedness” and argues that embodied connection in relation is a religious experience. 90 Gebara argues that when women bring the experiences of giving birth, nursing and nourishing into theology, the mystery of the incarnation is discovered in a new way. Chung talks of the power of storytelling, which lies in its embodied truth. From this, McCarthy concludes that

[for the task of developing a genuinely pluralist theology of religions, the affective – indeed, passionately embodied – spirituality of women may draw forth unsuspected points of contact between traditions and open alternative meanings of the Christian claims that have long been stumbling blocks in the interreligious conversation. 91

McCarthy finds, in the work of the theologians she draws upon, “a hermeneutical audacity unparalleled in even the most radical of male liberation theologians” (italics in original), in that they “employ a vast set of theological resources and use the orthodox sources in a highly selective and critical way” 92 where Bible, tradition and Christology are seen as valuable but not unchangeable or normative resources.

This offers a methodological contribution to a theology of pluralism, that facilitates “an experientially grounded rather than conceptual interreligious exchange” besides allowing for “thoroughgoing reassessments and creative reinterpretations of such doctrines as the uniqueness of Christ, which have so

87 McCarthy 1996, p 167
88 Ivone Gebara, quoted in McCarthy 1996, p 167
89 McCarthy 1996, p 167
90 McCarthy 1996, p 167
91 McCarthy 1996, p 168
92 McCarthy 1996, p 168
long been stumbling blocks in the way of a full Christian endorsement of pluralism”.  

McCarthy foresees that the resources she suggests will be labelled as heresy, syncretism or co-optation. But she retorts:

These are real and permanent risks for authentic faith. But the greatest risk facing Christian theology in this world is not that it will become corrupted but that it will simply become irrelevant. And that threat would seem to justify the risk of what Chung calls a “survival-liberation-centered syncretism” […] that the intersection of feminist and pluralist theologies portend, because the promise such an encounter holds out is even greater.94

Kate McCarthy extracts implications for a theology of religions from the works of some prominent feminist theologians, focusing on the category of “women’s experience”. While she points out that “women’s experience” is diverse and complex, and deliberately chooses theologians from different cultural contexts, she fails to discuss the relevance of the concept, and uses it in the singular. On the other hand, she highlights “otherness”, “marginality”, and the consciousness of “plurality of location” as important ingredients of this “women’s experience” and thus avoids an essentialist position.

The focus is more on “experience” over against an exclusive focus on conceptual exchange, where she does not seem to presuppose that an “experientially grounded” exchange is the exclusive property of women. The contributions of feminist theology are both its being grounded in the concrete and its audacity in challenging traditional theology.

McCarthy echoes the concerns of the women from the Women’s Interfaith Journey that dialogue must be grounded in praxis, but her “theorizing” of experience also provides a bridge over the gap they perceived between theory and praxis. It is not a question of women being less analytical than men, but of a different approach to theory, where conceptual tools are understood as necessary for clarity in discussions, but insisting that they are always inadequate because they can never capture the “messiness of actual existence”.

The Messiness of Lived Experience

“Messiness” is a central concept in Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki’s “affirmation of religious pluralism”, Divinity & Diversity. Drawing on William James’ perspective on the nature of concepts and truth, she points out that definitions are a way of getting a sense of control over reality:

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93 McCarthy 1996, p 169
94 McCarthy 1995, p 173
They are useful abstractions from the messiness of lived experience that leave the fullness of that experience behind. The power gained over the world through these abstracted concepts is so beguiling as to lead one to think that what is really real is precisely those abstractions: the rational, in pure, unchanging, controllable form. The actual world, with its buzzing confusion, is of a lesser sort, and those aspects that are left out of our definitions become irrational, unreal, or irrelevant. Seeing the world through concepts, we become blind to whatever does not fit our conceptual scheme.95

This is another way of expressing Jeannine Hill Fletcher’s insistence that religious identity is multiple and diverse, and cannot be contained within conceptual understandings of “religion”. Suchocki’s concern is that we might confuse our concepts of God with the reality of God: “we yank God from the messiness of this fulsome life, wipe off the mud of experience, and place the shined-up concept of God on an idealistic pedestal in isolated splendour”.96

The implications of this for a pluralist theology of religions is that if God is not to be found in conceptual systems, “but in the messiness of evolutionary life, [t]he expressions of this God, and the ultimacy thus represented, will necessarily be pluralistic”.97

The Aesthetic Dimension of Experience

Pamela Dickey Young, in *Christ in a Post-Christian World* connects experience to the concept “beauty”, which she argues can help us deal with the notion of universal truth claims. Like Chung Hyun Kyung, she sees beauty as the primary concept in the triad truth, goodness and beauty. While emphasizing particularity as central in feminist theology, Young is not willing to relinquish the idea of universal truth, but argues that truth must not be understood only in terms of reason, but also of action and feeling. Truth cannot be separated from the categories of goodness and beauty, from “life as lived”.98 And here, the concept of experience becomes central.

Young adopts Alfred North Whitehead’s notion of “primary nonsensuous experience”, characterized by integrity, interconnection and value, where we experience the whole rather than the parts. This experience, which is experience of God, is the foundation of religious life, and religious differences arise from differing interpretations of primary nonsensuous experience.99

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95 Suchocki 2003, p 41
96 Suchocki 2003, p 50
97 Suchocki 2003, p 51
98 Young, Pamela 1995, p 70
99 Young, Pamela 1995, p 77-78

292
Truth, goodness, and beauty are values on which Young centres her argument. They are the creative response to the primary experience of integrity, interconnection and value. They are also criteria that could be used to evaluate religious traditions.

“Women’s experiences” has been primarily been connected in feminist thought with the value of goodness, or justice. Women’s experiences of oppression have been the starting point for feminist thought and action. Justice is an important criterion for evaluating religious traditions, as among others Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki and Paul Knitter have pointed out. Young agrees with this, but also highlights what she calls the “aesthetic dimension”.

The holistic, integrated existence that women seek, could be described in terms of beauty, that is, harmony, enjoyment and satisfaction. Audre Lorde uses the term *eros* to describe this. Young, however, wants to reclaim the word “beauty”, which has had so many negative consequences for women. Her definition of beauty is “a balance of harmony and intensity”. We have seen that balance and harmony were words Chung used to define beauty.

Beauty can be ideologized and thus harmful for those who do not measure up to certain standards, or for those who are forced to create beauty they are not allowed to enjoy. Therefore, the discernment of beauty cannot be separated from that of goodness or of truth. However, with Charles Hartshorne, Young argues that beauty is the inclusive category, which encloses goodness, which in its turn encloses truth, “like nesting dolls”.

Further, the aesthetic dimension “is yet another *entrée* into the religious lives of others”. The aesthetic experience can broaden one’s cognitive understandings of others’ religious symbols. The theme “transformation” appears here as well: the experience of beauty can challenge us to see the world in new ways, and also gives rise to reflection.

Also, Young claims that “the aesthetic dimension” has played a significant role for women seeking “new feminist religious options” within and without established religious traditions. That is, experiential or ritual aspects are central, for the decision to stay within a tradition as well as to turn to new traditions like Goddess worship. This brings us to the notion of “feminist spirituality”.

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100 Young, Pamela 1995, p 124
101 Young, Pamela 1995, p 134
102 Young, Pamela 1995, p 118
103 Young, Pamela 1995, pp 118-120
104 Cf. section 6.3.4 above
105 Young, Pamela 1995, p 122-129
106 Young, Pamela 1995, p 121
107 Young, Pamela 1995, p 124
108 Young, Pamela 1995, pp 116-117
The Experience of Conversion in Feminist Spirituality

Paula Cooey discusses the nature of religious experience in connection with the transforming experiences of women in consciousness-raising groups. “How”, she asks, “does calling these experiences ‘religious’ enrich our understanding both of these experiences and of religious experiences in general?” Cooey’s discussion was prompted by an article by Judith Plaskow, where she had observed that women saw their experiences in the women’s movement as religious, yet were reluctant to use religious language for them.

While feminist theory has argued for the centrality of experience, and the gendered nature of experience, what remains is to discuss how women’s feminist experiences can call into question previous “formulations of the structures of religious experience, especially transformation”. Conversion is a central theological concept, which can be reconceived by including women’s experience of transformation in the women’s movement.

Conversion, she argues, “describes very appropriately many of the experiences that have brought and continue to bring women into the women’s movement”. Consciousness-raising has meant a “recentering of identity” where women have turned from a “struggle to fulfil destructive cultural expectations, defined according to gender, and turned to a positive sense of what it means to be a woman”. Such an experience is religious in the sense that it is a “root experience”. In accordance with Valerie Saiving’s classical definition of women’s sin as negation of self, and William James’ analysis of conversion as a reorientation of worth and identity, this certainly can be called conversion.

Drawing again on Judith Plaskow’s account of the “religious journey” of the participants in a consciousness-raising group, Cooey stresses that the goal is “full related selfhood” which “suggests that ‘conversion’ in this context marks a turning toward a sense of balance in which relationships to others no longer stands in opposition to individual identity”.

Conversion reflects a shift in power, Cooey argues: it is a “transformation from an identity based on dependence on others […] to an identity based on interdependence”. Conversion has classically been described as surrender and loss of ego, but women’s experiences from consciousness-raising groups

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109 Cooey 1985, p 23
110 Cooey 1985, p 24
111 Cooey 1985, p 27
112 Cooey 1985, p 27
113 Cooey 1985, p 32
114 Cooey 1985, p 29, italics in original
115 Cooey 1985, p 30
opens up for understandings of “transformation as a movement from helplessness and fragmentation to integrity”.  

The significance of Cooey’s argument for interfaith dialogue is that women from different religious traditions,

who apprehend participation in the women’s movement as religious, belong to a long-standing tradition of women that cuts across specific religious confessions, race, and class, a tradition that is bound by a common resistance to subordination in relation to men and a transcendence of this subordination, rooted in religious experience, various in its particular manifestations and interpretations.  

We have seen how feminist theologians emphasize the role of experience in theology. Lived experience is diverse and complex, and can never be captured in concepts, which is why theology must always be tested against experience. Values like truth, goodness and beauty are not abstract concepts but responses to experience. The understanding of religious experience is deepened and widened when women’s experiences of consciousness-raising, where relationality and interdependence are central, are included.

7.3.5 Relationality and Interconnectedness

“Women’s experience” is a category closely connected to another central concept in feminist theology, namely relationality. Carol Gilligan’s thesis that women make moral decisions based on a notion that relations are central, and its implications, have been discussed above, and a recurring theme in feminist theology is that reality is experienced as essentially relational. A common thread between Christian, Jewish and Goddess feminists is “a shared language about interconnectedness, mutuality, and relationship between and among all things”.  

An important contribution from feminist theology to a theology of religions is, according to Kate McCarthy, its doctrine of God, where God is understood in thoroughly relational terms. This affords a new way of thinking about religious truth and about those who understand ultimate reality differently. It avoids both exclusivism and relativism in that “a relational understanding of God and truth can condemn as error that which isolates and breaks away from such relationality but endorse and indeed depend upon diverse manifestations of the divine relationship.” This view of

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116 Cooey 1995, pp 31-32
117 Cooey 1985, p 35
118 Keefe 1997, p 66
God “illustrates concretely what Raimundo Panikkar calls for theoretically: an understanding of pluralism as the factual structure of ultimate reality”.119

Friendship as a Paradigm
Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki argues that women are conditioned through the expectation that they will be mothers, to see the multiplicity of relationships, but that relationality is a paradigm of existence generally, and not just of women.120 Especially, relatedness is an essential mode of spirituality: “it is our openness to relatedness and the quality of relatedness that constitute our spirituality as rich or poor”.121

This entails reciprocity also in the relations between God and humans. The traditional argument has been that if God is affected by the relationship to humans, it would undermine God’s self-sufficiency and perfection. But in a relational understanding of existence, an impassive mode of being in a human would be considered “impoverished indeed, lacking in the fullness of spirituality”. So why not, asks Suchocki, “consider that the highest possible mode of spirituality – absolute relatedness to all that is, both giving and receiving, receiving and giving, is a better description of the God who relates so centrally to us through Jesus Christ?”122 Such a spirituality also involves openness to the other, “giving a fullness of presence to the other”, where “more of the other comes into view”.123

In Divinity & Diversity Suchocki on the basis of John 15:14, 17 (you are my friends if you do what I command you […] that you love one another) develops “friendship” as a paradigm for mission. Mission in a pluralistic world, according to Suchocki, means “not to convert the world to our religion, but to convert the world toward friendship”.124

Friendship requires honesty, respect and trust, friends dare to ask each other hard things, they join in activities meaningful to both, and it is in and through differences that friends have something to learn from each other – these are some of the properties of friendship which are valuable in interfaith dialogue, says Suchocki, and like Hope Antone,125 she points out that friendship entails sharing meals together. She concludes: “To regard the religious other as ‘friend’ involves us in mission together, sharing who we are, and working together for the common good. Being most deeply who we

119 McCarthy 1995, pp 170-171
120 Suchocki 1989, p 395
121 Suchocki 1989, p 396
122 Suchocki 1989, p 397
123 Suchocki 1989, p 396
124 Suchocki 2003, p 109
125 Cf. section 6.1.7 above
are, we are open to God’s transformative call toward how we might yet be.”126

**Eco-Feminism**

Kathleen Coyle, S.S.C., who teaches systematic theology at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila, points out that feminism, ecology and interfaith dialogue are related, in that they emphasize that “the mystical interrelatedness of all creatures and of all matter has no boundaries”.127

Eco-feminism is a global movement, and Rosemary Radford Reuther has found that ecofeminist perspectives cross-culturally are characterized by the keynote themes interrelationship, interdependency, and mutuality, “calling for a renewed sense of how humans should relate to one another and with the natural world”.128 She finds that “[e]cofeminist rereading of religious traditions, with its vision of humanity as part of one life-giving matrix”129 can enable religious traditions to learn from each other to be resources in the struggle for an ecologically sustainable world.

Christian eco-feminism includes an interreligious perspective. Especially it is inspired by the Indian eco-feminist *Chipko* movement, where shakti is a central concept. The idea of shakti as “power-from-within” is being associated with the Spirit in Christian tradition.

Anne Primavesi envisions an “ecological model of the Trinity”, where the Spirit is not subordinated to the Father and/or the Son, and not confined to the Christian framework:

> The relationship between the Spirit of God and all that lives and breathes is recognized as existing in its own right, as power-from-within all creation; not bounded by those systems of belief or thought which acknowledge the Son and the Father as God.130

“There will be no worldwide ecumenism without creation-centered spirituality”, states Anne Primavesi.131 Christian absolutism, she argues, inhibits ecological perspectives, because it narrows down “our sense of divine revelation to verbal sources” and inhibits “authentic exchanges with the divine from within other religious, cultural and natural systems”.132

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126 Suchocki 2003, p 121
127 Coyle 1993, p 28
128 Ruether 2005, p 123
129 Ruether 2005, p 178
130 Primavesi 1991, p 259
131 Primavesi 1991, p 82
132 Primavesi 1991, p 119
Interconnectedness in Buddhism and Feminism

According to Anne Hunt Overzee, acknowledging our “fundamental relatedness” is the key to creative theologizing, where metaphors, symbols and models from other religions can inform one’s understanding. Especially, the Buddhist understanding of interconnectedness could “illuminate and deepen Christian belief in the body of Christ” besides developing a “new form of mystical theology”.

Interconnectedness is a central concept in both feminist theology and engaged Buddhism. Alice A. Keefe has explored what is really meant by this “buzzword”, how it is understood in these two movements and what they can learn from each other.

Both feminist theology and engaged Buddhism reject the dualistic tendencies of their respective traditions, where spiritual life is separated from worldly life, and favour a this-worldly spirituality engaged in the transformation of society. But they still have distinctive articulations about what interconnectedness or interdependency might mean.

One difference is that for engaged Buddhists, the principle of interconnectedness is found in the very heart of the Buddhist tradition, while Christian feminist theology “must deal with the apparent absence of a strong principle of interconnectedness within the classical theological tradition”.

Keefe joins Suchocki in her concern that God must not be separated from the messiness of life. The vision of the interconnectedness of all things, says Keefe, involves a dethroning of the divine “from ‘his’ transcendent impassibility, into the immanent web of life”. This is done in resistance to the “dualistic metaphysics of Western religious thought” and “guides feminist theology in an effort to resacralize the relational and embodied nature of human experience”.

While the emphasis in engaged Buddhism is to “attain inner calm, freedom from anger, or boundless compassion”, the feminist emphasis is “upon an effort to overcome the internalized structures of the patriarchal dualistic worldview that are manifest within the structures of one’s own psyche”.

Feminists, who honour anger as a motive force for change, Keefe argues, could use mindfulness training, “which focuses upon the anger itself rather than upon its object” to help them “work creatively with the energy contained in anger”.

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133 Overzee 1993, pp 136-137
134 Keefe 1997, p 65
135 Cf. section 7.3.4 above
136 Keefe 1997, p 66
137 Keefe 1997, p 67
138 Keefe 1997, p 67

298
Engaged Buddhists, on the other hand, could learn from feminist theology to value interpersonal relationships, as traditional Buddhism has emphasized solitude “as the sine qua non of the path to enlightenment”.139

Feminist theology’s suspicion of calls for selflessness and sacrifice can also be a corrective for Buddhism, where selflessness is seen as the ultimate solution to all humanity’s problems which are seen to be rooted in our self-centeredness. Keefe points out that selflessness means one thing in the context of dharma practice, but quite another to Thai women, whose lives are characterized by a self-negating selflessness stemming from low social status. Awareness of interconnectedness implies a more inclusive ethics of responsibility, but, Keefe argues, the question must be posed: “where does our responsibility not to harm the web of life upon which we ourselves depend shift into responsibility to give our selves selflessly […] beyond the parameters of our own self-interest?”140

But again, Keefe suggests, feminist theology does perhaps “need to give a more central place to compassion, self-giving and even sacrifice”.141 The reluctance to discuss the need for sacrifice in activist work points to a lack in feminist theology. “Must compassionate concern for others be seen as undermining the attainment of an empowered, self-directed sense of personal agency,” Keefe asks, and conjectures that the opposition between autonomy and relationship is “a function of Western constructions of selfhood”, which feminist theory has not yet been able to solve.142

Keefe also voices a critique of feminist theory for maintaining an evil “other” which is not included in “feminism’s circle of belonging”, namely elite, white heterosexual males, who are constructed as “the source of violence, prejudice and oppression”.143 While I find this slightly exaggerated, as feminist theory generally is careful to view kyriarchy as structural and not blame individual men, there is a grain of truth in her critique. Especially in Asian feminist theology, there is a tendency to re-inscribe dualism even as it claims that their stance is “holistic rather than dualistic”,144 and to project the negative side of the dualisms on the West. Western feminists must also be reminded of their complicity in colonialism and racism. Keefe points out that “in acknowledging connection only with victim and not with victimizer, feminist thought today sells short its vision of interconnectedness”.145

Like Paula M. Cooey’s essay on otherness, Alice A. Keefe’s discussion of interconnectedness is an example of how feminist thought can be enriched

139 Keefe 1997, p 68
140 Keefe 1997, p 71
141 Keefe 1997, p 71
142 Keefe 1997, p 72
143 Keefe 1997, p 73
144 Cf. section 6.1.6 above
145 Keefe 1997, p 74
by concepts from other religious traditions, as well as how it can inspire and
give new perspectives to interfaith dialogue on a central religious concept.

7.2.6 Christology

Christology is an area that is challenged both by feminist theology and by
pluralist theologies of religions. In theology of religions the question is how
to understand the claim that in “no other name” can there be salvation. In
feminist theology, Rosemary Radford Ruether’s question, “Can a male
saviour save women?” has not yet been given a definite answer. It is not
only that the maleness of Jesus, used as an argument against the ordination
of women, has been a problem, other ingredients of traditional Christology
have been questioned by feminists.

The atonement theory idea of a father sacrificing his son is not seen as
salvific and unique for Christianity, but rather as one of many “stories about
male bonding and fathers teaching sons invaluable lessons about the role of
the hero and the glory of sacrifice”. The concept of redemptive suffering is
also problematic because it is frequently used to keep women in abusive
relationships. The Christological title “Lord” is questioned not only because
it is male, but also for its hierarchical and imperialistic overtones.

According to Kate McCarthy, feminist theology can contribute to a
Christology that is fruitful for a theology of religions. The theologians on
whom McCarthy bases her argument understand Christology in
soteriological, rather than metaphysical terms, through life and justice
categories, and are also open for the possibility of “multiple Christs”. This,
argues McCarthy, “opens Christology to dialogue with other traditions and
places emphasis on the movement toward just community […] rather than
ecclesial affiliation as the mark of salvation”.

We have seen in Chapter Five how dialogue with Jewish feminists can
challenge Christian feminist theologians to rethink and deepen their
Christology.

Wisdom Christology

A solution to the problem of how to formulate the centrality of Jesus to the
faith of Christian feminists, which has an impact also on a theology of
religions, is the rediscovery of the Wisdom tradition, where Jesus is seen as
the prophet/incarnation of the female Wisdom principle, rather than of the
male Word. Schüssler Fiorenza finds the “Jesus messenger of Sophia’

146 Ruether 1983, pp 116-138
147 Isherwood 2001, p 25
148 McCarthy 1996, p 171
149 McCarthy 1996, p 172
traditions significant because they assert the unique particularity of Jesus without having to resort to exclusivity and superiority.”

We have seen that Asian feminists have found important connections to the Sophia figure in Asian traditions. Susan Cady, Marian Ronan and Hal Taussig argue in *Sophia: the Future of Feminist Spirituality*, that “Sophia can, in fact, become a major connection between feminists and traditional churchgoers, between Christian, Jewish, and goddess-centered feminists”. As I have argued in my M. Phil dissertation *Sophia in Interfaith Dialogue*, Sophia’s scope is wider than that: the presence of female wisdom figures in Buddhism and Hinduism, and the Wisdom concept in Islam, can make Wisdom a foundation for a comprehensive interfaith dialogue with a feminist perspective.

**Christology as Soteriology**

Diana Eck observed that none of the women at the Toronto conference seemed to be “vexed about the salvation of the others”. Indeed, “salvation” is not a word that figures frequently in feminist theology, at least not in the sense of “who comes to heaven”.

One exception is Jeannine Hill Fletcher, whose book contains the word in its title, *Monopoly on Salvation?* In the tradition of feminist theology, she understands salvation in terms of healing and wholeness. She finds that in the Christians Scriptures, the meaning of “salvation” tied to the name of Jesus Christ is “linked to practices patterned on Jesus and continued after his death.” These practices, more specifically, are practices of healing and “restoration to wholeness”, carried out in humility, by the Christian community following the pattern of Jesus. This is the way Christians strive to grasp God’s mystery. In this “collective Christology” she stands in the tradition of Rosemary Radford Ruether, who stresses that “the Christian community continues Christ’s identity” and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s “community of equals”.

But salvation is also “‘worked out’ in solidarity with the religious other”. As we have seen above, Fletcher is concerned with restoring the balance between affirmation of the “overabundance of God”, affirmation of God’s revelation in Jesus, and the “counteraffirmations” of the religious other. In an inventive twist of the Beatitudes (Luke 6:22.23), she asks if they

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150 Fiorenza 1994, p 157
151 Cady et. al. 1986, p 77
152 Egnell 1996
153 Cf. section 3.1.1 above
154 Fletcher 2005, p 17
155 Fletcher 2005, p 18
156 Ruether 1983, p 138
157 Fletcher 2005, p 126
might be read as referring to these counter-affirmations: “Are not our neighbors of other faiths often hated on account of Jesus, the Son of Man? Have they not been excluded and reviled and defamed, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth?”

Fletcher concludes her book with an outline of a theology of religions which, again, begins and ends with God’s overabundance. Drawing on Aquinas’ view that human fulfilment consists not in “finally comprehending God, but in the ongoing wonder that is the human posture of relatedness to God”, she finds that while affirming that they have come to know God through Jesus, their “wonder about God can be increased” through the encounter with religious others, who’s very particularity or “otherness” is seen as “an invaluable resource for an ever broadening vision of the mystery of human existence and the mystery which Christians call ‘God’.”

Experiential Christology
Pamela Dickey Young’s *Christ in a Post-Christian World* is another attempt to formulate an answer to the questions involved in how to be a pluralist feminist Christian. Her aim is to outline a Christian theology, focusing in particular on the understanding of Christ (Christology), that might serve theologians well as they seek to think through the Christian tradition in light of the claims made on Christianity by other religious traditions and by feminism. I seek a Christian theology that is neither imperialistic nor patriarchal.

Particularity, experience and “fullness of life” are themes from feminist theology which Young bases her argument on. Feminism has been wary of universals, on the grounds that supposedly universal claims have left out half of the population. At the same time however, Young argues, feminism must be able to claim that there are universals. Even though women’s experiences are diverse, if we are not able to communicate and understand each other’s experiences, “nothing binds women together against patriarchy.”

There are parallels here, Young says, with interreligious understanding:

Both in feminist thinking and in thinking about religious pluralism the challenge is to hold the particular and the universal in tension, not to let the commonalities get swallowed up by myriad diversities, not to jump too soon to pseudo universals. The way to the universal is through the particular and

158 Fletcher 2005, p 126
159 Fletcher 2005, p 136
160 Fletcher 2005, p 137
161 Young, Pamela 1995, p 5
162 Young, Pamela 1995, pp 34-35
not around it. Feminist thought has helped me to discover this and apply it to my thoughts about religions.163

The feminist emphasis on particularity moves Young to denounce the tendency of Paul Knitter and John Hick to move away from christocentrism, as well as Rosemary Radford Ruether’s concern that a Christology which claims that Jesus is the Christ is inherently anti-Jewish. Christianity must be christocentric, Young states, but there are many ways of being this, and a christocentric Christianity must not necessarily claim to be the only path to salvation.164

Young bases her attempt to formulate a non-imperialistic, non-patriarchal Christology on the earliest layers of the biblical textual tradition, as understood by biblical scholars Marinus de Jonge and John Dominic Crossan. In these early layers, the stress is not on Christological titles or abstract notions of who Jesus is, but on “his effect on those who listened to him and experienced the inbreaking of the reign of God through him”165 With Schubert Ogden, Young argues that “the point of Christology is an existential one”,166 and she observes that “the whole area of ‘feeling’ or experience often remains unanalyzed in Christology”.167

Using Schubert Ogden’s distinction between Jesus as constitutive as opposed to representative of salvation, Young finds that if Jesus re-presents rather than constitutes God’s offer of grace or salvation, God’s grace “presumably […] could be re-presented in other ways and forms”168 which solves both feminism’s problem with the maleness of Jesus and the claims of other religions to have representations of salvation.

If we understand Christological claims as existential claims, says Young, we can compare these existential claims with those made by other religious traditions through their particular symbols. This is a better way than seeking, as Panikkar does, functional equivalents of symbols across religious traditions, Young argues.169

The existential question that Christology answers is “From whom shall we live in order to bring about fullness of life?”, and the answer is “God”.170 It is God’s love, God’s grace, God’s summons that we experience through Jesus. Jesus points away from himself towards God. This might not seem too different from Hick’s move to “reality-centeredness”, but Young’s point is

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163 Young, Pamela 1995, p 35
164 Young, Pamela 1995, pp31-32
165 Young, Pamela 1995, p 46
166 Young, Pamela 1995, p 48
167 Young, Pamela 1995, p 49
168 Young, Pamela 1995, p 54
169 Young, Pamela 1995, pp 60-61
170 Young, Pamela 1995, p 60
that as Christians, we cannot bypass Jesus as our way to experiencing the ultimate reality we name God.

**High and Low Christologies in Tension**

Pamela Dickey Young is critical of Rosemary Radford Ruether’s contention that an understanding of Jesus as Christ must be anti-Jewish. We have encountered Ruether’s critique of anti-Judaism in Christian theology in section 5.1.1, and her proposal that we must understand the messianic meaning of Jesus’ life as “paradigmatic and proleptic in nature, not final and fulfilled”. 171 I find, however, that Ruether operates with two different Christologies.

She has consistently tried to construct Jesus not as opposing, but as being in continuity with liberative trends of the Judaism of his time. The understanding of Jesus as a prophet, standing in the Jewish messianic renewal tradition of his days is central for Ruether’s feminist project as well as in the context of anti-Judaism. Her Christology takes its starting point in “a reencounter with the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels, not the accumulated doctrine about him but his message and praxis”. 172 This message and praxis was egalitarian and liberating for oppressed and marginalized groups, among them women.

Besides this “low” Christology however, Ruether also operates with a “high” Christology which “regards Christ as the cosmic manifestation of God, appearing both as the immanent divine source and ground of creation and its ultimate redemptive healing”. 173 This “sacramental cosmology”, 174 built on the Wisdom tradition, is primarily a resource in her work with eco-feminist theology.

Ruether does not tie the cosmic Christ exclusively to the historical Jesus, but claims that “the Christian community continues Christ’s identity”, and that “redemptive humanity goes ahead of us, calling us to yet incompletely dimensions of human liberation”. 175

As I read Ruether, she has an implicit understanding that the “cosmic Christ”, or God’s Word, is also realized outside the Christian community. Nevertheless, I find that, as long as she has not spelled out the relationship between the incarnation of “the cosmic Christ” in Jesus and the Christian community, and its possible manifestations elsewhere, it comes close to an inclusivist notion of “anonymous Christians”. At least, there is an unresolved

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171 Ruether 1974, p 249
172 Ruether 1983, p 135
173 Ruether 1993, p 229
174 Gross & Ruether 2001, p 200
175 Ruether 1983, p 138
tension between “Jesus the prophet”, compatible with Jewish-Christian
dialogue and “the cosmic Christ”, compatible with eco-feminism.

Is it necessary to resolve this tension? What we have encountered in this
chapter are fragments, tentative approaches to various aspects of theology of
religions. There is, so far, no comprehensive “feminist theology of religion”
taking in and harmonizing all aspects. Perhaps that is not even desirable? It
might be better to resist the temptation to comprehensiveness, preserving the
open-ended, unfinished quality of feminist theology, true to the insight about
the “messiness of actual existence”.

7.3 Conclusions: An-Other Discourse
When feminist theologians reflect on issues of religious plurality, they do so
from the perspective of praxis and experience. The experience of being
“othered” leads to reflections on theological constructions of otherness. The
experience of women not being heard in interfaith dialogue leads to
reflections on the philosophical underpinnings of the dialogue.

It is from this vantage point that feminist theologians approach questions
of truth and universality, which are central in theologies of religion. What
then emerges is “truth as conversation”, or truth as a response to primary
experiences, a holistic concept where truth cannot be understood apart from
goodness and beauty.

In many ways, experiences from the women’s movement are used as
theological resources. Women’s experiences in consciousness-raising groups
are seen as religious experiences and interpreted in terms of conversion. The
frame of reference for discussions of universality and particularity is the
discussions in the women’s movement around whether there are universal
“women’s experiences”, and universals are then seen more as commonalities
deducted from many particular stories than as ontological categories.

If there is a universal, it could paradoxically be captured in the phrase
“the messiness of actual existence”, or in the concept “change”. Life is
complicated, identities are hybrid, everything is subject to change. Theology
and philosophy should not try to “tidy up” the messiness, but deal with life
as it is with all its contradictions and ambiguities, including the plurality of
and within religions. Difference is a key word, and much of the critique
against malestream theologies of religion focuses on their tendency to either
deny or reify difference.

The conversation partners of the writers featured in this chapter are on the
one hand those interested in interfaith dialogue, on the other hand feminist
theologians. The writings have appeared in either feminist or interfaith
publications, with a slight preponderance of the latter. But the challenge to
malestream theologies of religions has not yet acquired momentum; the feminist voice is still marginal.

Maura O’Neill builds on experiences from women’s dialogue meetings, the book written by Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rita M. Gross has the form of a Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and there are some references to the “wider ecumenism” in the women’s movement. But on the whole, feminist theologians do not take their cue from women’s interfaith praxis. Apart from Diana Eck, none of the theologians in this section appeared at the conferences described in Chapter Three, and there are no references to these or other women’s interfaith events.

There are, however, connections, in that the theologians take their starting point in experience, and deal with themes that were prominent in the conferences. A difference is that while Buddhists were not a very vocal or visible group at the conferences, it is Buddhism that provides most inspiration for feminist theologians.176

In spite of the lack of connection to women’s interfaith praxis, the feminist theologians, by their choice of a starting point in, and by reflecting on experience, provide a bridge across the gap between praxis and theory perceived by the women of the Women’s Interfaith Journey. Maura O’Neill’s analysis of the philosophical underpinnings of interfaith dialogue and “women’s ways of being religious”, as well as Kate McCarthy’s reflections on “women’s experience” as a hermeneutical key, could provide women with tools for interpreting their dialogue processes.

176 It is mainly Buddhism in its Western guise, and in the form of “engaged Buddhism” that is appropriated by Western feminist theologians.
8 Malestream Responses to the Feminist Challenge

8.1 An Overview

Feminist perspectives are not prominent in theologies of religions. Apart from some assertions about the necessity of including women’s voices, not many malestream theologians of religions seek their resources in feminist theology. *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* is exceptional in the literature on theology of religions, by including two essays with a feminist perspective, those of Ruether and Suchocki.

In this section I will give a few examples of how feminist concerns are treated by some malestream theologians of religions. This overview does not purport to be comprehensive, but contains the instances of engagement with feminism or with issues central to feminism, that I have found in a sample of current literature on religious plurality.

The themes that we have seen to be central in feminist theologies of religions are not absent from malestream theologies, but are peripheral or treated from other perspectives.

Harvey Cox says, in *Many Mansions*, that “what we now call interreligious dialogue remains a truncated conversation among men about the male versions of the great religious traditions of the world” and “I am convinced that, when women become full partners, the interreligious dialogue will change, so much so that what is now going on will be regarded as only an insufficient and misleading beginning”.

This is cited with approval by Diane D’Souza and others, but apparently remains a non-committal remark, as there is no evidence that Cox has made any efforts to make this happen, or that he has drawn to a great extent on feminist writings.

John D’Arcy May deals with many issues prominent in feminist theology, such as the interest in “people’s religions” with their quest for life and wholeness, “the other” and the construction of the self. In *Transcendence and Violence: the Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions*, he argues that the great traditions, in relation to “primal religions” of the Pacific have failed to counteract violence and inspire peacemaking. He

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1 Cox 1992, pp 57-58
notices that in anthropological studies of the peoples in Melanesia, “life” is a central concept; as well as “wholeness”, which keeps the spiritual and material realms together and aims at the well-being of all; and where “transcendence” is manifested in “communal and cosmic relationships”.2

May further discusses the relation between dogmatics and ethics in dialogue, and observes that there is a dissymmetry:

in the realm of gnosis, the religions assume their own superiority based on the certainty that they possess definitive truth; in that of ethos, however, they defer to the prior demand of the Other as Stranger […] to be treated with respect and love.3

With Emmanuel Levinas, he claims that “the ethical has precedence over the cognitive, justice over truth”.4 He is also influenced by Levinas in his view of the Other as “absolute Stranger”, though he finds that Levinas’ thought needs to be examined in the light of feminist and ecological concerns.5 We shall return below to Levinas, who is central to Michael Barnes’ theology, and the feminist critique of his dichotomy between knowledge and ethics.

In After Pluralism: Towards an Interreligious Ethic May points out the connections between sexism and religious universalism. He argues that the basis for religious antagonisms which lead to violence is that “specifically religious authority is invested in male-dominated or ‘kyriarchal’ structures”.6 He further points out that religious traditions are “universal in their claims in proportion as they are patriarchal in origin and hierarchical in structure”.7 He suggests that the “principle of complementarity” should be implemented, and that “[i]nterreligious communication will be severely truncated if partnership does not replace patriarchy in both symbolism and practice”.8

May also discusses how an approach to interreligious dialogue should include “confronting the unacknowledged Other in ourselves”, both on the personal level and “in the unconscious depths of each religious tradition’s ‘identity’”.9 There are “three constitutive dimensions of this hidden Other, which I shall call the feminine, the primal and the poor”,10 May says, though he does not comment on the connections between them: women’s central role in primal traditions and the fact that the majority of the world’s poor are women.

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2 May 2003, pp 48-49, 58
3 May 2003, p 127
4 May 2003, p 129
5 May 2000, p 41
6 May 2000, p 74
7 May 2000, p 74
8 May 2000, p 75
9 May 2000, p 72-73
10 May 2000, p 73 (italics in original)
Ursula King, says May, “is right to enquire about the ‘missing feminine’ in religion”. But Ursula King is not talking about the missing feminine, but about feminism as the missing dimension. May’s lapse is reminiscent of Aloysius Pieris system, where actual embodied women disappear and “the feminine” as an aspect that men need to realize to become full human beings remains. Androcentricity is masked, and the question of power easily disappears, when we talk about the “feminine” rather than feminism.

The power question, the question of violence and what Deepthi Sukumar from the Women’s Interfaith Journey termed “the bad things about religion” are increasingly coming into focus in interfaith dialogue, but without references to the feminist critique. John D’Arcy May argues that, as a basis for dialogue, Christianity as well as Buddhism must acknowledge their failure to “transcend violence”. Erhard Kamphausen likewise has argued that the interrelation between religion and violence must be discussed openly in interfaith dialogue. We cannot just maintain that it is not religion itself, but its corruption in the hands of other forces, which promotes violence, he says. We must put the question: “Why is it that religious feelings can so easily be used for sinister purposes?”11

Paul F. Knitter takes up the issue of power in connection with religion and violence. When he claims that “[w]e must raise the question of religion and violence in order to avoid the exploitation of interreligious dialogue by the powerful”,12 this is precisely the concern of feminist projects like the Women’s Interfaith Journey. Feminist theologians have thoroughly exposed the religious abuse of power, and Knitter’s argument is impoverished when he does not bring the dimension of gender into his analysis of power.

Knitter’s insistence on “justice” and “liberation” as criteria in interreligious dialogue, and his proposal that interreligious dialogue must deal with the question of power, are very much in tune with feminist theology, but he does not make much use of feminist sources or specifically mention women’s issues.13

Together with Wesley Ariarajah and Stanley Samartha who, as we have seen in Chapters Three and Six, acknowledge the importance of feminism, Paul O. Ingram is one of the few male theologians who appraise feminist theology as a renewal movement within the religions, which has wider implications than just gender issues. To him, feminist theology provides both a radical critique of religions and ways of dealing with the “bad things in religion”. For Ingram it is a question of liberation, not of a “feminine element”.

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11 Kamphausen 2002, p 107
12 Knitter 2005, p 33
13 An exception is a reference to the feminist critique of Hick in Knitter 1998, p 79. A more thorough examination on Knitter’s gender-blindness is to be found in Tetlow 2004, pp 14-15
Ingram has developed these thoughts in an essay on Buddhist-Christian dialogue and the liberation of women. Here, he specifies what he as a “white male historian of religions” has learned from feminists engaged in interreligious dialogue, especially Rita Gross and Paula Cooey. The first lesson, he says, is that “any religious tradition is false which forces its adherents to define their faith and practice solely in terms of past forms”. That is, religious traditions are not static, but are in a process of change. If religions could solely be defined in terms of past forms, not only women, but also men would have to leave them. But the second lesson Ingram has learned from feminists is that “leaving may not be necessary” if we listen to what feminists are saying and doing in the different religions.

Feminist theology is for Ingram the foundation of liberation theology, as the liberation of women engenders all other forms of liberation. And because the need for liberation is global, feminist theology should be grounded in the practice of interfaith dialogue: “[i]nterreligious dialogue empowers the particular struggles for liberation from patriarchy in all religious traditions”.

Though themes current in feminist thought do appear in mainstream theologies of religion, the feminist challenge has not to a great extent been taken seriously. In the next section, I shall take a closer look at a theologian, who does not in any way engage with feminist thought, and show the implications of this oversight.

8.2 A Test Case: Michael Barnes S. J.

I will concentrate on Michael Barnes’ *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* partly because it is a recent work, that has attracted a great deal of attention, but mainly because he treats areas that are central in my material: “the other” and “being in relation”. Like feminist theologies, it is intended to be praxis-oriented: “a theology which arises from the various forms of dialogue with other religions”, a “theology of dialogue”. He reflects on Indian experiences of interfaith dialogue, and the Holocaust – or Shoah which is the term preferred by Barnes – is central for his understanding of interfaith dialogue.

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14 Ingram 1997, p 56
15 Ingram 1997, p 57
16 Ingram 1997, p 59
17 Barnes 2002, p x
18 The term *shoah*, which means ”disaster”, is used in the Zionist context, where it has connotations of a natural disaster: something that is unavoidable but still possible to take precautions against – in the Jewish case to seek refuge in Israel, cf. Bartov 1996, p 60. There
Like many others, Michael Barnes is dissatisfied with the tripartite paradigm approach to theology of religions, and his main objection is that “it tends to serve the interests of the pluralist agenda only”. Like Jeannine Hill Fletcher, he finds that “[t]he other is still a ‘problem’ to be excluded, included or – more safely – ‘pluralised’” within the threefold paradigm. The question is “[h]ow to account for a relationship with the other, to know the other as other, without assimilating the other to the category of sameness”. He therefore proposes an approach based on the different logical status of a theology which arises from reflection on the actual engagement with the other and on the whole complex process of inter-personal communication which is represented by the term inter-religious dialogue.

Barnes takes his starting point in Levinas’ philosophical questions about relationality. The question put by Levinas, and also by Barnes, is: “How can a being enter into relation with the other without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other?” Or, in Barnes’ words: “how to allow for the inevitability of the ‘alteration’ of the subject without risking its fragmentation?”

Levinas claims that the foundation for ethical behaviour is the radical demand of “the face of the other”. For the ethical demand to be sufficiently radical, the other must be totally alien to the ethical subject, there must be no common ground. Levinas rejects Buber’s “I – thou” ethics as not radical enough – the other must be a stranger, not “a friend in a common project”.

It is intriguing to encounter Levinas after reading Gilligan’s theories and their implications for feminist theology. In Gilligan’s terminology, he resists a “male” ethic based on rules, and advocates a “female” ethic of relation. At the same time, however, this relational ethic seems well nigh impossible for the male, European, enlightenment subject, which is constituted by separation and contained in itself, so that it is threatened by the reciprocity of a relation. For feminist theologians, to be a self is to be self-in-relation, the subject is constituted by its relationships. Not so for Levinas.

Roger S. Gottlieb has pointed out that part of the problem with Levinas’s ethics is that he “finds an unbridgeable gap between knowledge and ethics”,

is no evidence that Barnes uses it in this sense, but he does not explain his choice of terminology.

19 Barnes 2002, p 8
20 Barnes 2002, p 13
21 Barnes 2002, p 26, italics in original
22 Barnes 2002, p 13
23 Levinas, quoted in Barnes 2002, p 68
24 Barnes 2002, p 68
25 Barnes 2002, p 88
because for him “knowledge of others necessarily reduces the other to something we possess”. For him, knowledge is understood in strictly positivist terms, and there can be no knowledge of the other outside structures of domination.

Gottlieb interprets Levinas’s ethics as a response to the trauma of being a survivor of the Holocaust. During the Holocaust, the Jews of Europe were “the irreducibly other”. To reach out to Jews meant to risk torture and death, so that to be ethically responsible, “was to reach out to those who could not reach back to you”. The power of Levinas’ thought then, in spite of being trapped in a cultural masculinity, according to Gottlieb, “resides in the fact that it speaks to this condition, offering a prayer of hope during a century of death camps”.

The Shoah is central also for Barnes: it was, he says, the catalyst for a theology of religions in Europe, and Judaism is Christianity’s “primary otherness”, which somehow determines relations to other “others”. “In de Certeau’s terms, the Jewish other is always returning, always present, ‘haunting’ the space carved out by the dominant Christian ‘same’”.

Barnes does not enter into a feminist critique, but he is not satisfied with the lack of reciprocity in Levinas’ philosophy. For Barnes, the point of Levinas is that his is “a prophetic voice warning of the dangers of totalising discourse”, but he finds that “he does not take us far enough”. To do so, he brings in the thoughts of Paul Ricoeur, Gillian Rose and Michel de Certeau.

Barnes finds Gillian Rose’s terms “holy middle” and “broken middle” helpful to critique Levinas. When Levinas insists that there is no common ground between self and other, he, in Rose’s terms, substitutes the “broken middle” with “the holy middle”.

This ‘holy middle’ appears to be what is left once the past has been denounced and the future deferred as ‘eschatology’: a present meeting or dialogue which lacks any ‘epistemology of recognition’ because it seeks to avoid contamination with the messiness of the phenomenal.

Dialogue for Barnes is “negotiation of the broken middle”. Philosophy is not enough; Barnes senses that interfaith dialogue must be situated in the messiness of lived life. To approach the practices of everyday life, he turns to Michel de Certeau.

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26 Gottlieb 1994, p 2
27 Gottlieb 1994, p 9
28 Gottlieb 1994, p 9
29 Barnes 2002, p 62
30 Barnes 2002, p 71
31 Barnes 2002, p 95
Barnes employs Michel de Certeau’s project of “heterology” to explore interfaith relations. Here he finds the notion of “‘the returning other’, other persons, other stories, other experiences, which, once marginalized to the borders of the known and familiar, manage somehow to insinuate themselves back into the centre of critical reflection”. What interests him in de Certeau is his “perspectives on the practices of everyday life, in which the powerless fashion the transformation of the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests” and his method of “narrating ‘micro-discourses’ in which he speaks not of ‘the other’ but of ‘others’ with their ever-developing and ever-changing relations with each other”.

Barnes chooses as his “micro-discourse” the strategies of the early Jesuit inculturation pioneer in India, Roberto de Nobili, and his followers in the contemporary ashram movement. His assessment of de Nobili is unambiguously positive, and does not contain the kind of reservations voiced by Jeannine Hill Fletcher. He discusses at length the situation in India, and also takes seriously the Dalit movement’s critique of the inculturation advocated by ashramic spirituality. He finds, however, that Dalit theology is characterized by “a reverse Orientalism which encourages a type of ‘oppositionalist’ thinking” and leaves unanswered the question “how far the ‘dialogue of action’ can be integrated into a wider inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue in a way that overcomes rather than creates oppositional dualisms”. The Women’s Interfaith Journey might be able to show him the way here!

Barnes finds that Levinas does not go far enough, and I find the same about Barnes – or that he does not do what he is talking about. For all his insistence on particularity, on practice over against theory and on reflection on the relational experience, it all remains theoretical. Much of what he is searching for is to be found in the praxis and theory of women’s dialogues and feminist theology, but he never looks in that direction.

While Barnes stresses that interfaith dialogue is an engagement with persons who bring their particular histories, ethical and political questions to the dialogue, and theological debate therefore must be “made secondary to that practice of faith which forms persons in responsible relationship with each other”, his theology takes its starting point in the documents of Vatican II and in philosophical works, and does not “emerge from reflection

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32 Barnes 2002, p 26
33 Barnes 2002, p 27
34 Barnes 2002, p 27
35 Cf. section 7.1.2 above
36 Barnes 2002, p 171
37 Barnes 2002, pp 171-172
38 Barnes 2002, p 58
on the relational experience itself”, 39 which is what feminist theology and interfaith praxis do.

When Barnes describes how, according to de Certeau, “the powerless operate from a position of weakness yet maintain the freedom to move across boundaries in order to adapt to present needs” 40, this strikes me as a very apt description of what has above been referred to as “people’s religion” or “women’s ways of being religious”, as well as the dynamics of the interfaith projects and conferences described in Chapters Two and Three. Barnes, however, applies this to de Nobili, Bede Griffiths and Swami Abhishikthananda, who, though original and controversial, were highly educated white male members of established religious orders within the Catholic Church. If they were marginalized, they had voluntarily chosen this position, which can hardly be described as “a position of weakness” in the same manner as that imposed upon women, Dalits or other oppressed groups.

Barnes is in the same position: in contrast to the feminist theologians, he operates from being “self”, not from the experience of being “other”. He is a white European male, with a higher academic education, as a Jesuit a member of one of the most distinguished orders of a church which defines itself as the only true church.

It could be argued that as a celibate who has taken vows of poverty, he is “different”, but again, this is a chosen otherness, and one that entails the privileged position of having no concerns about how to earn one’s living, and being able to devote one’s life to intellectual pursuits. As “otherness”, this is, with Paula Cooey’s distinctions more akin to the otherness of God than the otherness of women, inasmuch as it is “a sign of eternity, incorruptibility of life”, 41 and the priest’s identification as an alter Christus 42 according to the Catholic Church, with which Barnes strongly identifies.

In fact “the Church” appears as the primal subject in his book. In spite of his insistence that it is persons who meet in interfaith dialogue, “the Church” is presented as the primary subject in that context, which has relations, responds, recognises, tells, seeks and engages with others. 43 Those others are presented as diversified, i.e. “Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists” rather than “the Muslim community” etc, but “the Church” appears as a monolithic entity, there is no hint that there might be “others within”, or a diversity of voices within it. While Barnes sees Judaism as “the Church’s” primary other, 44 he

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39 Barnes 2002, p 182
40 Barnes 2002, p 152
41 Thurian 2000
42 Sepe 2000
43 Barnes 2002, p 135
44 Barnes 2002, pp 24, 139, 231

314
does not reflect on the fact that “the Church” could be Judaism’s other, and perhaps not its primary other.

In other words, “the other” remains an unsolved problem for Barnes, because he lacks the experience of being other, and does not even reflect on his lacking this experience, or on his own situatedness. In contrast, for feminist theologians, being “the other” is the problem, to which the solution can be to enter into dialogue with other “others”. This experience also leads to a deeper reflection on different constructions of otherness, as that of Paula Cooey.\footnote{Cf. section 7.3.1 above}

When Barnes points out that the “negotiation of the middle” takes place also within religious communities as they learn to “adjust to the wider culture”, and that interfaith dialogue is re-reading of traditions as a common enterprise,\footnote{Barnes 2002, p 242} feminist theology and interfaith praxis are again an example of this which could have enhanced his understanding of this negotiation and re-reading.

While Barnes takes exception to the “threefold paradigm”, his stance is very much that of an inclusivist in the spirit of Karl Rahner. He talks of the potential of the Eucharist “not just for transcending all boundaries, of race and nation, but for bringing creation into a new unity”,\footnote{Barnes 2002, p 196} and claims that “the context of Christian liturgy always includes the other, both the language and symbolism of the Jewish other\footnote{Barnes 2002, p 244 (italics in original)} and the more recent history of further engagements with ‘other others’”.\footnote{Barnes 2002, p 248}

It is significant that Barnes does not mention gender as a boundary transcended by the Eucharist. The feminist critique of Christian liturgy is precisely that it is exclusive, literally and symbolically excluding women’s voices. And, as we have seen in the section on Jewish-Christian dialogue, it is not unproblematic that the liturgy includes the language and symbolism of Judaism. It appears that Barnes’ strong identification with “the Church” makes him lapse into the assimilation of the other into the category of sameness which he repudiates throughout the book.

I find it remarkable that someone in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century can be so completely gender-blind and attempt to create a theology “in the context of otherness”\footnote{Barnes 2002, p 245} that claims to be a “reflection on the relational experience itself”\footnote{Barnes 2002, p 182} without taking into account the various feminist theologians who have probed these issues. Barnes’ failure to live up to his good intentions of doing “a theology which both emerges from the practice of faith and feeds back into it”\footnote{Barnes 2002, p 5} and
“shifts attention from theory altogether to the skills, dispositions and virtues which sustain persons in their pursuit of meaning” testifies to the difficulty of stepping out of “the centre” to discover new perspectives at “the margins”.

Nonetheless, there is much in Barnes’ theology which is profound and valuable, not least his use of Levinas, Rose and de Certeau, which could serve well to develop feminist perspectives. For example, Levinas’ warnings about the dangers of abuse of power in relationship could serve as a corrective to an unduly romantic embrace of Gilligan’s theories. Michel de Certeau’s thoughts provide tools for analyzing the processes in women’s dialogue praxis. Not least, Barnes’ concept “negotiation of the broken middle”, with its connotations of ambiguity, complexity, particularity and unpredictability, is very compatible with feminist theology. If Barnes joined company with feminist theologians to explore this broken middle, the outcome could be very exciting.

8.3 Conclusions: Still a Long Way to Go

References to feminism in malestream theologies of religions mostly take the form of non-committal benevolence, exemplified by Harvey Cox. There is a tendency to talk in terms of the missing “feminine” rather than “feminism”. There is, however, a growing awareness that the kyriarchy of religious institutions is a factor behind abuse of power and violence in the name of religion, as in John May’s writings, and an insight that it is crucial to start talking about “the bad things about religion”, though this is generally not tied to the feminist critique. Some theologians, however, like Paul Ingram, do acknowledge that feminism is a resource for critical appraisal and renewal of religion.

There is in contemporary theologies of religions a turn away from the emphasis on dogma, towards an interest in the dynamics of relating to “the other”, a development which should satisfy much of the critique we have encountered in the women’s dialogue projects and feminist theologies. But at the same time, the treatment of these topics is less satisfying from a feminist point of view.

It is both a question of differences in perspective, of centre and margin, of self and other; and of theoretical assumptions. This is made clear by the reading of Michael Barnes from a feminist perspective.

As we have seen, the women participating in the projects described in Chapters Two and Three consciously operated from a position of

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52 Barnes 2002, p 183
marginality, and found that “the margin is a good place for dialogue”. Feminist theologians analyze otherness from the position of being other, and stress that identity is forged in relations, that identities are hybrid and religious traditions characterized by diversity. Carol Gilligan’s theories about an ethics based on relations is an undercurrent in much of the material.

Michael Barnes, on the other hand, operates from a position in the centre, as an ordained religious in a church with which he wholly identifies, and which he perceives as a monolithic identity. To him, the other is really other in the sense of strange and incomprehensible. This is underscored by his use of Levinas’ ethics, which, like Gilligan’s claim that ethics must take their starting point in relation, but by his culturally masculine construction of self becomes almost opposite to Gilligan’s.

The importance of taking “women’s experience” as starting point in feminist theology is made abundantly clear. Reflection on the experience of being other, of being situated on the margins, provides new insights. But grounding theology in experience should not be seen as a prerogative only for feminist theology. If Michael Barnes caught sight of his situatedness as “same”, and being in the “centre” and reflected on it, he would also gain new insights. But it is in the nature of things that it is much harder to catch sight of the peculiarity of sameness than that of otherness.

The challenge for malestream theologies of religions then is not to acknowledge a “feminine dimension”, but query their starting point in “sameness”, to take intrareligious diversity seriously, and to heed the perspectives from the margins. There is still a long way to go.
PART III
SYNTHESIS
This dissertation has a twofold focus: praxis and theory. We have seen that there are threads connecting them throughout the text. But now it is time to synthesize the findings from these two areas, and see what interconnections there are.

While they are not explicitly connected to a great extent, in the sense that the theologians take their cue from dialogue experiences, or the practitioners of dialogue consciously build upon feminist theologies, they do have themes in common. Feminist interfaith praxis is influenced by feminist theory “in general”, especially ideas of relationality derived from Carol Gilligan’s theories. It is also indebted to methodologies from the women’s movement. Feminist theological discourse on religious plurality treats themes that crop up in the dialogue, such as otherness, difference, change. The concept that best summarizes feminist approaches to religious plurality is “the margins”.

9.1 “The Margins is a Good Place for Dialogue”

What we have encountered in this dissertation is a discourse on the margins. This can be understood in a positive and a negative sense. On the one hand, it is a marginalized discourse, in that it is not heard in malestream discourse on religious plurality. On the other hand, it is a discourse that has been proud to situate itself on the margins in order to get a different perspective, turning marginality into an advantage.

So what is so advantageous about being at the margins? Arguments given by Diana L. Eck and Diane D’Souza, leaders of the interfaith projects studied in Chapter Two and Three, were that “the reach is not so far” between those on the margins of different traditions, “the investment in centrist positions is not so great”, that there are new insights to be had from voices at the margins, and that women’s experiences of being marginalized might bring greater sensitivity to other marginalized perspectives.

The expression “the reach is not so far” invokes a spatial image, where the religious traditions can be compared to neighbouring countries, which share borders, and where those who live at the borders have a lot in common with those on the other side of the border, perhaps more than they have with
the capital of their own country, and there is a great deal of cross-border exchange. The landscape seen from the border looks different to the view from the capital – but it also looks different from different places on the border.

Marginality could also be expressed in two other terms that are central in this dissertation: “otherness” and “difference”. Those who are constructed as “other” by the dominant discourse, are perceived as “different” and relegated to the margins. In a kyriarchal worldview built upon dualism and hierarchy, the “other” is “different” in the sense of “inferior”.

The problem in interfaith dialogue is how to understand and enter into relation with the other, who is perceived as different and somehow inferior. Solutions have attempted to either minimize or reify differences, strategies rejected by feminist approaches to religious plurality. Jeannine Hill Fletcher argues that instead of minimizing difference, we should avoid reifying it by acknowledging internal diversity in religious traditions.

Women can bring a paradigm shift into interfaith dialogue through the feminist experience of being “the other”, of being othered. The experience of being othered is a point where women from different religious traditions can meet. It is a different vantage point for looking upon each other, and upon religious traditions. Being conscious of the failings of one’s own tradition to promote women’s full humanity can be a memento not to construct the other’s tradition as inferior.

It is when differences are reified that “the other” can be constructed as essentially different/inferior. What women, who meet on the margins, discover is that boundaries are permeable, that there is great variety within each tradition, that it is not always easy to tell who is “inside” and who is “outside”. At the margins, “the messiness of actual existence” is part and parcel of dialogue. While malestream theologies of religions and interfaith dialogue pay lip service to the fact that religious traditions are not unified wholes, and that it is people, not religions, who meet in dialogue, this insight has not been allowed to define the dialogue.

“Difference” is, however, not a harmless concept. Difference can be “celebrated” because it provides new insights, shows us that there are many valid ways of being in the world. Differences can be complementary. But there are also antagonistic differences, differences of power. Feminist approaches to religious plurality are sensitive to power imbalances. Who is invited to dialogue, who invites? Who sets the terms of the discourse? Will dialogue between high caste people ever touch on relevant issues? Womanist and post-colonial theological discourse in particular takes differences seriously.

But feminist dialogue projects are not themselves free from power imbalances. Even when precautions are taken to make conferences inclusive
and participatory, when they are held in North America Third World participants experience them as being held on Christian, Western terms. They are set not beyond time and space, but in a world of power imbalance, terrorism and war-against-terrorism, of rising fundamentalism. Even in a Third World setting, Christian women are suspected of having a hidden missionary or imperialist agenda when they invite to interfaith gatherings. In a post-colonial situation, even though they are a marginalized group within a minority community, they have to bear the stamp of the colonizer.

There has been a certain awareness of, and readiness to deal with, these power mechanisms in the projects I have studied, especially the Women’s Interfaith Journey, which focused caste conflict. But there has also been a certain amount of naivety in the international conferences on the part of the American organizers, an inability to understand the impact of the US in the world. There has been some kind of assumption that the women all meet on an equal footing, which has been challenged by Muslim and Third World participants.

Difference is a potential source of conflict. I have shown how conflict arose in the projects studied, over differences related to power: the caste issue, the situation in Israel-Palestine; or over strategies for achieving peace and justice. I have discussed how a constructive handling of these conflicts was facilitated by an emphasis on relation-building. This also involves the issue of otherness. It is not only that women meet in the experience of being othered. It is also a basic principle in feminist theology that reality is relational. The other is basically a person with whom I am in relationship, not an alien with whom I have no ties. In conflict, it is as important to sustain the relationship as to solve the subject matter of the conflict.

I have argued that the process in feminist interfaith dialogue, as it appears in my material, embodies a “narrative feminist ethic of care and justice”. It is based on story-telling: approaching issues through the particular. The sharing of personal stories is a way of building relations between participants, fostering a concern for each other’s well-being. At the same time, this focus on sustaining relationships is prevented from leading to an evasion of conflict by the concern for justice. In this way, differences can be faced without being reified by the othering mechanism.

The concern for justice entails openness for change. As Paula M. Cooey points out, “change” is one of the properties the kyriarchal discourse projects upon woman as other. The tenet that change is central to human identity of life, is denied by a discourse that privileges hierarchy and immutability. In feminist interfaith dialogue, as we have seen, change was seen as “normative” also with reference to religious traditions.

Women have been excluded from the centre stage of interfaith dialogue by the prevailing kyriarchal discourse, as Maura O’Neill has shown. But
they have also chosen to situate themselves on the margins. We have seen that in all the dialogue projects, the participants distanced themselves from malestream interfaith dialogue. They did not understand what they were doing in terms of a dialogue built on the premises criticized by O’Neill, Fletcher and others.

Instead, they have created what in Bourdieu’s terms can be called their own “field”. A parallel is the way Indian feminist theologians, through the use of a marginal tradition, the *shakta* tradition, have constructed themselves as “same”. The participants in the dialogue projects claim that they, unlike malestream dialogue, they are “talking about something”, confronting the “hard issues”.

### 9.2 Can the Margins Become the Centre?

By making use of their marginal position, and the perspectives it offers, feminist approaches to religious plurality offer a new paradigm for dialogue through a new understanding of the concepts “difference”, “other” and “change”.

But will this remain a marginalized paradigm? There is, as Bat-Omi Bar On and others have pointed out, a danger in privileging the marginalized voice, which entails glossing over real power relations and reifying the marginalized as marginal. Or is there a possibility that as this marginal discourse has turned concepts like difference, other and change upside down, it can turn the concept of margin and centre upside down, too?

Seen through the lenses of cultural theory, which understands the boundaries between cultures as the sites of identity formation through interaction and change, an exciting perspective emerges. What if, in today’s religious landscape characterized by “the turn to subjectivity” and increasing multiple religious belonging, the margins were the centre, in the sense of the centre of development and change? What if we realize that the “little traditions” are really the “great” ones, in the sense that they are embraced by the majority of believers, encompass a great variety, and that, according to Pieris’ theory of the cosmic and metacosmic, they are really the foundations of the “great tradition”?

Again, we can think of this in spatial terms, with different religious traditions as “countries” whose “capitals” in the middle, representing the “great tradition” (and maybe enclosed by a sturdy city wall), a “countryside” consisting of the “little traditions”, and borders, which are the contact points between traditions. Now, what happens is an increasing amount of cross-border activity, commerce, marriages, some people living in a neighbouring
country have dual citizenships and are bilingual, dialects on opposite sides of the borders merge – while the capitals are increasingly isolated and deserted.

Or, to use Bourdieu’s field theory, we have seen that feminist interfaith initiatives comprise a field of their own, distinct from the field of malestream dialogue, where a different cultural capital is required. Instead of viewing this as a marginal field, if we see it as extrapolated from the big “map” of all the religious traditions in their entirety, and malestream dialogue as extrapolated from the “capitals”, the feminist dialogue and other dialogues at the “margins” constitute the wider field, encompassing malestream dialogue within its borders. That is, the dialogue of “experts” is one, minor field within the vast field of interfaith dialogue, and to be relevant, it needs to relate to what is going on around it.

Still, however, the resources remain in the centre. The means for publication, and for arranging seminars and conferences are controlled by the centre. We have seen that the lack of organizational and financial resources have hampered the development of feminist interfaith initiatives. Unless institutions like the WCC and various dialogue institutes are ready to “unprivilege” the dialogue of the experts, the rest of the field will remain invisible.

But to make the wider field of interfaith discourse visible, feminist dialogue praxis, as well as feminist theologies of religion, must also be developed more thoroughly than at present. What has been done so far are just beginnings. In the next chapter, I shall suggest some promising starting points for this development.
Towards Intercultural Feminist Theologies of Religious Difference

While “margins” is a word which, as I have shown in Chapter Nine, is characteristic of feminist approaches to religious plurality to date, I think the dangers of re-inscribing marginality are real if it were to become a catchword for the future. Instead, I propose “hermeneutics of difference” as the best strategy for the way forward.

I find that Kwok Pui-lan’s term “theology of religious difference” is better than “theology of religions”, as the latter preserves the notion of “religions” as unified wholes. “Theology of religious difference” acknowledges difference within and between religious traditions, and does not lend itself to projects of easy harmonization.

10.1 The Construction of Gender and Religion

The connections between sexism and religious imperialism have been hinted at, but not thoroughly developed, in my material. Such an analysis must be the basis of a feminist theology of religious difference. The mechanisms of gender construction through the categories of hierarchy and difference, are applicable to the construction of religious identities, too. This analysis must also include the contribution of postcolonial theory at the intersection of the constructions of the female, native and religious “other”.

Concepts like “difference”, “relation” and “the other” are central in both feminist theologies and theologies of religious difference. We have seen that theologians such as Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, and Paula M. Cooey have brought the two different discourses on these concepts together. Much still remains to be done, both in terms of a comparative analysis of how these concepts are used in the two discourses, and in terms of creative developments that combine the two approaches.

“Power” is a central concept in feminism. Paul F. Knitter is one of the few theologians who have reflected upon the issue of power in interfaith relations. Reflection on the role of power in the construction of both gender
and religious traditions, as well as an emphasis on the power question in interfaith dialogue, is an important task for a feminist theology of religious difference.

The dialogue projects described in Chapters Two and Three were all multilateral dialogues, involving women of many different religious traditions. They were also, though having a larger time frame than such conferences normally have, limited in time. My conjecture is that this setup is more conducive to seeking commonalities than differences. Bilateral dialogues conducted over a longer time span would allow for more probing of differences.

Bilateral dialogues between feminists from different religious traditions, conducted with the aim of probing differences as resources for theology, would be an invaluable contribution to the development of feminist theologies of religious difference.

10.2 Allowing Different Agendas

It was in the chapter on Jewish-Christian dialogue that the importance of acknowledging difference came out most forcefully, in the sense of allowing different agendas within a common project. I found that though Jewish and Christian feminists have a shared agenda of criticizing kyriarchy in, and creating liberating interpretations of, biblical texts, they might find different meanings in the same text. A text from the Christian Scriptures which is liberating to Christian feminists might also be perceived as anti-Jewish, e.g. Gal 3:28. And even without a supersessionist agenda, Christian approaches to the Hebrew Bible will to a certain extent differ from Jewish approaches.

I was once invited to speak at a conference called “Daughters of Abraham”, concerning dialogue between Christians, Muslims and Jews from a gender perspective. I reflected on the significance of the fact that our commonality was in the paternal, not the maternal line. Could it be that the common project is the critique of patriarchy/kyriarchy, while the constructive project of reclaiming the “mothers” must be undertaken by each group on its own? To some extent that might be true, but I believe we can cooperate also in the shaping of liberative traditions. We have seen the example of joint Christian and Jewish reflection on the Covenant. But there is also a lot to be learnt through the insight that there can be different valid interpretations and ways to go.

To return to the issue of our “mothers”, we have seen that the story of Hagar can be viewed as both contentious and as a paradigm for interfaith dialogue. Katharina von Kellenbach criticized Delores Williams’ reclaiming of the Hagar story as inherently anti-Jewish, while Mukti Barton views
Hagar as a symbolic figure for women’s resistance and struggle for self-expression within all religious traditions.

Barton brings in the question of power differences from a post-colonial perspective to interpret the role of Sarah in the story, showing how Christian women in Bangladesh, though they themselves identify with Hagar, can be seen as “Sarahs” by Muslim women because of their association with the Christian West. Through this reading, she complicates the story, but has not really taken Jewish interpretation of the story on board (which, given the Bangladeshi context, is not so strange). As Hagar is above all a heroine in Islam, it may not be self-evident to proclaim her a paradigmatic figure for interfaith dialogue. However, feminist interfaith dialogue on the significance of Hagar through a hermeneutics of difference would be an exciting project.

10.3 Engagement with Muslim Thought

Mukti Barton is the only theologian in the material who makes use of Muslim sources. It is striking that while Muslims play a prominent role in the dialogue projects, Christian feminist theologians do not enter into dialogue with Muslim thought, whereas Buddhist concepts appear in their writings.

The absence of Muslim influence is a serious lacuna in feminist theology of religious difference. Is there a tendency to islamophobia also in feminist thought? Is the Muslim other seen as so essentially different that there is no expectation of a contribution to feminist theology from that quarter? After all, there is a growing body of Muslim feminist writings that could provide inspiration for Christian feminists.

If Jewish-Christian dialogue is a test case for feminist theology, so is, increasingly, Muslim-Christian dialogue. It is apparent that women’s issues are a site of contention in Muslim-Christian relations. Those who want to denigrate Islam can point their fingers at burqa-clad women in Afghanistan, stonings in Iran and Nigeria, and Saudi-Arabian women who are not allowed to get a driving license. Muslims wishing to vilify the West point to the way Western women are objectified in advertising and pornography.

In the midst of this, Muslim women have to figure out how to “practise physical gender” in a way that is both liberative and compatible with Muslim standards. The veil has become the symbol of this, a symbol which is not straightforward. Muslim women have to decide what kind of veil they want to wear – anything from full covering to a smart headscarf – or none. The veil can be a sign of piety, of cultural assertion, of feminist strategy, a political statement – or all at once.
Christian feminists likewise are torn between their critique of the exploitation of women in the media, and their demand to have control of their own bodies and decide their dress code for themselves. They also face the question of whether it is possible to be in solidarity with both Muslim women who relinquish the veil as a sign of oppression and those who claim it as a sign of liberation?

To gain their own voice in this “clash of civilizations” where women’s bodies are constructed as the site of contention, Muslim and Christian feminists must get together. In this dialogue between Muslim and Christian feminists, a hermeneutics of difference is indispensable.

There is no denying that, because of the different status of the two scriptures, interpretation strategies for the Bible must differ from those for the Qur’an. While there is a movement towards a historical-critical reading of the Qur’an, it is far from being a mainstream interpretation. Christian feminists cannot expect Muslim feminists to treat the Qur’an as anything but the Word of God in a literal sense. On the other hand, they in their turn should not conform to Muslim expectations in their reading of the Bible. But in spite of this, they can share what they, through different reading strategies, have found, and gain new insights.

There are also, as Anne Hege Grung points out, differing views of womanhood in the Christian and Muslim traditions. The Christian tradition lends itself to both essentialist/complementary and constructivist notions of womanhood, while the Muslim tradition has a stronger orientation towards essentialism and complementarity. Again, participants in the dialogue must acknowledge and respect that they have different views of womanhood, which might lead to different strategies. The notion of “gender pragmatism” can help participants accept each other’s way of “practising physical gender”: there are many ways of being woman; we can discuss which ways are more liberative, but must in the end respect each others’ choices.

10.4 Ethics and Dialogue

The subject of ethics features in this dissertation in two senses. Ethics rather than doctrine is the norm against which religious traditions are assessed, and the dialogue process can been described as embodying an ethic of care and justice.

Throughout this dissertation, we have seen a privileging of ethics over dogmatics, of orthopraxis over orthodoxy. The touchstone of beliefs and practices is pragmatic: does it work? Does it contribute to “fullness of life” and “the wellbeing of all”? Does it promote justice and peace and the “full humanity of women”?

330
If there is a norm in feminist approaches to religious plurality, the key word is “life”. What is life-affirming in various religious traditions should be claimed, what is life-denying should be rejected. The privileging of ethics over dogmatics is also a feature of malestream theologies of religious difference, such as that of Paul Knitter, but the prominence of the concept “life” is a specific contribution of feminist theology.

By observing the dialogue process as it is recorded in the accounts of the dialogue initiatives I have studied, I have deduced an ethic that is embodied by this process. I have called this a “narrative feminist ethic of care and justice”, and have argued that this is an ethic which helps the participants to deal with conflict constructively, and to allow differences without reifying them into otherness. This concept needs to be developed and tested in other dialogue projects, and it should be pointed out that though it is informed by women’s traditional and feminist experiences, it is a feminist, not a feminine ethic – that is, it should be applicable to mixed and all male groups as well.

Though ethics have been the subject of interfaith dialogue – Hans Kün’s project of creating a Global ethics is the outstanding example – there has been less discussion of the ethics of dialogue. There are numerous “rules” or “guidelines” for dialogue, but not so much reflection on the values behind those guidelines, or on how they shall be implemented. A narrative feminist ethic of care and justice could be a foundation for dialogue guidelines that make space for “other voices” to be heard.

10.5 “Religion As Practiced”

“Life was before religion” wrote one of the participants of the Women’s Interfaith Journey in her reflections after the journey. The lived faith of real, embodied people, was the focus for that project as well as for other women’s interfaith initiatives. “Messiness” is a concept that has been central throughout the dissertation: an insistence that religious realities cannot be contained in neat categories. Coupled to this acknowledgement of “messiness” and emphasis on “lived faith”, there is also profound scepticism of theory, analysis and abstract thinking. This divide between theory and praxis must be bridged by a feminist theology of religious difference.

“Religion as practiced” plays an important role in Asian Christian feminist theology. But in Western Christian feminist theological writings, there is not much reflection on “religion as practiced” by women. One reason could, of course, be that especially in Protestant Western Christianity,
the “little tradition” is not so prominent.¹ But I wonder whether there might not also be a fear of essentialism that has prevented Western theologians from taking up women’s religious heritage in popular religiosity.

As there is, indeed, a danger that reflection on women’s religious heritage in the “little tradition” may collapse into an uncritical glorification of women’s traditional roles, it is all the more important that serious theological work is done in this area.

There is, as we have seen, a discussion among Asian feminist theologians about the usefulness of shamanist and goddess traditions for feminist theology. There is a tendency to romanticize, and though Chung Hyun Kyung has a point when she says “you have to fall in love before you start criticizing”, “religion as practiced” should not be embraced uncritically. The concept “difference” is again vital: the “little traditions” are often homogenized and universalized as generally ecological, peaceful and women-friendly. But they must also be seen in their particularity.

To avoid superficiality in their view of “religion as practiced”, feminist theologians should make more use of the works of anthropologists, sociologists and historians of religion – there is a vast field of possible fruitful interdisciplinary cooperation here.

“Faith as lived” is an expression of the emphasis on experience in feminist theology. To insist, as Kate McCarthy does, that interfaith dialogue should be experientially grounded rather than conceptual is yet another vital feminist contribution to a theology of religious difference.

Mealtable sharing and intermarriage have been used by Asian feminist theologians as metaphors for interfaith dialogue. While there is a risk that this is labelled a specifically “feminine” contribution, to bring these domestic metaphors into the public sphere is an important contribution of feminist theology. To do some feminist theologizing about (inter)marriage, bringing in lived experience is also important, given the celibate clerical dominance in reflections on this topic. Gé Speelman’s Keeping Faith is an important example, and worth following. We have also seen how Jewish and Christian feminists criticize the marriage metaphor for implying dominance and subordination in covenant theology.

If a feminist theology of religious difference is to include reflection upon feminist interfaith praxis, it must take the wider field of “religion as practiced”, and “the dialogue of life” seriously. To conduct field studies of

¹ In Ireland, where the Celtic heritage has survived both within and without the Catholic fold, a lot of reflection inspired by this folk religiosity is carried out by Mary Condren and other theologians attached to the Institute of Feminism and Religion. It might be more than a coincidence that Ireland’s historical relations with England can be described in terms of colonialism and a nationalist struggle where the indigenous cultural heritage was important.
women’s interfaith work at the grass-roots level and theologize those findings is an urgent task.

10.6 “Religion As Prescribed”

Though a feminist theology of religious difference should be distinguished by taking “religion as practiced” seriously, it should, of course, not neglect “religion as prescribed”, that is Christian doctrine. Feminist theologians must claim their place in the “dialogue of the experts”.

The survey of themes in feminist theological reflection on religious difference in Part II of this dissertation shows that Christology and, especially among Asian theologians, scripture and canon, are those of the classical dogmatic themes which have received most attention. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is not treated as an obstacle for interfaith relations, but as a resource for understanding religious plurality in terms of diversity and relationality, and the question of universal truth is treated by Pamela Dickey Young in terms of experience – the classical themes are more or less subordinated to the “new” themes of feminist theology. The pragmatism of feminist theology is evident here: the classical concepts are interesting not in themselves, but insofar as they are useful – in this case for interpreting life in a religious plural world.

Salvation is a theme which we saw already in Chapter Three to be of less concern: none of the participants in the Toronto conference were “vexed about the question of the salvation of others”. If feminist theologians are to take their cue from feminist dialogue praxis, salvation is simply not an issue. But there might still be cause to clarify how a feminist theology of religious difference understands salvation. The very concept is one that has caused non-Christian participants in dialogue to complain of a Christianity-biased agenda, as there is no equivalent in some other religious traditions.

When Jeannine Hill Fletcher discusses salvation, she does so in terms of “practices patterned on Jesus”, practices of healing, humility and restoration of wholeness. Feminist soteriologies tend to speak of healing and wholeness rather than salvation. How does that relate to corresponding concepts in other religious traditions?

Christology is a big issue in both feminist theology and theology of religious difference. These two approaches can enrich each other, but not without tension, as the example of Jewish-Christian dialogue shows. The critique from Jewish feminists prompts Christians to seek ways to proclaim that “Jesus was a feminist” without “blaming Jews for patriarchy”. This should be a call to probe deeper, to go beyond the “Jesus was a feminist” stage of feminist Christological reflection. Though comparatively much
reflection has gone into this, the task of creating a Christology that is “neither imperialistic nor patriarchal” is still unfinished.

Asian feminists are in the vanguard here. One strategy is to connect with lived faith, with “religion as practiced”, as when Kwok Pui-lan argues that the Christological question “Who do you say that I am?” must be both personal and contextual, and when Chung Hyun Kyung shows the multiplicity of answers to the question “Who is Jesus for Asian women?”. Kwok also contributes more theoretical starting-points with her suggestions for an “organic model” or Christ as a “hybrid concept”.

Taking this emphasis on multiplicity into account, we should reformulate the task as creating Christologies that are neither imperialistic nor patriarchal. In line with the critique of universalism in both feminist theology and theology of religious difference, we should abandon the presumptuous effort to create one Christological formula, to exhaust the significance of the Jesus event.

Wisdom Christologies, or Sophiologies, have been proposed throughout the theological material as conducive to theologies of religious difference. As wisdom is a concept with astonishing similarities, as well as significant differences, between the religious traditions, interfaith dialogue on wisdom would certainly be a fruitful enterprise, and might even result in the growth of wisdom...

10.7 Towards an Intercultural Future

The bricolage, or patchwork, which makes up this dissertation, brings many different elements together: interfaith conferences in diverse geographical settings over a time-span of 20 years; Asian Christian feminist theology being produced on both sides of the Pacific; Jewish-Christian dialogue entering a “third space” as it leaves its moorings in the European context; and Western Christian feminist theology engaging with Buddhist concepts, and taking its cue from Third World postcolonial theorists. This mirrors the development in today’s world which is commonly referred to in terms of “globalization”, and calls for an intercultural theology.

As a contribution to intercultural theology, this dissertation, has mapped the intersection of feminist theology and theology of religions. Experiences from feminist interfaith projects in diverse contexts have been retrieved and made accessible. These projects have been found to provide a methodology for facilitating interfaith and intercultural dialogue, centered on the building of relationships, that can be developed into an ethics for dialogue. Cross-cultural themes in feminist theology, such as difference, otherness and relationality, have been highlighted.
Intercultural theology deals with the question of “to which extent the ‘others’ really differ from ‘us’” and how an understanding of “the other” is possible. I have discussed whether or not it is tenable to talk of “Asian theology”, and found that it is, as long as this is done in terms of contextual theology which embraces a wide range of approaches.

Feminist theologians in the East and in the West largely deal with the same questions concerning the subordination of women in religion and society, and use the same theoretical framework, built on the pioneering efforts of feminists in the West. But there are differences. Asian feminist theology is coloured by its being part of an anti-colonialist liberation movement, and also makes use of indigenous concepts that give a somewhat different approach to some women’s issues. The view of motherhood is a case in point.

Asian feminists sometimes exaggerate the difference between Asian and Western feminisms, but they very consciously choose what they want to appropriate from the Western discourse, and use it contextually. Western feminists would do well to discover the contextual character of their own theologies, and to read Asian feminist theology as a resource in the same way as Asian feminist theologians have been inspired by the Western discourse, so as not to become too parochial.

In other words, feminist theology needs to be intercultural theology, where dialogue between Christian feminists from different parts of the world is as essential as that between feminists from various religious traditions. Likewise, theology of religious difference must be done within the framework of intercultural theology, and with feminism as an indispensable dimension.

“An intercultural feminist theology of religious difference” might sound like an amassment of many big words. But during my work with this dissertation I have come to the conclusion that, to create theology in today’s world, all these dimensions need to be held together.

\[2\text{ Cf. section 1.3 above}\]
Appendix
Interview questions for Case Studies

Would you please introduce yourself?
How did you get involved in this project?
Why did you want to take part in the project?
What were the most important aspects of the project?
Were there any negative aspects/difficulties involved in the project?
What has participating in this project meant to you?
  Change in your understanding of other religions?
  Change in your understanding of your own faith?
  Change in your understanding of society?
How did it effect the project that only women participated?
  Would the project have been different if men had taken part too? In which ways?
  Do you think women relate differently to each other than men do? In which ways? Why?
Did you have any interaction with people of other faiths before you took part in the project? In which ways?
Have you taken part in other forms of interfaith dialogue? If so, was this different? How?
Do you have more interaction with people of other faiths now than before the project?
Why do your think interfaith dialogue is important?
What issues are important to take up in interfaith dialogue?
Are there issues that women find more important than men do in if dialogue?
What is the aim of interfaith dialogue?
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Abraham, Dulcie, 141, 337
accountability, 20, 22, 86, 87, 107, 124, 169, 170, 254, 262, 272, 289
Ahlstrand, Kajsa, 42, 190, 337
Al-Mayarati, Laila, 132
Ammah, Rabiatu, 107, 110
Ansari, Homera, 56, 58, 66, 68, 74, 75, 337, 360, 361, 362
anti-Judaism, 24, 51, 176, 183, 184, 185, 186, 188, 189, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 201, 203, 204, 205, 257, 259, 262, 272, 279, 304
Antone, Hope, 220, 221, 227, 228, 268, 296, 337, Se
Ariarajah, Wesley, 96, 109, 111, 113, 114, 117, 118, 119, 120, 166, 167, 170, 229, 309, 337, 362
asianness, 20, 48, 49, 50, 61, 253, 265, 268
Balthazar, Stella, 210, 211, 218, 223, 338
Bar On, Bat-Ami, 21, 324, 338
Barnes, Michael, 52, 308, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 338
Barton, Mukti, 152, 198, 199, 215, 220, 221, 222, 328, 329, 338
Berger, Peter, 44, 45, 338
Bhabha, Homi K., 50, 198, 259, 265, 276
Bok, Sissela, 128, 134, 167, 362
Borg, Annika, 33, 339
Bourdieu, Pierre, 168, 195, 324, 325, 339
Boys, Mary C., 191, 339
Broitman, Caryn, 108
Burford, Grace G., 178, 339
Chapman, Cynthia R., 223, 224, 270, 339
Chireau, Yvonne, 180, 339
Choi Man Ja, 141, 142, 147
Christ, Carol, 30, 179, 246, 339
Christology, 13, 35, 136, 137, 184, 185, 186, 191, 204, 222, 223, 224, 229, 243, 258, 259, 266, 267, 279, 283, 290, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 333, 339, 343
Condren, Mary, 332

363
Greenberg, Blu, 132, 133, 162, 189, 344
Gross, Rita M., 17, 18, 24, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 201, 281, 282, 304, 306, 310, 344
Grung, Anne Hege, 99, 116, 330, 344
Grushewaya, Irina, 116, 344
Gummel, Gabriele, 187, 192, 344
Gupta, Lina, 213, 345
Hagar, 98, 99, 139, 199, 220, 221, 222, 328, 329, 349, 353, 360
Hammar, Anna Karin, 114, 362
Hampson, Daphne, 123, 124, 126, 127, 128, 129, 134, 167, 345, 362
Harris, Grove, 106, 345
Harris, Harriet, 31, 345
Harrison, Beverly Wildung, 37, 345
Hartmann, Christiane, 116, 345
Hassan, Riffat, 97, 107, 109
Hatfield, Janet, 107, 108
Heelas, Paul, 45, 46, 91, 170, 345
Hellman, Eva, 215, 345
Henry Martyn Institute, 7, 16, 51, 55, 57, 58, 59, 76, 82, 345, 360
Hertig, Young Lee, 208, 345
Heschel, Susannah, 185, 192, 193, 259, 352
Hetata, Sherif, 132
Heuss, Urte, 116, 345
Hick, John, 156, 260, 273, 274, 276, 303, 309, 352, 354
Hiltebeitel, Alf, 212, 342
Hinduism, 11, 13, 43, 48, 59, 62, 78, 85, 87, 142, 147, 214, 216, 271, 283, 301, 343, 347
Hirdman, Yvonne, 32, 345
Hogan, Linda, 30, 31, 345
Höglund, Anna T., 37, 38, 345
Hollenweger, Walter J., 14, 345
hybridity, 259, 265, 268, 270, 278
Ingram, Paul O., 309, 310, 316, 346
intercultural theology, 14, 15, 16, 40, 335
Isasi-Díaz, Ada Maria, 175, 346
Isherwood, Lisa, 346
Islam, 11, 13, 38, 48, 60, 78, 87, 97, 107, 109, 119, 123, 131, 137, 141, 147, 154, 165, 301, 329, 347, 349
Iyer, Lalitha, 58, 61, 67, 69, 70, 73, 75, 76, 77, 83, 86, 346, 361
Jackson, Diana Reed, 50, 101, 159, 163, 360
Jain, Devaki, 17, 18, 50, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 342
Joseph, Pushpa, 150, 216, 346
Judaism, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 193, 195, 312, 314, 315
Kabilsingh, Chatsumarn, 127, 137, 142, 362
Kabo, Rita, 221, 346
Kali, 177, 213, 214, 220, 230, 243, 250, 251, 283, 345, 351, 354, 360
Kamphausen, Erhard, 309, 346
Kampmark, Louise, 36, 37, 90, 360
Kang Nam Soon, 20, 23, 49, 50, 219, 230, 263, 272, 346
Kanyoro, Musimbi, 195, 196, 346
Katoppo, Marianne, 19, 20, 207, 346
Keefe, Alice A., 295, 298, 299, 347
Keller, Catherine, 35, 47, 346, 347
Kerr, David, 26, 347
King, Richard, 42, 43, 49, 347
King, Ursula, 12, 18, 29, 211, 273, 283, 309, 347
Kinukawa, Hisako, 48, 195, 196, 266, 348
Knitter, 155, 309, 327, 331, 348, 350, 352, 354
Knitter, Paul F., 293, 303, 309
Küster, Volker, 14, 15, 16, 18, 253, 342, 348
Lee Park, Sun Ai, 29, 136, 138, 207
Lettini, Gabriella, 242, 280, 349
Levinas, Emmanuel, 308, 311, 312, 313, 316, 317, 344
Levine, Amy-Jill, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 349
Ligo, Arche, 147, 217, 349
Lohre, Kathryn Mary, 51, 102, 103, 159, 360
Lorde, Audre, 27, 247, 293, 349
Lung Ngan Ling, 221, 349
Mananzan, Mary John, 20, 136, 207, 209, 210, 217, 225, 269, 349
mangala, 211, 212
Marcos, Sylvia, 125, 127, 128, 132, 133, 134, 135, 161, 226, 362
margin, 22, 165, 316, 317, 324
marginality, 22, 154, 157, 166, 170, 213, 254, 291, 317, 321, 327
Marglin, Frédérique Apffel, 211, 212, 349
May, John D’Arcy, 349
May, John D’Arcy, 307, 308, 309, 316
McCarthy, Kate, 289, 290, 291, 295, 296, 300, 306, 332, 350
McCaulay, Deborah, 119, 185, 189, 190, 191, 341
Melanchton, Monica, 213, 223, 360
Mernissi, Fatima, 123, 125, 129, 168
messiness, 11, 63, 89, 90, 91, 95, 224, 270, 291, 292, 305, 312, 322
messy, 63, 246, 252
Metti, A., 150, 214, 350
Metz, Kristin, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 350
Mollenkott, Virginia, 18, 50, 97, 350, 351, 356
Monteiro, Evelyn, 17, 149, 350
Moody, Linda A., 14, 350
multiple religious belonging, 38, 44, 111, 180, 278, 324
Musyoni, Wayse, 68, 360
Namala, Annie, 58, 61, 64, 70, 71, 72, 73, 77, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 89, 91, 112, 204, 360, 361
Smith, Wilfred Cantwell, 38, 39, 90, 274, 354
Song, C. S., 29, 48, 49, 265
Speelman, Gé, 50, 158, 162, 227, 332, 354
Sporre, Karin, 243, 251, 354
Stewart, Charles, 41, 354
Suchocki, Marjorie Hewitt, 18, 279, 280, 288, 289, 291, 292, 293, 296, 297, 307, 327, 354
Suh, David Kwang-sun, 217, 355
Sukumar, Deepthi, 58, 61, 65, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 77, 80, 82, 84, 85, 88, 90, 309, 361
Swidler, Leonard, 186, 274, 355
syncretism, 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, 140, 142, 241, 242, 243, 244, 252, 280, 291, 354
Tamez, Elsa, 129, 199, 221, 355
Tanner, Kathryn, 22, 37, 40, 166, 355
Tapia, Elizabeth, 146, 242, 268, 269, 355, 362
Tatman, Lucy, 32, 210, 269, 355
Templeton, Elizabeth, 106, 355
Tetlow, Ruth N. M., 26, 51, 99, 158, 159, 160, 161, 163, 170, 309, 361
theology of religious difference, 260, 261, 271, 327, 328, 329, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335
Thistlethwaite, Susan Brooks, 211, 355
Thunberg, Lars, 241, 355
Topping, Eva Catafygiotu, 201, 356
Trinh T. Minh-ha, 19, 356
Troch, Lieve, 26, 162, 286, 356
Ucko, Hans, 106, 118, 195, 356, 362
Vijayan, Teresa, 142, 143
von Kellenbach, Katharina, 183, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 199, 200, 201, 328, 347
Wacker, Marie-Theres, 191, 193, 194, 353, 356
Wadud, Amina, 179, 180, 261, 356
Wainwright, Elaine, 195, 356
Wansbrough, Ann, 142
Weiler, Gerda, 187, 192, 193, 352
Weissman, Deborah, 108
West, C. S’thembile, 180, 356
Wicca, 105, 106, 129, 165
Wijsen, Frans, 14, 15, 356
Wilfred, Felix, 230, 356
Williams, Delores, 22, 191, 199, 200, 221, 287, 328, 357
Winter, Miriam Therese, 47, 210, 357
wisdom, 39, 64, 81, 87, 98, 143, 144, 213, 223, 230, 241, 243, 245, 255, 301, 334, 357
Wisdom, 98, 148, 177, 213, 223, 230, 258, 267, 300, 301, 304, 334, 340, 344, 351, 356, 358
women’s experience, 30, 39, 175, 189, 264, 279, 288, 289, 291, 294, 306, 317
Wong Wai-ching, 18, 20, 49, 50, 148, 207, 209, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 272, 357
Woodhead, Linda, 45, 46, 91, 170, 345
Yamashita, Akiko, 137, 143, 217, 218, 242, 272, 357
Yeung Kwong-Keung, 48, 50, 357
Yong Ting Yin, 146, 362
Young, Pamela Dickey, 17, 154, 250, 289, 292, 293, 302, 303, 304, 333, 357

Yuasa, Yuko, 218, 358
Yule, Sandy, 217, 358
Zaru, Jean, 108, 124, 132, 133
Zunhammer, Nicole, 185, 192, 358
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