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Feminist Exegesis as Liberation Project, Cultural Critique and Cultural Memory Work

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Zusammenfassung:

Der Artikel befasst sich mit feministischer Exegese im größeren Kontext ihrer Legitimation in den akademischen Religionswissenschaften und in der feministischen Forschung; in feministischen und religiösen Bewegungen und Institutionen, und in politischen Systemen, besonders im norwegischen staatlich-feministischen System. Feministische Exegese wurde oft als eigentlich traditionelle Methode dargestellt, die aus feministischen Basisbewegungen heraus entstanden ist. Dies mag für das 20. Jahrhundert zutreffend sein, jedoch ist eine Analyse der Art und Weise, wie sich die Bewegungen und Trends einander immer mehr angleichen, wichtig, um die feministische Exegese, wie wir sie jetzt kennen, überhaupt möglich zu machen. Ich wähle einen Zugang, der von politischen Theorien beeinflusst ist, um das Zusammenspiel der feministischen Exegese mit dem größeren politischen institutionellen System aufzeigen zu können in dem sie sich bewegt. So soll deutlich werden, in welchem hohem Ausmaß die feministische Exegese in ihren akademischen, religiösen und politischen Feldern von solchen Systemen bestimmt und auch ermöglicht wird. Während die feministische Exegese im Bereich der biblischen Forschung häufig eher eine Randerscheinung darstellt, ist im politischen Umfeld des staatlichen Feminismus die biblische Forschung die Randerscheinung; die feministische Exegese hingegen erscheint an dieser Stelle als Methode, die der Bibel einen zeitgenössischen kulturellen Sinn geben kann – und so auch deren Einfluss aufrecht erhält.

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I want to thank the organizers for inviting me to speak on the topics of impact and audience. They bring to the forefront questions about the function and relevance of feminist exegesis. These topics are something I have had to think much more about since I arrived in my current location, the Centre for Gender Research at the University of Oslo. I will therefore answer your challenge by way of some reflections based on experiences from three different “homes” for feminist exegesis. The differences between them are telling and important:

Before my arrival in my current location, I had spent my career at two different institutions: first at the Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo in the 1990-ies. There, feminist exegesis was carried out within the larger context of theology, a theology that was experienced as rather un-attached and open-ended in practice, but whose basic questions, distinctions and agendas were almost exclusively drawn from a Lutheran imagination. The faculty was still very much shaped by the rationale for its existence: providing education for Lutheran ministers in the Norwegian state church. This meant on the one hand that the impact of feminist exegesis on the scholarly community of academic theologians and academics more broadly was rather limited. On the other hand this meant that feminist exegesis had as its constituency feminist present and future ministers (of whom there were and are many) – as well as other feminist women in the church. In addition, the competence of feminist exegetes were in high demand in the church at large, due to the central place the Bible has in Protestant Christianity. As feminist and as exegete I was appointed to the Church of Norway Commission on Women and Gender Equality (a commission that unfortunately no longer exists because of the ideology of “gender mainstreaming”).¹ Because of the peculiarities of Norwegian politics, to which I will return, feminist approaches to Bible and theology have even been seen as *more* (or at least as much) relevant and aligned with the sentiments in the population at large than theology in general! Liberal newspapers write *against* the priesthood in general, but come out in favour of *feminist* priesthood because they are seen to undermine old-fashioned religious authority. One example of this we saw when the first female bishop in the Church of Norway was elected - a feminist biblical scholar, Rosemarie Köhn (elected just after Maria Jepsen, and functioning from 1993). The first woman with a Norwegian doctoral degree in theology was another feminist biblical scholar, Turid Karlsen Seim (Seim 1994). In this regard, the impact of feminist biblical exegesis on women’s lives must be said to have been strong, clear and direct. Although I am currently too far removed to be up to date with recent developments, from my distance the once pioneering and successful feminist exegesis seems to become more and more marginal because it is associated with exegesis, which again is associated with the Bible. The Bible is increasingly left in silence by the church because it is seen as outdated, politically incorrect – and more difficult to access: To study an ancient book written in dead languages requires strong nerve and strong conviction that one will find something worthwhile. That conviction is definitely waning among feminists. To some extent then, one could say that feminist exegesis has been the victim of its own success.

When I came to Sheffield 10 years ago, biblical studies there were carried out in a department of biblical studies within a faculty of arts setting. Cheryl Exum can address the impact of feminist exegesis according to Sheffield's set up on the wider biblical-scholarly community, but let me just mention that it was and is considerable. Exum is not least responsible for this impact herself (Exum 1993; Exum 2007). On the other hand, the impact of feminist exegesis on British women in church and society at large was and is limited. This scholarly setting was thus opposite from the one I came from before. First, feminism is not the same strong social force in Britain as in the Nordic countries. Second, the set-up of the relationship between state and religion means that British religious communities to a much greater extent have become isolated havens for hard-core believers. Unfortunately, gender-conservatism seems to function as one of their identity markers, and then feminist exegesis is not the first thing they are likely to accept from the state universities! Third, this institutionalisation of conservatism implies that there are far fewer women religious leaders on the higher level: Without feminist exegesis, it becomes difficult to argue, for example, for women bishops in a Protestant setting.

This leads me up to my current setting at a centre for interdisciplinary gender research in a state university in a Scandinavian country. How do I as a feminist exegete fit into such a setting? There is no longer anything that requires me to work on the Bible. Thus I have to legitimate not the *feminist* approach, but the fact that I work on the *Bible*. One answer to the question just mentioned is a simple, institutional one: an interdisciplinary research centre also has a space for feminist exegetes. The impact zone would be the academic community at large.

But if you ask the question more in terms of: "Outside of and apart from church and religious structures, what is the function of feminist exegesis?" it becomes harder to answer. If Northern European societies at large consider the Bible an antiquarian remnant, is exegesis just an intellectual play so that we can keep our jobs?

I would say no. First, it might still be a political, judicial critique: Examples of this are the notes that the Centre for Gender Research is entitled to make to government Green Papers (= law proposals) preparing the ground for the passing of new laws through the Norwegian Parliament. When laws with particular gender implications are proposed, we are addressed directly and asked to comment them. Two such instances were the recent (2008-2009) changes in the Gender Equality Act and Working Environment Act with the purpose of reducing gender-discriminating employment practices in religious communities. The centre submitted a lengthy note including feminist exegesis of crucial passages that Christian religious communities have used in order to legitimise their

discrimination against women and homosexuals in employment, and showed how the passages could be read otherwise. What was presented by the religious communities as legislation “against the core of their faith” was shown to be legislation against particular appropriations of the Bible. The legislation was slightly altered, but since the liberty to discriminate against women and homosexuals is still seen as an expression of religious freedom, the human rights of the latter two groups had to yield once more. The dispensation from the Gender Equality Act that religious communities used to enjoy was thus not removed completely, although it became severely limited.²

Feminist exegesis in a non-religious and secular feminist context might also take the form of a broader cultural and academic critique. Again I expect Cheryl Exum to say more about this approach. She has been one of the main exponents of biblical studies and feminist exegesis as cultural studies (Exum and Moore 1998). The Bible has been and still is an important book for feminists to engage with because of the way it is woven into the fabric of Western culture and gender models. Thus it has been an appropriate intellectual task to unearth biblical elements still alive and well in cultural expressions; to expose the vested interests of their interpretation; to expose ways of drawing on the Bible that are potentially harmful for women especially, for gays and lesbians, and, I would say, for men too. Hierarchical gender systems mean less freedom for everyone (Økland 2008). But in some ways the sheer possibility of such critique is a sign that it has already succeeded to a certain extent. Some hundred years ago the penalties for making statements about the possible harm of the Bible were high. Today, the Bible is no longer a book that actively influences gender constructions in society, hence to criticise it is no longer dangerous. The Bible may still function as a repository for engrained gender models, though, which are important enough to expose. I should think this is as true in Scandinavia as in the US as in southern Europe. Thus in the West, feminist exegesis as cultural critique is still an important intellectual task.

But back to the Nordic context and some of the limitations it presents to feminist exegesis today: Feminist exegesis as a liberation project for women who are still at home within the church is clearly epistemologically unpersuasive when carried out within a context where social structures are far more egalitarian than the Bible can ever hope to be. If society at large is relatively gender-equal, it is extremely difficult to find the liberating feminist potential of the Bible. This is why, I think, that feminist liberation theology has never had much of an appeal here and probably could never work. Other aspects of feminist exegesis have greater potential. I will explain what I mean by this:

In general, Nordic feminist exegetes have tended to be less impressed by Paul – or Luke, or other biblical authors – than many of their counterparts elsewhere in the world. I believe the reason is to be found in the Nordic “state feminist” context. The term was coined by political scientist Helga Hernes in her attempt to describe how feminism in the Nordic countries was promoted “from above in the form of gender equality and social policies” (Hernes 1987: 153). Since then, governments of all shades have continued to execute feminist agendas and interests through the 1990-ies and until today without major controversy, and it has become common to speak of Norway and also Sweden as state feminist systems. In political science terms, the state feminist model is a further development of the Nordic welfare state model, which again was a development of the social democratic model adopted elsewhere in Europe (UK, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Spain), but which today is on the wane. If in a state feminist system equality is the highest value and even the government promotes it, it means that the standards of gender equality and justice are very high – as they should be! Equality should mean equality and not just “slightly less discriminatory”. One could still remark that there is a difference between ideal and social reality, and that it will take a while before reality catches up with the ideal. Still there is no doubt that high equality standards have changed also social reality in a very profound way.

But when the standards are high, it is all the more difficult for the poor biblical authors to match up. Paul simply doesn’t make the bar! Whereas if you perform your research in a context where women are fired when they get pregnant, have two weeks maternity leave and perhaps the fathers have no leave at all, where women are excluded from religious offices, obviously such a context puts the biblical authors who wrote from within their deeply patriarchal culture in a far more favourable light! I believe it’s as easy – and complicated – as that, but instead of discussing material conditions and political contexts we often pretend that these are interpretive differences in how we exegete the wording of the biblical text, or what kind of feminist theological “school” we belong to. In my view that is the reason why turning the spotlight back on ourselves may actually be the scholarly more responsible, transparent option. Of course, as good hermeneuticians we still know that the meaning in the biblical text is never fixed, but open to re-interpretation and transformation. But such re-interpretation is not without limits. The state feminist system puts the limits of possible feminist re-interpretations and transformations in sharp relief.

The Bible has not been very central in developing the state feminist political system. If anything, this political project has eliminated as many biblical elements as possible

from the social fabric, and it has undoubtedly given women a better deal for that. And as mentioned, this development may already have taken some of the vitality and steam out of the feminist-exegesis-as-cultural-critique project. So what remains is the feminist-exegesis-as-memory project:

Starting in feminism rather than in the Bible, feminist exegesis can contribute to broader feminist scholarship by demonstrating how feminism as a current of thought developed out of discussions over among other things the Bible. This is what we explore in the Centre-based project *Canonicity, Gender and Critique: The Hermeneutics of Feminism and Canon Transformations*.³ The project is sponsored by the Norwegian Research Council's programme for gender studies (of course the Research Council in Norway has its own funding programme for gender studies!).

Canon and history are two entities that feminist as well as poststructuralist theories have tried to ignore and leave behind. Feminists are uneasy about the implicit power claims inherent in canons and canonization processes, which have made it seem more appealing to start from the blank slate. But is that possible? As historically minded scholars we know that it probably is not, but then what do we do with the repressed past? It is indeed a wiser route to remember, re-interpret and relegate parts of it to the archive (Assmann 2008).

It may seem as if I contradict myself here since I stated above that there are limits to re-interpretation. This does not mean that re-interpretation is impossible or undesirable within the given limits. It is still important to point out that the allegedly male apostle Junias of Romans 16 was in fact the female Junia. But it is also important to acknowledge that this re-interpretation neither places her among the Twelve, nor secures the grammatical uncertainty concerning her "apostleship". There are limits to what re-interpretation can do and still be called scholarship (Brooten 1977; Cervin 1994).

Canonisation and remembrance belong very closely together. A canon provides a structure of remembrance for something that a community considers important. The Bible functions perhaps as a container of remembrance. The Centre-based canonicity project does from the outset diverge from the common understanding of feminism as designating only the most recent wave of attempts (post-enlightenment) to overturn gender hierarchies, and includes also previous attempts (e.g. "Querelle des Femmes"), especially those found in religious revolutionary movements (such as the dissenters of the 17th century). The notion that only the modern feminist movement qualifies as feminism properly speaking, is in itself a symptom of the lack of a historicised self-understanding in most current gender theory that we see as one of our goals to address.

The result of feminism's refusal to remember has been that numerous feminist insights and advances won in one generation were lost for the next.

This historical insight has highly relevant implications: If canon is a container and a structure of remembrance, as long as feminists avoid forming such structures one easily ends up in amnesia and the feminist project of historical change is undermined.⁴

In this perspective, there is an ocean of possibilities for feminist exegetes. They can contribute to a broader project of tracking and tracing feminist engagements with the Bible historically. They can demonstrate how exactly earlier feminists have interpreted the texts, and how through such interpretations they have not only changed the meanings of the texts over the centuries, but also contributed to de-centering the Bible. And by the same token they have also carved out a space for the current of thought called "feminism". Which in due course developed into a political movement, which in turn gave rise to the political system of "state feminism" in whose time and age we live now ... What comes next? It MUST be the epistemological revolution.

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¹ Gender mainstreaming is a political and/or academic strategy to integrate gender perspectives into mainstream politics and research rather than dealing with gender separately and in its own right. According to the mainstreaming approach, attention to gender and issues of equality are central to all activities/research, not just to activities/research dealing with women. While this is undoubtedly correct, a “mainstreaming” approach has in practice frequently led to a disappearance of gender perspectives: “everyone” is in theory responsible for integrating it but no one has a special responsibility to provide competence and monitor developments.

² The Comment can be found here (in Norwegian):

http://www.stk.uio.no/til_nedlasting/H%F8ring%20NOU2008_1%20kvinner%20og%20homofile%20i%20tro.pdf

The Comment was later published in the *Norwegian Journal of Gender Research* in a slightly revised form (Økland and Halsaa 2008).

³ See webpage: <http://www.stk.uio.no/English/canonicity.html> and <http://www.stk.uio.no/forskning/prosjekter/kanon.html#Anchor-Paraplyprosjekt-43793>.

⁴ I am of course not talking about all feminist research, acknowledging very much the work of feminist historians. Judith Bennett for example, recently has argued along very similar lines.

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