

Missing men.

The ambiguous success of gender studies in practical theology

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Adam, where are you? That is the first question that comes to mind when I think about the success of gender studies in practical theology. It is not difficult at all to list dozens of women who have contributed to gender-awareness in practical theology both in the Netherlands and internationally. While we are here in Groningen, let me not only thank all of you and the organizers, but mention specifically the work of Riet Bons-Storm. In her writings and teaching, but also in her activities within the International Academy of Practical Theology (where she ranks among the founders), she has been a vigorous advocate of overcoming gender imbalance. And as we have been reminiscing the initiatives to correct for that in the International Academy, I am proud to say that Riet refused to nominate me for that reason. She is in fact one of many: women who have fought against the semi-conscious privileging of men, women who have offered a critical analysis of the gender system in theology and religion, women who have given a voice to the experiences of women, especially from disadvantaged contexts. They have become more and more central in the discipline and in the International Academy. By now, feminist and pro-feminist scholars are dominant in leadership, and four out of five keynote speakers later this year will be women.

So Eve has found her way to the royal gallery of practical theology, but where is Adam? He still seems to rule the place, of course, but actually he is in hiding. Is it merely a coincidence that almost all the speakers at this expert meeting are women? And that those who are not are either added to a session with two women, or gay? Or does it still reflect the old structure of patriarchy in which only women (and maybe gay men) were supposed to have a gender, because men were the hegemonic and thus standard group who didn't have to reflect on their gender status? And where transgenders are invisible because they don't fit the binary? Just like 'people of color' includes people of all colors except the hegemonic white. Or like 'sexual diversity' seems to apply to all sexual varieties except heterosexuality. Is it a coincidence that so few male scholars explicitly address gender issues in their work? While I know many female scholars in my field who have done so, it would be difficult to come up with more than ten names of men who have systematically taken gender into account. And if I would be looking more

specifically for straight men studying gender in practical theology, it would be even more difficult. Not impossible, but it would be a very small harvest. Adam, where are you?

To understand the place and ambiguous success of gender studies in practical theology, it is important first to try and describe the discipline itself. This is, however, easier said than done. Practical theology is arguably the theological discipline with the least consensus about its definition. Some say that its main debates are always about the issue of defining itself, thereby limiting its value for the rest of the world. An interesting game of navel gazing that is hardly practical and certainly not theological. That is overstated, of course, but not entirely untrue. The connections between empirical investigation, theological reflection, and strategic implementation are complicated and require ongoing discussion. But that does not mean necessarily that the discipline as a whole is in a constant state of confusion and dispute.

More important perhaps is the fact that there are a number of different perspectives that are not easily reconciled. They differ in their answer to the question what should be studied: ordained ministry, church life, religion, culture, society. They differ in their ideas how practice and theology are connected. They differ in the grounds on which they think normative claims are to be settled: the Bible, church tradition, social sciences. They differ in their view on the role of the practical theologian: distanced observer or pious religious leader.

Many of these differences can be traced back to three streams in the history of practical theology. Up to today, these are discernable as separate discourses, and they show a remarkably different level of gender awareness. The three discourses parallel David Tracy's famous distinction between the three audiences of theology. Even though he was speaking of theology in general rather than of practical theology in particular, his observations hold true for these practical theological perspectives as well. According to Tracy the audiences of academy, church, and society each ask for a specific theological perspective and each pose specific challenges for justification.

The first practical theological perspective often goes by the name of pastoral theology. It represents the classical focus on ministerial formation and is therefore related to the so-called clerical paradigm. The primary audience in this perspective is the church and the key question is how individuals can be trained for and supported in their tasks in ordained ministry. The habitus of the theologian and his or her initiation and ordination are at the forefront and church traditions play an important role in the normative debates surrounding this ministry. Classical versions include the medieval notion of *theologia practica*, the idea that all theology has to contribute to the piety of the believers. More recent versions of this perspective give more attention to personal development, supervision, and the like. This stream is characterized by a natural form of conservatism, precisely because of its close connection to the church and its tradition. Surely, women

have gradually taken their place in the past century, but that is still only a brief period, and large parts of the church still deny them equal opportunities. It is not too harsh to judge that this first is still a male dominated perspective, like it has always been. Because of that, gender questions have not been addressed properly.

The second practical theological perspective finds its primary audience in the academy. The history of this perspective slowly started with the emergence of the modern university after the middle ages, but it evolved more fully in the past half century. It strives to develop the discipline from ecclesial training to a fully academic discipline, defined by high quality research and often close affiliation with social sciences. It sometimes goes by the name of empirical theology, but there are also historical, philosophical, and biblical-theological versions. The key notion is that practical theology is scientific or scholarly work. It studies religious practices and may even develop strategies to improve them, but it is not itself necessarily immersed in those practices. Here practical theology is less governed by the normative tradition of the church and more by the methodological do's and don'ts of academic work. As has been noted in other disciplines, this perspective is also dominated by men. Gender issues may be studied as an academic topic, but it is not uncommon to find a lack of awareness of the researchers' own position and perspective as men. This is precisely because the dominant discourse in the academy stresses objectivity and distancing, thereby suggesting disembodied absolute knowledge. The white male perspective is not critiqued for being just one perspective, but is privileged as being the real thing.

The third practical theological perspective orients itself to society. This perspective draws mainly on contextual and liberation theologies. It prioritizes the experiences of the marginalized and subaltern voices and perspectives. Noteworthy are the early contributions from Latin America, but it has spread to a wide variety of cultural minority groups. For our topic today, we should look specifically at the contributions of feminist and womanist theologies as well as gay liberation and queer theology. All these are efforts to lend a voice to underprivileged or subjugated groups and aim at their emancipation. They take a starting point in the acknowledgment of subjectivity, the crucial influence of the social location from where one is speaking, and the need to critique social positions and cultural perspectives. This liberationist perspective in practical theology shows a clear correlation with gender studies, but the two are not identical.

To be sure, these three perspectives are not limited to their natural locations. Universities and especially seminaries may be devoted to pastoral theology; some churches may stress the value of liberation theologies, and so on. I am not talking about the locations but about the discourses that originated from these locations. These discourses represent different styles and the work done is evaluated by different criteria. Most important and most obvious however is the observation that gender awareness plays a significant role only in the third perspective. Even though this is one of the constitutive dimensions of practical theology, the other two are not as much inclined to include a gender studies perspective – and are in

fact better anchored in structural power positions. Both in academia and in the church, the position of men often still goes unchallenged because – so my contention – gender studies functions only in the less powerful liberationist perspective. This relates to the fact that we easily and uncritically blend gender studies (an academic lens for analysis), gender perspectives (giving attention to the different voices and experiences of men and women), and gender justice actions (focusing especially on the position of women in church and academe). If there is a position in gender studies, it is often assumed that a woman should be appointed. Wouldn't it be more effective to appoint a male scholar in gender studies and a female scholar in some innocent field like New Testament?

The connection of gender studies with emancipatory approaches is not unique for practical theology. There has often been a confluence of advocating better positions for women, affirmative action, criticizing patriarchy, and studying the role of gender. This combination of the academic, the strategic, and the personal has contributed much to the visibility of women and to a lesser degree of non-hegemonic men. The exposure of their subjectivity served to challenge the subjectivity-taken-for-objectivity of the male dominated academic and ecclesial hierarchies. The less than systematic attention for gender in the other two perspectives, however, limits the possibilities. As long as gender studies is perceived as the political interest of minority groups, it will remain the arena of female and marginal male subjectivity.

This means that we have to engage hegemonic men in gender studies much more effectively. But that is easier said than done, precisely because they are hegemonic men. It is much easier to become aware of the limitations of your subjectivity if you belong to a minority group. In a sense, all the early feminists – or gay activists for that matter – had to do was raise their voice and make themselves heard. That was difficult enough because of the social pressure and limitations. But discovering their own subjectivity was not the hardest part. Or to put it differently: to shout out that you have your own story takes only one step. For people from a hegemonic group, the necessary movement consists of two paradoxical steps. First they have to unlearn the voice that they thought was their own and then they have to discover their own subjectivity. For that reason it is not enough for a man to take a feminist position. That would only imply that he would forego his own subjectivity once again and fall into the same trap of seeing oneself through the eyes of another. I for one have never identified as a feminist or pro-feminist for that reason. I have, for obvious reasons, also avoided the natural counter-term masculinist. But this is precisely the problem for men with regard to gender perspectives. How can we develop gender-awareness and masculine subjectivity?

As a sidenote: we are often still talking about a rather simple dichotomy of male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, and we have hardly started to include the wider varieties of sex and sexuality, like intersexual, transsexual, asexual,

bisexual, and so on and so forth. All these groups not only ask for attention, they challenge the gender and sexual binaries we take for granted. I learned a lot from a meeting with transgendered people in which one apparently male, strong, bearded, tattooed, seaman-type person said: 'I am John, I am a woman, and I don't see the need to change my body.'

To interpret these processes, it may be useful to explore Baumann's (2004) theory of 'selfing and othering'. Baumann departs from the view that claims to identity inevitably correlate with exclusions of alterity (every 'us' excludes a 'them') by describing a more complex set of three different grammars of connecting identity and alterity. In describing them, one should note that they are built on differences between groups and fail to account for the complexities in both groups and the large overlap between the two. We use them here precisely because they help us understand the ways in which controversies are framed. Apart from the binary grammar of only oppositions (which Baumann calls an 'anti-grammar'), the first grammar is one of orientalizing. This is in fact a binary grammar in which self and other are attributed oppositional sets of features. In the case of gender, different characteristics are attributed to men and women. The messages men and women hear are markedly different and influence the space they take and the roles they play. Men for example are supposed to be rational and academic, women subjective and pastoral. The orientalizing grammar adds sophistication to the binary grammar by acknowledging that the other-group may have some admirable features that the self-group misses. For example, men may describe women as more sensitive. These positive attributions, however still serve dichotomous relationships. Therefore this grammar is usually a barrier to dialogue.

The second grammar is one of segmentation. In this grammar, society is divided in different groups that are subdivided again and again. By consequence, where two persons may belong to the same group at a higher level in this hierarchy of segmentation, they may belong to different groups at a lower level. Different subcultures of women may be very much separated from one another, yet join together over against a male dominated society. The question is, however, how the segmentation hierarchy is organized. There have been painful encounters between white women from Europe or North America and black woman from Africa, in which the first defined themselves as allies with the latter against male domination, whereas the latter defined themselves as allies with the black men against white domination. Regardless of the level of segmentation, there is always the risk of turning into an orientalizing grammar. Although this segmentation grammar allows for contextual awareness and the understanding that on the highest level we all belong to the same group, it is easily employed to demonize the other and prevent any proper dialogue.

The third grammar is described as encompassment. This grammar acknowledges the difference of the other, but then defines a higher level in which the other is similar to the self. This similarity however is not defined as a higher order as in the segmentation grammar, but it is defined by the characteristics of the self that are projected on the other. By consequence, this grammar is often used primarily

by dominant groups who incorporate (or colonize) the minority groups by allowing them to feel different and reinterpreting them as being intrinsically the same, thus resisting the challenge to the dominant group's self-understanding inherent to the encounter with the other. The linguistic tendency to define humanity in masculine terms – mankind – is a case in point. Women are accepted as a subspecies, but their perspective is seen as subjective, whereas the male perspective is seen as objective. Similarly, the perspective of other gender- or sexual minority groups counts as subjective and not as equal. As a result, these minority voices cannot easily challenge the dominant group.

If we apply this model to the development of gender studies, gender critique and emancipation movements in practical theology, we may interpret the traditional perspective of many contributions as working with a grammar of encompassment. The role of women and LGBT persons is more and more accepted, but as a subspecies, not really challenging the privileged position of male heterosexism. I find that even in my own work, I am very self-conscious when I engage in projects that relate to homosexuality. Am I not discrediting myself? Am I not too subjective? Am I not too far off the beaten track of academic practical theology? Am I not too much of an activist? I believe these are legitimate questions, but how come I never ask them when I study bereavement, post-traumatic growth, non-traditional spirituality, or religion and cinema? These topics are also directly related to my own experiences and show how much the personal is theological. But my subjectivity is much less contested as it is when I engage in topics of sexuality and masculinity.

If encompassment is the primary grammar of hegemonic men in our discipline, for a long time women and marginal men will learn to live accordingly and even define themselves in the terms of the hegemonic group. It is a major effort in identity politics to demand not being accepted for being essentially similar, but for being different. The first step to do so is to deny this encompassment and claim the differences. The first wave of feminism and of gay liberation was to speak up, to claim a different voice. This is often done in an effort to move to a grammar of segmentation, in which the hegemonic and subaltern voices go together. As long as the hegemonic group does not accept that grammar of segmentation, this attempt is futile. The second wave of emancipation therefore is often more one of conflict, basically returning to an orientalizing grammar. Staunch feminists of this second wave sometimes treated all men as responsible for gender inequality, or even as potential patriarchs and perpetrators. Stalwart gay liberationists opposed every moral ordering of sexual desire for being heterosexist oppression. This is the typical black and white approach of the first grammar. It doesn't help in the long run, but it may be essential in overcoming the grammar of encompassment. It is probably only after that battle that a real and fruitful grammar of segmentation can be developed in which we can accept differences and similarities and overcome the power divisions that limit us.

Maybe that is where we are today. There is – I would say – an ambiguous success for gender studies in practical theology. As an academic lens, as acknowledging the perspective of women, and as a call for gender justice, it has been and become an intrinsic dimension of practical theology, thanks to Eve. But we have to become smarter than that. If we don't find ways to lure Adam out of the bushes of ecclesial power and scientific objectivity and get him to look critically and unashamed at the fig leaf of his masculinity, gender studies will remain the private game of women like you and silly men like myself.