

WOMEN IN GERMAN CHURCHES AND SOCIETY

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1. Introduction

In 1981 the German Bishops' Conference published a paper on the role of women in church and society. In this paper they stated that the church should be a model of the partnership between women and men. This was indented to remind the church and its members about their responsibility and to challenge them to assume their responsibility in concrete issues. However, it seems to be a vision church itself has theoretically formulated with sufficient theological background, though it still remains an ideal the realization of which is yet to be achieved.

In order to clarify the process that leads to this divide I want to describe briefly the situation of women in society. Then, I shall discuss women's relationship towards religion in general and towards the Church, in particular. Finally, I propose to list up a few subjects that are of common interest to women in Germany irrespective of denominational affiliations.

2. Women in Society

In Germany there exists side by side a multiplicity of ideas about what women should be like in involving and interacting within the societal life. However, it must be said that the traditional view which reduces women to the famous "three K's" – *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (children,

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kitchen/household work, church) – is still prevalent.¹ According to this view, motherhood is a woman's first duty. She is responsible for the happy and contented life of the family. Women's work is seen as a necessary evil save social work which is held to be a woman's vocation.

This patriarchal view still holds prevalence, though very often subliminally, with men and women especially in the rural parts of the country.² Diametrically opposed to this is the feminist view of the emancipated woman. The women who support this view can't identify with the traditional picture of women handed down through the centuries and still – as they see it – upheld by the church.³ However, there are first signs that this feminist view which starts out from the idea of "gender" instead of "sex" is becoming more widely accepted throughout the society.⁴

Modern women today have, at least theoretically, the possibility to choose their own way of life. Young women have received better and higher education. Opportunities for higher education, career, and the ensuing independence infuse among women more confidence, which, in turn, make them independent in their thinking as well. However, despite

¹"Die Repräsentativumfrage "Gleichberechtigung von Frauen und Männern" des Instituts für praxisorientierte Sozialforschung (ipos) von 1992 sowie deren Fortschreibungen von 1994 und 1996 machen deutlich, dass die traditionelle Aufgabenverteilung noch fest verankert ist und sich nur langsam ändert. Unabhängig von der Berufstätigkeit wird die Hausarbeit auch 1996 zum größten Teil von Frauen erledigt. Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, Frauen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn 1998, 96; hereinafter referred to as BMFSFJ.

²BMFSFJ, 97.

³"45% aller Katholikinnen ... vermuten bei der Kirche ein bestimmtes, festgefügtes Frauenbild, das die eindimensional, aufopfernde, sich dem Mann unterordnende Frau zum Leitbild erklärt." Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, *Frauen und Kirche: Eine Repräsentativbefragung von Katholikinnen im Auftrag des Sekretariats der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz durchgeführt vom Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach*, Bonn, 1993, 97. Hereinafter referred to as FK.

⁴According to new studies, only 5% of the Germans no longer agree – at least theoretically – to the traditional view which restricts women exclusively to family duties. Zulehner P. M. and R. Volz, *Männer im Aufbruch: Wie Deutschlands Männer sich selbst und wie Frauen sie sehen, Forschungsbericht*, Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag, 1999, 145.

being highly qualified women are not on an equal standing with men when it comes to job access, payment or promotion because of the prevalence of a traditional gender-biased view on women. Since most of the industry and business are still male-oriented many women take up jobs as social workers or primary school teachers or are employed by firms very often as members of the junior staff or the lower ranks of the senior staff. Only very rarely do they rise to a leading position. There are only a few firm managers, only a handful of leading female politicians, and only a very small percentage of female professors at the universities.

In total it can be said that women's positions are marked by them holding administrative positions, barely enabling and involving them in the actual decision making processes. It is, however, also important to acknowledge that women, for unknown reasons, often do not support enough those who are working for women's issues. In Germany there are ample occasions and challenging opportunities for women, though most of them are often neglected.

Comparatively, more women are hit by unemployment than men. The traditional view holds that it is man who supports the family and, hence, women are more likely to lose their job in the case of a recession and less likely to find new employment than men.⁵ Elderly women face the danger of the poverty trap. For, it is usually the woman in the family who takes maternity leaves and later works only part-time. So too, women's pensions often are far below the pension benefits men receive.⁶ Other social groups that are likely to be hit by poverty are single mothers and families with more than two children.⁷

Though unfortunate, it must be stated that there is a rise in domestic violence which hits women of all classes. One reason among many others for this is the fact that many men find it hard to adapt to and to accept women's newfound independence and confidence.⁸ Many women – and

⁵BMFSFJ, 70-75, Zulehner and Volz, *Männer im Aufbruch*, 97.

⁶BMFSFJ, 131-135.

⁷BMFSFJ, 104-106.

⁸Zulehner and Volz, *Männer im Aufbruch*, 199f.

even girls – are also to a great extent confronted with rape, sexual harassment and sexual exploitation like forced prostitution.⁹

During the last four years the women's commission of the German Bishop's Conference is working on initiating a change in the attitude towards women and to enforce awareness programs to enable both women and men to discuss topics like domestic violence, and to encourage and enforce better participation of women in decision making processes.

3. Women's Changing Relationship Toward Religion

There are many women who are very active in their parishes doing honorary work. Research has found out that the women who take an active part in their parishes' church life are also interested above average in politics and very active in this field. They realise that it is important to have a vision supported by the gospel and to bring it into society and leadership.

As far as their relationship towards religion is concerned, it must be stated that women tend to break with the Church without, however, giving up their faith. These women are searching for ways to re-organise the Church and to find their own ways for expressing their personal faith. They form small groups and movement where they can do what they are officially not allowed to do. This gradually leads up to a split in the German Church. Women take the decision to break with the Church consciously and deliberately and search for new and integral ways to live the Gospel.¹⁰ Women of all ages refuse to accept any longer a solely male-shaped picture of God. In their opinion this male-shaped picture is one reason for the patriarchal hierarchy of the Church and society in general.¹¹ On the other hand, many women decide to stay in the traditional way of the church and to meaningfully participate in parish life as well.

⁹For further information see, Wetzels P. and Pfeiffer Chr., "Sexuelle Gewalt gegen Frauen im öffentlichen und privaten Raum," Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Gesundheit 48 (1995).

¹⁰Becker S. and Nord, J., ed., *Religiöse Sozialisation von Mädchen und Frauen*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer-Verlag, 1995, 133-196.

¹¹For further reading see Børresen K. E., ed., *Image of God and Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, Oslo, 1991.

In their search for new ways to live the Gospel women draw their inspiration and find support in the ideas of feminist theology. Especially those women who are active in small groups discover feminist theology and feminist exegesis interesting. Many women complain about being kept ignorant about those aspects of theology because not many from the so-called official church deal with these ideas. Although many innovative projects have been started at German colleges and universities,¹² feminist theology has not yet found its way into university curriculum and there is no department of Feminist Theology at German universities. Also it is admitted that feminist theology adversely affects many theologically trained women who aspire to become professors for theology at universities in Germany.

4. Relationship of Women Towards the Church

Discriminating opinions of women towards religion and the church also show themselves in the fact that a growing number of women of all ages, even elderly women, leave the Church or, at least, do not attend services any more. The number of women for whom the Christian religion is of existential importance is steadily decreasing. One reason for this is the Church's inability to adapt to and accept the reality of changing life-styles, views and ideas.¹³ Therefore, women distance and dissociate themselves from the Church. They search for new ways to express their Christian faith and to live their spirituality¹⁴ and, thus, to build up the so-called "women church."¹⁵ It is women who want a Church where men and women cooperate closely in search of new forms of spirituality, religiousness and for novel ways of re-organizing the Church. They want a Church that accepts women and men as individual beings whereby both women and men are enabled to exercise influence on the decision-making procedures. They want a Church where women and men work closely together; a Church

¹²See Meyer-Wilmes H., *Zwischen lila und lavendel*, Regensburg: Pustet-Verlag, 1996, 53-74.

¹³FK, 102.

¹⁴See Hintersberger B., "Elemente und Strukturformen weiblicher Spiritualität," Langer, M. ed., *Weil Gott nicht nur zu Mose sprach*, Innsbruck: Frauen nehmen Stellung, Tyrolia, 1996, 119-129.

¹⁵See Meyer-Wilmes, *Zwischen lila und lavendel*, 141-146.

that takes their proposals for re-organization and a structure that is less hierarchical and seriously involves them to a higher degree. It is particularly women who promote the idea of gender awareness, and it is to be accorded proper consideration and value.¹⁶

As they are breaking loose from the Church, women take an active part in their parishes' life, and fight – often without support from outside women's groups – for women's concerns. These women do not necessarily hold with feminist ideas, on the contrary, many of these women favour the traditional view. The clash of these different views often leads to tensions within the parish.¹⁷ The Church welcomes women as parish-workers, religious education teachers, social workers and staff members on social service projects. It is true that women's services, their qualifications and commitment are highly respected and appreciated. Yet only very few women attain a leading position in their field of work.

There is a wide discrepancy between these women's opinions towards the Church and the joy and contentment they experience in their work. They state their hopeful impressions that the Church might change her traditional views and become interested in women's concerns.¹⁸ On the other hand, women regret their lack of empowerment. They, however, go on hoping that the Church might one day lend an open ear to their concerns and welcome them with open arms as equals. In short, these women love the Church but they also suffer because of the Church.

5. Women Across Denominational Ties

Today there is an increasing number of women's activities in Germany and of subjects that are of common interest to women across denominational ties. Women of various church communities have started

¹⁶See Spindel St., "*Frauen in der Kirche: Frauen in der Gemeinde*," Langer M. ed., *Weil Gott nicht nur zu Mose sprach*, Innsbruck: Frauen nehmen Stellung, Tyrolia, 1996, 138-143.

¹⁷Bühler M., *Frauen-Kirche-Ehrenamt, Entwicklungen und Perspektiven*, Düsseldorf: Klens-Verlag, 1995, 67-76.

¹⁸FK, 151.

building up networks¹⁹ with the aim of furthering the development of a feminine political spirituality.²⁰ They also discuss converse questions as, for example, the problem of the Church's norms of family and sexuality, the question as to whether or not to acknowledge new and differing lifestyles. These discussions can, probably, lead to a clash with the opinions of the church officials.²¹ Other topics that are taken up by these networks are: poverty, the responsibility towards the creation, globalisation and the consequences it carries for women.

Women also discuss the question as to whether women should be allowed to become deacons. They see the female diaconate as a chance for the Church to fulfil and extend her welfare and social work.²² Women attach great significance to ecumenical Christianity. The World's Day of Prayer²³ and the Ecumenical Decade for Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998) gave rise to various forms of co-operation among women. All of them don't want to miss the experience they gained from their working together. A result of the growing co-operation among women of different Christian communities is the founding of the "Christinnenrat" in the year 2000. Its aim is to strengthen the sense of ecumenical community among women, to continue the work on topics of the Ecumenical Decade and to keep up contacts with ecumenical women-groups all over the world. In addition to that the "Christinnenrat" wants to make women's voices to be heard more loudly and widely through its public relation work, through general meetings and through talks with church officials.²⁴

¹⁹Lissner A., et al., *Frauenlexikon: Traditionen, Fakten, Perspektiven*, Freiburg: Herder, 1988, 835ff.

²⁰See Praetorius I., *Skizzen zur feministischen Ethik*, Mainz: Grünewald-Verlag, 1995, 47-56.

²¹FK, 110f.

²²Hünemann P., ed., *Diakonat: Ein Amt für Frauen in der Kirche, ein frauengerechtes Amt?*, Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag, 1997, 78-85, 129-138.

²³Lissner A., et al., *Frauenlexikon*, 1157.

²⁴"Frau und Mutter," *Mitgliederzeitschrift der katholischen Frauengemeinschaft Deutschlands*, 12 (2000), 6.

6. Conclusion

The development of the consciousness of gender justice within the German society and the Church as a whole is contributing towards the empowerment of women. The struggles that are initiated at various levels in this regard seem to be gaining attention and momentum as the years go by. It is certainly optimistic that the innovative steps adopted by Christian feminist movements will bring about needed changes within the general and official views on women-participation in the church life at all levels. Equal participation accorded to women along with men is not a concession, but a right – a fundamental one in this regard – by virtue of their Christian discipleship and official membership in Christian fellowship.