



Review of Heike Walz and David Plüss (eds.),
Theologie und Geschlecht. Dialoge querbeet
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In the second half of the twentieth century, Christian feminists critically addressed gender-neutral concepts of theology and church. Their arguments were not exclusively opposed by men within churches and theology but sometimes taken on. Although the last thirty years witnessed a range of gender-theoretical discussions and a pluralization of perspectives—including the development of critical masculinity studies—until now, it seems, only little cooperation between gender-conscious women and men within the field of theology has developed.

As a starting point in the context of German theology, the publication *Mannsbilder. Kritische Männerforschung und theologische Frauenforschung im Gespräch* (2006) edited by Marie-Theres Wacker and Stefanie Rieger-Goertz can be mentioned. This volume *Theologie und Geschlecht*, edited by Heike Walz and David Plüss, shares the concern of exchange between gender-conscious women and men within the field of theology. The initial point of this book lies in the concrete institutional and social contexts of the formation of the “Netzwerk Geschlechterbewusster Theologie” (Network of Gender-Conscious Theology). The network first met in the context of collegially organized meetings with the slogan “blinde Flecken” [blind spots] in Basel in 2003 (p. 10). This volume documents the first output from this network for the general public and is the first publication in the new series *Dialoge querbeet*. It offers a collection of articles by 24 authors, most of whom are located in Switzerland and Germany, two in the USA, one in Argentina, and one in Austria. Most contributors belong to the church or academic-theological settings. Their denominational background is mainly Protestant.

The volume starts with Heike Walz’s substantial introduction. More than simply an overview, Walz discusses the existing research in the field of theological gender studies, the previous exchange between feminist approaches and men’s studies within the field of theology, and further questions perspectives on that issue. The subtitle of Walz’s introduction is *blinde Flecken*, which she uses in reference to the already mentioned reasons for the formation of the network. But Walz also wants to cover several issues that have been neglected so far by research. She mentions the necessity of viewing men as gendered subjects (pp. 12, 14–15), the controversies about female delinquent and privileged women (pp. 12–13, 17–18), pleas for a pluralization of female perspectives (pp. 13, 17–18), and the reception of constructivist gender theory within theology (pp. 13–18). Walz addresses subjects that have been extensively discussed within feminist and gender-political contexts since the 1980s and are still of current interest.

Apart from the leitmotif of “blind spots,” of special interest to Walz is the concept of deconstruction by Jacques Derrida—and its further development by

Judith Butler—in the context of gender-theoretical discussions (pp. 12, 15, 17, 19, 29). According to her, this concept offers potential for the network because of its key idea of the indefinability of *Geschlecht*/gender (p. 19). But Derrida's concept of deconstruction is not limited to gender-theoretical matters but deals with questions of truth and essence. It addresses ideas of metaphysics with the aim of deconstructing them. Derrida's theory of deconstruction constitutes no less than a substantial challenge to theology. Walz raises concerns for theological implications when referring to an anti-metaphysical stance (p. 29), but unfortunately she leaves the readers with open questions. Nevertheless, the reader can take away suggestions for further thought about the specific characterizations of the categories gender and religion. With respect to *deconstructivist* understandings of *Geschlecht*/gender, it remains unclear how deconstruction as a theory and method could be fruitfully applied to the field of gender-conscious theology. Reading through the volume one gains the impression that—apart from a few exceptions—“women” and “men” are not only the central subjects and objects of this field but rather the constituent sources for defining *Geschlecht*/gender. Walz herself characterizes her deconstructivist understanding of *Geschlecht*/gender in offering some catchwords like fluidity and indefinability (pp. 17, 19), and she critically discusses the limits of and rivalries between different definitions of *Geschlecht*/gender in specific contexts (p. 14). The volume itself documents those gender-theoretical differences.

Theologie und Geschlecht is structured in five parts, each of which consists of two dialogues discussing a particular issue. Part One (*Theologie und Geschlechterbilder*) negotiates questions concerning different experiences of women and men regarding “birth” (Scheuter, Oldenhage, Borter, Plüss) and “body” (Krondorfer, Standhartinger). Birth as a theological issue is reflected by Sabine Scheuter and Tania Oldenhage in terms of personal and female experiences, overshadowed by gender-specific expectations and dealt with too little pastoral care. Based on this appraisal they introduce some feminist theological conceptions of pregnancy and birth and critically reflect their underlying understandings of femininity. In his response, Andreas Borter complains about the specific female perspective and refers critically to women-centered definitions of family. David Plüss adds his personal experiences regarding the birth of his child and depicts his feelings of pain, helplessness and hope. Both male authors express their general agreement with the relevance of the matter and both demand a broader consideration of fatherhood and male experiences—a claim that Scheuter and Oldenhage do not deny in their response.

Part Two (*Theologie und Geschlechtsidentitäten*) offers discussions of individual and collective identity formation in the context of network-building (Rödiger, Bachmann) and introduces basic ideas for implementing queer theory into the field of theology (Schippert, Söderblom, Brinkschröder). Claudia Schippert, Kerstin Söderblom and Michael Brinkschröder introduce their work by explaining “queer” and queer theory, which leaves little room—especially for Schippert—to engage theological considerations. Her remarks are reduced to questions about ethical consequences for queer perspectives. Söderblom offers an exemplary analysis of the film *Fremde Haut—Unter die Haut* by Angelina Maccarone. Both authors demonstrate how queer theory is deeply interlocked with questions of difference beyond the issues of gender and sexuality. Of special interest is the

recurrent mentioning of liberation theology in the context of queer theoretical approaches. Schippert, as well as Söderblom, seem to be affected by this approach. The issue is taken up by Brinkschröder, who offers a critical and differentiated discussion of Schippert's and Söderblom's theoretical and political references, elaborating on similarities and differences between queer theory and liberation theology.

The two dialogues in Part Three (Theologie und Männergeschlecht) deal with "male megalomania" (Walser, Pömper, Rödiger), especially in regard to the masculinity of Jesus, and with different concepts of theological men's studies and deconstructive gender studies (Fischer, Heß). The dialogue between Martin Fischer and Ruth Heß demonstrates how shared interest in gender-conscious theology does not have to start with or lead towards shared concepts of Geschlecht/gender and theology. Their divergent positions, which are both representative of the field of gender-conscious theology, are stated clearly—although Heß is more detailed in her argumentation, but they are not further discussed. Fischer does not fully respond to Heß's offer to take on the challenge of dealing with their differences.

In Part Four (Theologie und Geschlecht im Gottesdienst), issues around gender and liturgy (Plüss, Bieler, Becker) and sermons (Becker, Glasser, Plüss) are introduced. Brigitte Becker reflects on the ambivalence of feminist sermons, which, for her, is caused by the complex situation of communication between the preacher and the listening church community. The relevance of language, which is stressed by Becker, is questioned from a Catholic point of view by Christine Glasser. For Glasser, the idea of the presence of Jesus Christ during a sermon is of great significance and relativizes the importance of the preacher's words. David Plüss takes on the concept of "confessional competence" (pp. 223, 232–233) and links it to the "biographical I," which he argues reflects more accurately Becker's feminist self-conception.

The fifth and last part of the volume (Theologie und Geschlechter-Gerechtigkeiten) negotiates questions of theology and gender justice by means of "education" (Neuhoff, Pömper) and "development" (Chung, Bünker, Bichsel, Kolb). Meehuyn Chung tries to combine her understanding of interwoven relationships between people and ambivalent aspects of knowledge and power within a concept of web-theology. This web-theology is embedded in questions of gender and gender justice because of two aspects: first, for Chung, questions of participation and knowledge accumulation are of special urgency for women; second, the idea of indissoluble connectedness between people and their environment is important in relation to the idea of femininity. In response, Arnd Bünker describes different forms of knowledge and self-organization in Brazilian cities, which he connotes as either "male" (the model of mafia-like knowledge forms; p. 276) or "female" (democratic knowledge; p. 277). Heinz Bichsel problematizes the concept of "development" and Internet use, while Andrea Kolb introduces the example of a Latin-American women's network named "con-spirando," where the Internet is embedded within a social context and primarily functions as a medium for information and advice for young women.

Are these dialogues successful? To answer this question it is important to acknowledge different subjects and perspectives: female and male perspectives, different theological disciplines, different understandings of Geschlecht/gender, and the issue of dialogue between theology and gender theories. The volume

communicates such variety, including competition between different theoretical backgrounds and unease over exclusions. A range of voices is missing: trans-identities are mentioned but not integrated; differences between Europe and Latin-America are not represented; apart from mostly Protestant and a few Catholic perspectives, no other Christian denominations are included. Finally, parts of the volume read more like an introduction into different fields of gender studies while the theological focus seems to drift away—which is a problem that accompanies many disciplinary-based approaches to gender.

Altogether, the volume is—despite the critical remarks—absolutely worth reading. The dialogues take on a number of contemporary issues concerning gender and theology. Mostly, however, they inspire because of their verve, interconnectedness and candor—precisely because of their gaps.

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