

**REREADING THE BIBLE:  
A DIALOGUE WITH WOMEN THEOLOGIANS FROM  
LATIN AMERICA, AFRICA AND ASIA**

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To read the Bible as Motswana African woman is to read a Western book and to relive painful equation of Christianity with civilization.<sup>1</sup>

Is the Bible a western or a universal book? Is it a patriarchal book or does it also have a liberating message for women? The Bible is still a unifying source of Christian theology across cultural borders, not in the last place thanks to its presupposed authority. But its very concept of authority gets questioned in multicultural and multireligious contexts with a plurality of holy scriptures. At the same time the biblical canon is vigorously under discussion because of its androcentric character.

These issues bearing in mind, I will portray in this article women theologians from three different continents.<sup>2</sup> Elsa Tamez, a Mexican (born 1950), is Professor of Biblical Studies at the Universidad Bíblica Latinoamericana in San José, Costa Rica. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, born in Ghana in 1934, has worked for the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva and the African Conference of Churches (ACC). She was on several occasions a visiting scholar in Europe and the USA.<sup>3</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, Hong Kong Chinese by birth (1952), currently teaches in Cambridge, Massachusetts. First I shall give a short introduction to the particular ways each of them reads the Bible, especially how they understand the authority of the Bible. I shall then discuss commonalities, divergences and cross-fertilizations between their hermeneutical concepts. In this dialogue the western theologian is the fourth silent participant. Issues, which intrigue me as western listener, will be raised in the last section.

Whereas Elsa Tamez rereads stories of both parts of the Christian Bible as a biblical scholar, Mercy Amba Oduyoye is using biblical phrases to express her anthropological and ecclesiological interests, while Kwok Pui-lan's focus lies on hermeneutics.

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<sup>1</sup> Musa W. Dube, *Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, St. Louis MO: Chalice Press, 2000, 11,13

<sup>2</sup> For more biographical information: Virginia Fabella, M.M., *Beyond Bonding. A Third World Women's Theological Journey*, Manila: Institute of Women's Studies, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye has received an honorary doctoral degree in theology from the University of Amsterdam (UvA) in 1991.

*Elsa Tamez: Women Rereading the Bible*

The Mexican theologian Elsa Tamez<sup>4</sup> deliberately gives attention to often neglected and unnoticed biblical women such as Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Sara. In a worship service at the first general assembly of the fifth conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Women Theologians (EAT-WOT) in New Delhi in 1981, she compared Hagar to women in the Third World.<sup>5</sup> Hagar, who is in the margin of the salvation history, suffers like many women in the Third World from a threefold oppression. She is discriminated because of her sex (as a woman), because of her class (as a slave), and because of her race (as an Egyptian) and thus she is the 'oppressed of the oppressed'. Yet, Tamez points out that a great future was promised to her and her son.

The first – predominantly male – generation of liberation theologians primarily used sociological tools in referring to and selecting a certain canon of biblical texts. Thus, they took the story of the Exodus, the Prophets, and the historical Jesus. Tamez, however, interprets texts that within the context of liberation theology are considered rather unpopular such as the letters of Paul, the letter of James or Qohelet. In her doctoral dissertation she challenges the doctrine of justification. As a Protestant theologian she asks whether this Protestant formula that was inherited from American and European missionaries, could be of any interest for Latin America, a continent suffering under economic debt. It is difficult to understand the message of justification of the sinner in a setting where people suffer deadly from the consequences of sin and injustice.<sup>6</sup> In a context like Latin America this would seem as if God were a God of injustice. Paul himself had been imprisoned unjustly by the Romans. When he suffered with his own body under the destructive logic of the Roman Empire, the forensic vocabulary of the Apostle turned into political language. Paul who was humiliated from bodily tortures called for liberty (Gal 5:1). God's justice stands up against the injustice of the world (Rom 1:18). In a Third World context, the Mexican theologian writes that justification must be interpreted as "God's solidarity with the excluded."<sup>7</sup> In this way it becomes a liberating message with social and cultural impacts. In her analysis Tamez shows that in the ongoing social and political struggle against oppressive structures in times of neo-liberalism and globalisation, it is

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Elsa Tamez, Sun Ai Park, et al., 'Worship Service: This Hour of History', in: *Irruption of the Third World. Challenge to Theology*, ed. by Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis Books) 1983, 181-187, 183-185.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Elsa Tamez, Sun Ai Park, et al., 'Worship Service: This Hour of History', in: *Irruption of the Third World. Challenge to Theology*, ed. by Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis Books) 1983, 181-187, 183-185.

<sup>6</sup> Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by faith from a Latin American Perspective*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Elsa Tamez, Art. Justification, in: *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. by Virginia Fabella, and R.S. Sugirtharajah, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000, 116-118.

necessary to read the Bible anew.

Elsa Tamez' early investigation in the semantic field of 'oppression' in the Bible can be regarded as a classical exegetical work of liberation theology. In the 1980s and 1990s she called herself a feminist liberation theologian,<sup>8</sup> underlining her twofold hermeneutical presupposition: Together with her male colleagues and teachers she asserted to be stressing God's option for the poor. But she also saw herself influenced by her experiences as woman in a context of 'machismo'. In her view the Bible is liberating for the poor in general, yet women have to struggle with texts which are exclusive in character and interpretation. Hermeneutics of suspicion affects thus both interpretation and text itself. Mainstream interpretation of biblical texts often enforces the segregation of women in church and society, but certain biblical texts themselves are already exclusive for women. Hence Tamez encourages women to reread the Bible in the light of their experiences of oppression.<sup>9</sup> This process of gaining distance and reading anew may be controversial to ways men have read the Bible throughout history. The hermeneutics of suspicion affect the biblical texts as well. Misogynist texts, which legitimate the subordination of women as I Cor 14:34, can no longer be regarded as authoritative: ["Women are called, therefore, to deny the authority of those readings that harm them".<sup>10</sup> Yet, does this not imply a general rejection of the Bible because the text itself incorporates a critical principle, as shown for example with the Pauline letters?<sup>11</sup>

*Mercy Amba Oduyoye: Constructing an African Theology with the help of Biblical notes and Akan proverbs*

For several decades Mercy Amba Oduyoye has promoted the role of women in liberation movements, in church and in Theology.<sup>12</sup> Her paper held at the International Conference of EATWOT in Delhi in 1981 under the general theme 'Irruption of the Third World' was programmatic. As an African Women Theologian she proclaimed the "irruption within the irruption".<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Elsa Tamez, *Und die Frauen? Befreiungstheologen stehen Rede und Antwort. Mit einem Vorwort von Luise Schottroff*, Münster: Liberación, 1990, 185 and idem, 'Die feministische Hermeneutik der Befreiung', in: idem, *Visionen in Zeiten messianischer Dürre. Texte aus Lateinamerika*, Münster: CIR, 1997, 19-34, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Elsa Tamez, 'Women's Rereading of the Bible', in: *With Passion and Compassion. Third World Women Doing Theology*, edited by Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye Maryknoll: Orbis 1988, 173-180.

<sup>10</sup> Tamez, *Women's Rereading*, 176.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Tamez, *Women's Rereading*, 176 and id., *Women's lives*, 59.

<sup>12</sup> Dorothea Erbele, 'Der Aufbruch im Aufbruch. Die ghanaische Theologin Mercy Amba Oduyoye', in: *Evangelische Kommentare* 30 (8/1997) 453-455.

<sup>13</sup> Oduyoye, 'Reflections from a Third World Woman's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies', in: *Irruption of the Third World*, 246-255, 247.

The title of Oduyoye's collection of essays *Hearing and Knowing* is an abbreviated form of the words of the Samaritan woman in John 4:42: "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world!". She reads this in the sense that God has revealed himself directly to the African people and that the African History and the early history of the Bible are closely connected. In order to demonstrate the closeness and indeed familiarity of both, the biblical and the African traditions, Oduyoye tells a story of her school days when she was pupil at a mission school. There, Proverbs proved to be their favourite biblical book, since it gave rise to a funny game in which they converted an Akan saying into King James language and even invented and assigned chapter and verse numbers.<sup>14</sup> This clearly shows, she claims, that African proverbs may reflect Christian ways of thinking<sup>15</sup> and vice versa biblical sayings may converge with African ones.

Jesus' call in Luke 8 *Thalita qumi!* addressed to the daughter of Jarius, is translated by Oduyoye and her Nigerian colleague Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, as "Women of Africa arise!".<sup>16</sup> This biblical quote has become the slogan of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, founded in 1989. The Logo of the Circle depicts a kneeling woman who is about to respond to the call of Jesus to arise.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, a selection of essays for the first Biennial African Institute was edited under the title: *The Will to Arise*<sup>18</sup>. Mercy Amba Oduyoye's Bible quotes are short and often her questions or exclamations stress the dynamic power. They symbolize her visionary elements for an African Theology.

*Kwok Pui-lan: Reading the Biblical Canon in the midst of an Inter-Religious Plurality of Scriptures in Asia*

The title of Kwok Pui-lan's book on hermeneutics "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World,"<sup>19</sup> indicates the way she understands the Bible.

<sup>14</sup> Oduyoye, 'Calling the Church to Account. African Women and Liberation', in: *Ecumenical Review* 47 (1995) 479-489, 480.

<sup>15</sup> Resurrection, which is a central Christian topic is revealed in an Akan proverb: 'Should God die I would die' (Cf. Oduyoye, *Spirituality of Resistance*, 162).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. (the title of) the article from Martha Frederiks, 'Miss Jairus Speaks. Developments in African Feminist Theology', in: *Exchange* 32,1 (2003) 66-82, the article gives a introduction to some themes and persons in African feminist theology.

<sup>17</sup> *Thalita, qumi! Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians*, 1989. Story told by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, Ibadan 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, *The Will to Arise. Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992 (2<sup>nd</sup> 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995. Dorothea Erbele-Küster, 'Eine interreligiöse Dekonstruktion des biblischen Kanons. Die Theologin Kwok Pui-lan liest die Bibel im Kontext der Religionen Asiens', in: *Daß Gott eine große Barmherzigkeit habe*, (Festschrift for Gunda Schneider-Flume),

'Non-biblical world' refers to the multi-religious context in Asia where Christians are in an absolute minority situation. In China they count for less than 5% of the population. With regard to the plurality of Holy Scriptures and to the long tradition of hermeneutics in Asia, Kwok insists that Christians are asked to question their western conception of truth and hermeneutics. In an early statement she underlines the ecumenical importance of the Bible:

Those post-Christian feminists who try to move away from the biblical religion... tend to alienate themselves from global sisterhood because the Bible is an important part of our common 'heritage' and 'language' cutting across cultural and socio-political diversities.<sup>20</sup>

The Bible is a common tradition which wo/men from different contexts share with each other and which makes consequently dialogue or community possible. At the same time she claims the Bible as Asian heritage. Nevertheless the aim of Kwok's postcolonial reading is to discover the Bible with Asian eyes beyond the western perspective. In her interpretation of the Syro-Phoenician woman in Math 15:2-28 and Marc 7:24-30 she unmasks the abuse of this text. According to an anti-Jewish model of the history of salvation, the text often served in mission history as a paradigm for submissive conversion. For Kwok, as an Asian, the way the gentile woman addresses Jesus and vice versa is of utmost interest.<sup>21</sup> In the story the pagan woman begs Jesus to drive out the demon of her daughter. The narrative consists of a web of differences: Jewish homeland/foreign land, inside/outside, Jewish/Gentiles, woman/disciples. Otherness is stressed in multiple ways: the other as woman, as pagan etc. Instead of assuming, as most commentators do, that the Syro-Phoenician woman became a Christian, Kwok states that nothing is said about her conversion. In the way the story is told, the cultural and religious identity of the woman is respected.

As an Asian Christian theologian she tries to bring into dialogue two different stories: the biblical story and the Asian story.<sup>22</sup> Hence two acts of imagination have to be performed. First, it has to be established how the ancient biblical world was alike, and second, how the Bible might address the questions of contemporary Asia. Thus Kwok questions the biblical stories as whether they, for example, shed light on occasions such as the massacre of the Chinese students on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 1989, where thousands of them lost their lives in the struggle for freedom and democracy. Yet for her not only

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ed. by Doris Hiller and Christine Kress, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2001, 281-288 and Loraine MacKenzie Shepherd, *Feminist Theologies for a Postmodern Church. Diversity, Community, and Scripture* (American University Studies, Series VII, Theology and Religion Vol.219) New York: Lang, 2002, 77-106.

<sup>20</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, 'The Feminist Hermeneutics of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: An Asian Feminist Response,' *East Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol 3 (1985) 147-153, 148.

<sup>21</sup> Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 71-83.

<sup>22</sup> Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 12.

the Bible interprets the Asian history, it is as well the other way round. The courage of the young people in the resistance movement reveals the reality of resurrection.

In the process of re-writing and re-telling the biblical salvation history, the Asian myths and stories and the biblical stories get intertwined. Kwok's aim is not to maintain a hierarchical distinction between text and context, or between the biblical text and other texts. Consequently scripture is not a silent book but a "talking book," underlining the revelatory power.<sup>23</sup> In the process of dialogical imagination she also wants the oral tradition to be taken seriously. Hence she tries to proclaim a new model of scripture that also includes non-written forms.

### *Other Ways of Reading the Bible: An Intercultural Dialogue*

After having portrayed the three women I shall illuminate the 'otherness' of the ways these women understand the Bible in order to develop tools for an intercultural hermeneutics.

1. *Other Ways of Womanhood* – The Women's Commission of EATWOT, founded in 1983, worked as an intercultural forum from its early beginnings. Not the assumption of a universal female sex was the impulse for the Women's Commission but the different experiences of being a woman, of being excluded from certain positions in church and society, suffering from poverty, and of being segregated and violated. The identities of the women portrayed above are multi-faceted. Mercy Amba Oduyoye states: "I am first and foremost an Akan, a member of a matrilineal society speaking the language of Akan .... In fact it is as an African that I am Christian."<sup>24</sup>

The role models (gender) depend on the specific cultural, religious and political background. Motherhood and family play an important role in Africa. Oduyoye depicts mothering as a positive strategy for community life that should be practiced by women and men.<sup>25</sup> African women normally feel quite uneasy with the label 'feminist'<sup>26</sup> as they regard it as western term depicting only first world women situations, nevertheless Oduyoye uses it. The

<sup>23</sup> Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Oduyoye, 'The Empowering Spirit', in: *Lift Every Voice. Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. by Susan Brooks Thistethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990, 245-258, 245.

<sup>25</sup> Oduyoye, 'The African Family as Symbol of Ecumenism', in: *Evangelische Revue* 43 (1991) 465-478; id., 'Feminist Theology in an African Perspective', in: *Paths of African Theology*, ed. by Rosino Gibellini, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994, 166-181; esp. 176; id., *Daughters of Anowa. African Women and Patriarchy*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995 and id., 'Transforming Power: Paradigms from the Novels of Buchi Emecheta', in: *Talitha cum! Theologies of African Women*, ed. by Nyambura J. Njoroge and Musa W. Dube, Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2001, 222-244.

<sup>26</sup> Oduyoye, 'Feminist Theology', 167-170.

women do not opt for a universal concept of womanhood or an essentialist conception of the female sex. It is not the experience of sameness which unites women doing theology, but the experience of being regarded as the other/of otherness.

2. *From a Hermeneutics of Suspicion to a Deconstruction of the Authority of the Text* – Even though Tamez and Kwok concede that some biblical texts are oppressive, they do not abandon or reject the Bible as a whole, due to its patriarchal character.<sup>27</sup> Tamez struggling with the authority of misogynist texts states, “that those biblical texts that reflect patriarchal culture and proclaim women’s inferiority and their submission to men are not normative.”<sup>28</sup> However, she sees as well the need to “reformulate the principle of biblical authority.”<sup>29</sup> As a liberationist feminist the central message of the Bible is liberating for her. The Asian theologian questions the sacredness and authority of the canon generally. Kwok demands to demythologise and to deconstruct the Bible as canon.<sup>30</sup> She claims that the authority is rooted in the liberation process:

The critical principle lies not in the Bible itself, but in the community of women and men who read the Bible and, through their dialogical imagination, appropriate it for their own liberation.<sup>31</sup>

Thus the concept of text shifts from a scriptural text to a living texture.

3. *‘We are the text’* – In the late 1990s Elsa Tamez criticism concerning the text becomes sharper and more outspoken: ‘If women’s experience is a major resource for the hermeneutical process of doing theology and reading the Bible, it is a logical next step to state that women’s lives contain divine revelation’.<sup>32</sup> This statement might sound provocative to Protestant scholars who are trained in the Western tradition of self-sufficiency of the Bible. But Tamez is still obligated to the Protestant appraisal of scripture.<sup>33</sup> Relating the sacred text to women’s lives as sacred text is a mutual fulfilment: when women gain back their dignity, their lives are fulfilled and the sacred text is

<sup>27</sup> Oduyoye does not discuss the issue of the canon; for a critical introduction on the African Feminist positions in general cf. Frederiks, ‘Miss Jairus Speaks’, 77-80.

<sup>28</sup> Tamez, *Women’s Rereading*, 176. Cf. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone. The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Boston: Beacon, 1984, X: “A feminist hermeneutics cannot trust or accept Bible and tradition simply as divine revelation. Rather it must critically evaluate them as patriarchal articulations...”

<sup>29</sup> Tamez, *Women’s Rereading*, 177.

<sup>30</sup> Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 30.85.

<sup>31</sup> Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Tamez, ‘Women’s Lives as Sacred Text’, *Concilium*, 1998, 57-63, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Tamez, ‘Women’s Lives as Sacred Text’, 62: The written sacred text stands above the woman text.

shown to be divine in this revelation.<sup>34</sup> Within the hermeneutical circle of relating text and context, the biblical text remains superior for her. In Kwok's dialogical model, however, no qualitative difference between the text and the context seems to exist.<sup>35</sup> The text is no longer a static concept. Or, as the Korean woman theologian Chun Hyun Kyung puts it: "we are the text".<sup>36</sup> Those stories that promulgate the struggle for liberation are called revelatory or canonical.<sup>37</sup>

Kwok wants to "re-write the script and re-cast the biblical drama, giving women more active roles."<sup>38</sup> Although Oduyoye does not discuss bible hermeneutics at length, she has always been treating biblical stories alike. Her struggle is to re-enact biblical stories. She took the question of the women going to Jesus' grave "Who will roll the stone away?" as slogan for the *Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women*, addressing the difficulties which have to be overcome. Oduyoye's answer is: 'We will roll the stone away!'<sup>39</sup>, inviting men and women to take part in the human responsibility of caring for all life. This dialogical model and method of interpretation presupposes that the Bible is endowed with a plurality of meanings and of voices.

4. *From Indigenisation towards an Intercultural or Multifaith Hermeneutics* – Oduyoye describes the problem as follows: 'we can say that Christianity has converted the African people to a new religion without converting their culture.'<sup>40</sup> But theologians promoting indigenisation or inculturation<sup>41</sup> get in

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Tamez, 'Women's Lives as Sacred Text', 61.63. Or as Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone*, xiii puts it negatively: "if we claim that oppressive patriarchal texts are the Word of God then we proclaim God as a God of oppression and dehumanization".

<sup>35</sup> Kwok Pui-lan's position is in sharp contrast to a hierarchical model like that of Karl Barth. He warns of annihilation between tradition (context) and text (id. KD I/2, 607). In his concept the authority of scripture supersedes the authority of the church (cf. Antje Fetzter, *Tradition im Pluralismus. Alasdair McIntyre und Karl Barth als Inspiration für christliches Selbstverständnis in der pluralen Gesellschaft* [NTDH 32] Neukirchener-Verlag, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, New York: Orbis, 1990, 111: "The text of God's revelation was, is, and will be written in our bodies and our peoples' everyday struggle for survival and liberation.... Our life is the text, and the Bible and church tradition are the context which sometimes becomes the reference for our own ongoing search for God."

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christians Origins*, New York: Crossroad, 1983, 32 and id., *Bread not Stone*, 14

<sup>38</sup> Kwok, 'Reflection on Women's Sacred Scriptures', in: *Concilium* (1998/3) 105-112, 109.

<sup>39</sup> Oduyoye, *Who will roll the stone away? The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women*, Geneva: WCC 1990, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Oduyoye, *Calling the Church to Account*, 481.

<sup>41</sup> Kwok does not differentiate between indigenization and inculturation. Inculturation, however, considers neither the Gospel nor the text as fixed, but operates with a dynamic

trouble by questions such as: in which culture –high or low, male or female– the gospel should be inculturated? This model takes a universal kernel or truth for granted, which could be wrapped in different cultural fashions, whereas in a contextual model text and context have to be continuously related to each other.<sup>42</sup> The process is even complicated by the rise of a global western culture in postcolonial times. Christendom has been rooted in Third World contexts for such a long time, bringing forth the effect that many people are alienated from the culture of their ancestors. Thus it is important to develop, as Kwok claims, a “critical hermeneutic to demystify the claims of a homogeneous national culture, debunk the romanticizing of a patriarchal past, and expose violence done to women.”<sup>43</sup> Kwok and Oduyoye unmask the myth that Christianity has brought liberation to African /Asian women or humanity to wo/men alike.<sup>44</sup>

Many Third World women theologians criticize the inculturation model. Indigenisation, also for Kwok, seems to be obsolete, since it was often abused in mission history.<sup>45</sup> But all the above sketched theologians are looking for liberating roots of their own culture and religion. Although the interpretation process of the Asian myths was often dominated by males (just as in the case of the Bible), Kwok takes the stories told by women to interpret the Bible.<sup>46</sup> Her intercultural reading of the Bible finally leads her to multi-faith hermeneutics:

The Bible must also be read from the perspective of other faith traditions. Multi-faith hermeneutics looks at ourselves as others see us, so that we may be able to see ourselves more clearly.<sup>47</sup>

### *Learning from other ways of Reading the Bible*

In Euro-American wo/men circles the reception of Third World Women theologians is still at its beginnings.<sup>48</sup> There has been a certain cross-cultural

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concept of culture (cf. Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ. Intercultural Theology*, London: SCM, 2001, 20-24, esp. 23f).

<sup>42</sup> Volker Küster, *Theologie im Kontext. Zugleich ein Versuch über die Minjung-Theologie*, (SIMSVD 62) Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1995, 39-52, esp. 48-52.

<sup>43</sup> Kwok, Art. ‘Bible, Third World Women’, in: *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, 27-29, 28.

<sup>44</sup> Oduyoye, *Calling the Church to Account*, 479 and id., *Knowing and Hearing*, 73.

<sup>45</sup> Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 57f.65. Likewise the contributions of Gomang Seratwa Niloedibe-Kuswani and Dora R. Mbuwayesango, in: *Other Ways of Reading. African Woman and the Bible*, ed. by Musa Dube, Geneva/Atlanta 2001 are critical towards inculturation (cf. the review of the author in: *Exchange* 32 [2003] 278-280).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, IX: „When women study the Bible, we do not read from a written text. Instead, we share our stories, songs, and dreams“.

<sup>47</sup> Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 92 (thesis 8) in bold letters.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. for example the early overview articles in *Exchange* 47 (1987) on ‘Asian women doing theology’; in *Exchange* 48 (1987) on ‘Latin American women and South African

exchange for instance between the works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a European, teaching in North-America and the ideas especially of African-American/Womanist Theologians. Schüssler Fiorenza's strive to reconstruct the female impact in the early origins of Christianity have had a great influence on Kwok and Tamez. Vice versa Schüssler Fiorenza gets more and more aware of the impact of race and class for her/our doing theology.<sup>49</sup> Otherness seems to be the intriguing point of departure for all our investigations. Having executed this intercultural comparison between Third World women, my own hermeneutical position becomes marked off and questioned. Last but not least the fictitious dialogue opens new possibilities to reconceptualize the biblical canon in at least three considerations.

1. *Otherness* – Trying to describe otherness is tricky. To begin with, my point of view is marked by the western exegetical and feminist discourse. Who differs from whom, in which respect and from which point of view? Yet is it at all possible to describe the other? Thus the otherness of reading does not only refer to the otherness between First and Third World women or that between women and men, but also to the otherness among Third World women theologians. First wave feminism in western theology tended to universalise their feminist perspective and to mark boundaries between men and women, thus taking the risk of again promoting gender clichés. Looking at the otherness in women's experiences and ways of reading the Bible we have to realize diversity within feminism.<sup>50</sup>

Interreligious and intercultural aspects are found within one's own identity. Otherness has thus to be taken as starting point. A multireligious and multicultural context changes the reading of the Bible. Differences are not annihilated and tensions are taken as challenge. Probably one of the most difficult challenges for multifaith hermeneutics is to see the Bible through the lens of other religions and cultures, thus to be interpreted by the other.

2. *Realizing our western point of view* – Reading the text with the eyes and the body of wo/men who are the "Other" makes things more complicated. The authority of the text becomes questioned twice: externally by wo/men and internally by the text itself, as the critical principle lies inside and outside the Bible. This new model of reading is not just a new version of the western search for a canon within the canon. It criticizes the authority of the Bible and goes beyond the understanding of the canon as a singular self-sufficient text.

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women doing theology' (cf. especially the one by Leny Lagerwerf) and Doris Strahm, *Vom Rand in die Mitte. Christologie aus der Sicht von Frauen in Asien, Afrika und Lateinamerika*, Luzern: Exodus, 1997.

<sup>49</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone*, XIV.

<sup>50</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Reading the Bible as Equals', in: Musimbi R:A: Kanyoro (ed.), *In Search of a Round Table. Gender, Theology & Church Leadership*, Geneva: WCC, 1997, 57-70, esp. 58-63.

Women's struggles for life are seen not just as the criteria for relevance of biblical texts they are regarded as texts. Hence the claim for the involvement of the reader in the process of understanding the Bible which is central to reader response criticism and receptionist aesthetics gets a different accentuation.<sup>51</sup>

In the western tradition we often have taken the Bible as a western book not asking the question whether it is addressed to us. Kwok for example struggles whether the Bible is or can ever be an Asian book<sup>52</sup> as it was used as oppressive tool in Asia and secondly how this book may be related to other scriptures. At least reading Bible interpretations from wo/men theologians stemming from the so called Third World, we are confronted with the western colonial interpretation history of these texts.<sup>53</sup>

3. *Other Ways of Reading question the Bible as Canon* – We have first of all to realize that the biblical canon reflects a historical process in a certain androcentric religious community.<sup>54</sup> It is however not adequate to respond to the historically male shaped canon with a female counterpart which would raise the old and new problems. The question raised at the beginning: whether the Bible is still a shared ecumenical point of reference, may be answered with 'yes', however its authority is highly disputed and it is no longer the only exclusive point of reference.<sup>55</sup> Maybe Kwok Pui-lan's most critical post-colonial way of dealing with this question may show us liberating ways to proceed. She deconstructs the authority of the canon which is just an integral part of her endeavour to discover the Bible in the non-biblical World. As the critical principle does not manifest in the Bible alone, it seems necessary to re-read our texts and contexts, in order to discover liberating and oppressive strands in both of them.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Dorothea Erbele-Küster, *Lesen als Akt des Betens. Eine Rezeptionsästhetik der Psalmen* (WMANT 87) Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Kwok, *Discovering the Bible*, 11: "If other people can only define truth according to the western perspective, then christianization really means westernization."

<sup>53</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Reading the Bible as Equals*, 67, for instance unmasks in dialogue with Kwok Pui-lan's interpretation of the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman her own Euro-American and apologetic point of view.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Phyllis A. Bird, Art. 'The Authority of the Bible', in: *NIB* Vol.1 (1994) 33-64, 44: "the canons of both Judaism and Christianity reflect the views of the dominant parties and the survivors."

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone*, 14: "In this process of feminist critical evaluation and assessment, the Bible no longer functions as authoritative source but as a resource for women's struggle for liberation."

<sup>56</sup> Parts of this article have been presented at the IIMO conference on Intercultural Reading of the Bible in Utrecht/The Netherlands on 20<sup>th</sup> of November 2002 and at the ESWTR conference on Holy Texts: Authority and Language in Soesterberg/The Netherlands on 19<sup>th</sup> of August 2003.

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