

ICETH conference Cologne 2012, 5th – 8th July

Violence against Women – the Lesser Sin?

The Interreligious Conference of European women Theologians (ICETH) www.iketh.eu is a network of – at present still dominantly - Christian members as well as Jewish and Islamic theologians with 66 individuals and 3 organisations from Germany, Switzerland, England, Ireland, Sweden, and the Netherlands.

Through lectures and workshops the theme of the 2012 conference “Violence against Women” had been approached from a Christian, Muslim and Jewish perspective. The group of about 30 participants visited an Islamic cultural centre of encounter and a Jewish liberal Shul. Morning prayers and meditations open to the whole conference group were equally prepared by the three religions. Main concern of the theologians was to highlight that their holy scriptures being seen in a perspective of gender justice do not legitimize any violence though this actually has happened many times and still happens nowadays. Even the ‘bad’ texts e.g. the story of the daughter of Jifta in the First Testament who is sacrificed by her father because of a vow he has done should not be thrown away. By reading these texts we take seriously the awful experiences of women, we honor the victims by not forgetting them. The stories can be a warning for us of what can happen. Fortunately there are also many texts of peace, comfort and healing in the holy books such as the story of creation which shows men and women as equal in all the three traditions. Reading the texts through the eyes of women shows how important interpretations can be which have been made dominantly by male theologians up till now. Even the translation of a word can be biased. Is the woman a helper or an equal partner? In nowadays pastoral care, therapy and (religious) law it is crucial that the gender just reading of our religious sources is implemented to support the victims. Awareness raising is needed on all levels in our faith communities. Slowly and with caution we have to overcome the culture of shame and silence regarding violence and (sexual) crimes. The witness of Bosnian women who give trauma therapy to raped women and the widows of murdered Muslim men in the Balkan War (especially in Sebrenica 1995) showed that reconciliation is not possible without remembering and working through the bad things which have happened, along with concrete economic help. The need of education to know more about one’s own religion and the liberating interpretation of the holy books was emphasized again and again. From the Jewish side the example of *Agunah* was brought into the discussion as a form of violence due to a religious tradition. This is about ‘chained’ women imprisoned in a marriage they want to leave. For various e.g. economic reasons a husband refuses to give the get, bill of divorce, and puts her and her relatives under pressure to pay huge amounts of money to let her go. And also in Christian theology there is a relation with violence: abuse in Christian families based on bible texts and images of God as a judge and redeemer. God makes his covenant primarily with men, women are excluded and a patriarchal structure is uphold. The misogynic imagery of church fathers of women as misbegotten males and more corrupted by sin – culminating in the witch-hunting which was parallel to persecutions of Jews – shows the link between Christian theology and men’s violence. It was stressed that women have to criticize and re-interpret these oppressing traditions. In situations of violence the Christian preaching of

forgiveness – to preserve the marriage at all costs - should not silence what has happened. To forgive (not to forget) can only be the very last stage of a whole process. But in case of violence and abuse the marriage had been broken already. It is of great importance that women (and men) bring to light the woman-friendly texts and counter narratives like the opening chapter of Luke who tells us about the covenant of an angel with Mary or the leading role of women in the first Christian communities.

One of the conclusions of this conference is the vision to create a theoretical fundament to work against violence in an interreligious and joint effort. Judaism, Islam and Christendom are incompatible with violence. They should be reshaped and re-interpreted in a liberating manner. Their treasures should be dug up to help the process of healing and renewed trust.

For more information (including the lectures of this conference) see www.iketh.eu

Martina Heinrichs, Roman Catholic Co President, Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women www.efecw.net - July 2012