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*Introduction*

If Linda Hogan shows us one thing, it is that feminism is not dead. The new French philosophy (that is, post-Foucault) has recently been trying to teach us quite a lot about the death of feminism; that a sexless grunge is in; that the power struggle has shifted to a realm of classless, sexless and anonymous oppression, and so forth. The truth is that we often say something is dead in order for it to die: discourses of power, by definition, are not killed. At most, they transform and reconfigure themselves. Perhaps then, in these somewhat aquariusque times of feminist lobbying and political correctness, we should start striving for a more consistent recognition of what theologies, including feminist theologies, are all about: *theologies are either straight forward or configured discourses of power.*

Among other things, I am convinced this means i) that theologies are essentially immanent enterprises: they have more to say about society, (wo)man and their own methodological and theological convictions, than what they have to say about God. They pretend to talk about God, but talk about themselves, really. This also means ii) that theologies are not about the acquisition of power, but about the projection of power: there is no such thing as a theology of the powerless. The weak can't agitate. Theologies, as are all discourses, are only possible after relevant power transformations and/or configurations have taken place. Theologies thus do not have to aspire to power: they are in their very nature powerful discourses. This further implies that iii) theologies are conceptually unstable, always changing and moving, disregarding first principles, absolute truths and master narratives. And feminism (as Julie Clague rightly observes [7]) is moving, transforming theology for sure. However truly risky and blatantly Nietzschean it may be, this also has iv) evident repercussions for our understanding of theology: but also for our understanding of feminism *in toto*. I have come across only a few feminist theories in sociology, philosophy, literary theory and theology which do not thrive on the pretence of either weakness (the lack of power) or the possible acquisition of power, or both. Jong, McFague, De Beauvoir and Arendt have this in common: they all launch extremely powerful discourses, which are configured as something that canonically still aspire to power, acquiring in the process even more power. De Beauvoir's philosophy is a good example of this configuration of power: many feminists argue that she has not liberated herself from male domination either in her intellectual or personal life, since much of her work portrays an acceptance of male assumptions and thinking regarding the organization of the person and society. De Beauvoir's absolute confidence in rationality, thereby neglecting values often considered by theorists to be 'feminine', has assured her much criticism by some feminists. But the truth is, I am

sure, that this is only a strategy De Beauvoir employs to gain even more power. Pretending to be the underdog in the vicious company of men, she pretends to be fighting for the power (she already has), acquiring even more power. We had not recognized this until Foucault demonstrated this vindictive logic of Otherness: be the Other mad, black, criminal, homosexual and/or female. What Linda Hogan does, taking me by complete surprise, is not to deny or dispute this: on the contrary. She rather sets out to explore the radix of feminist power, to strip its neatly configured methodologies and cunning discursive states of mind. In order to achieve this, she has to dismantle the architecture of 'holy' knowledge/power, bringing about a fascinating postmodern discourse of power herself.

*Women's experience: subversion to the rescue*

It will do no justice to this intensely composed, argumentatively concentrated and extremely well-written book, but I have no other option than to try and make a résumé of Hogan's informed and nuanced lines of argument, only hoping that this will stimulate and interest the reader adequately to inquire into the exciting thought of Linda Hogan her/himself. Hogan's book consists of two parts: Part I deals with women's experience and praxis as the origins of the primary categories of feminist theology (9-84), while Part II employs these primary categories within the contexts of Christian feminism, womanist theology and post-Christian theologies (86-177). The informed reader will immediately recognize a strong element of subversion here: in a probing and incisive manner, Hogan shifts the roots of the primary categories of theology away from Scripture and dogma (which radical feminism considers to be essentially androcentric) towards women's experience and praxis. Hogan implicitly admits her battle to be somewhat 'subversive' (my depiction), at least as subversive as including patriarchal theories as starting points and norms of evaluation (10), such as in the case of De Beauvoir: but she emphasises from the start that this subversion is to bring about 'genuine change' (9). She also realizes or at least acknowledges implicitly from the start that the feminist discourse is powerful enough to bring this about: that is why this subversion does not aspire to destroy patriarchal traditions completely; there is simply no need for that. That is why there is no need for the construction of a new master theory. That is why, by implication, she can afford to team up with Adorno/Horkheimer, Deleuze and Derrida: she wants her concepts to be unstable. This postmodern (especially Deleuzian) interest in the subversive thus teams up with an already powerful feminist discourse, hereby constituting perhaps one of the most important and exciting studies of postmodernity and the female condition.

*Women's experience and praxis*

Within or precisely because of the postmodern contexts of the expansion and reinterpretation of fixed traditions, feminist theologians have attempted to effect a paradigm shift in religious studies. Feminist theologians have moved beyond the realm of patriarchal theories towards (new) starting points which will affirm the dignity of women, in questioning or even deconstructing basic assumptions concerning beliefs, values and even the methods for scientific inquiry: they have namely started to initiate theological discussion from the perspective of women's experience and praxis. These are the bases upon which feminist theology endeavours to reconstruct and create new religious forms. These are its primary resources, whereas androcentric texts and traditions formerly — in modernity and pre-modernity — reigned supreme. This use of women's experience and praxis beyond doubt signals a new departure for theology as such. It is Hogan's intention to explore the origins, uses and significance of the appropriation of these two categories as resources for (at least feminist) theology. Since each of these two categories has had a long and complex history, Hogan has deemed it necessary to, although being selective in her exploration,

unravel the origins and meanings of both. The term 'women's experience' has typically acquired a new meaning since it has been appropriated by feminists, and it is within this newly appropriated context that Hogan explores the diversity encapsulated by the term (16-63). She does not attribute any homogeneity to it: the category of women's experience is precisely a celebration of the plurality and diversity of women's lives, choices and values. This does not mean that Hogan appropriates this category uncritically: because experience does not transcend class, racial and cultural differences, but is intimately bound to them, Hogan realizes that it is not sufficient to refer to 'women's experience'. The category must be deconstructed by the marginalized experience itself, for example poor women, or women of colour. She initiates/allows that with measurable success.

As far as the term 'praxis' is concerned: it is clear from the start that Hogan has selected the revolutionary left-wing twist of the term, where 'praxis' becomes something very specific in its relation to theory. Not considering the philosophical development of praxis, Hogan rather concerns herself with the theological contexts in which praxis has come to the fore: of course, liberation and political theology. She fully explores, in relation to liberation theology's consideration of theology as critical reflection on praxis, her own understanding of praxis, which remains essentially Marxian, incorporating the critical tools afforded by Adorno and Horkheimer. Thus the category of praxis infuses the somewhat theoretical and abstract articulations of women's experience with a practical, critical dimension; it gives expression to the liberating activity of women which has constantly informed feminist theorizing.

Having examined the origins and meanings of both concepts in Part I, Hogan considers in Part II how these concepts actually operate in the work of feminist theologians (within Hogan's identification of three major strands, namely the contexts of Christian or 'reformist' feminism, 'womanist' theology and post-Christian theologies [86-177]). Because major methodological and epistemological issues (such as the difference among women and that these categories cannot but point to an extreme relativism, even nihilism) clearly arise in these contexts' relation to the employment of women's experience and praxis, which Hogan fortunately and honestly anticipates, she suggests some approaches (162-177) which may enable feminists to try and deal with them.

This is, as far as I am concerned, the real worth of this study: Hogan is not ducking and diving the harsh consequences of conceptual instability; she is truly at peace with it. It is clear throughout the book that the categories Hogan employs as primary categories are unstable and ever-changing. As the Frankfurt School consistently taught, both experience and praxis bring about an instability in theorizing, since both are dynamic, ever open to transformation. That is why Hogan fiercely questions the desirability of unity and conformity promoted by academic life under patriarchy: her (and all other feminists'; indeed every true postmodern thinker's) position would become impossible, ever in the process of being marginalized. That is why she rejects any possible value a master theory could have for feminism: she indeed questions the wisdom of attempting to formulate a rigid theoretical position in an ever-changing, unfixed, ever evolving world. Hogan rather embraces the instability in her own theorizing, escaping the norms of patriarchal scholarship, recognizing the inherent worth of an unstable position (see esp. 175-77).

Women's experience and praxis point towards Adorno's *Nichtidentität*, Derrida's *différance*, Foucault's great divide: therefore, the need to alter, change and reinterpret. It is true that this will progressively raise serious questions for and from theologians involved in doctrinal, hermeneutical and ethical fields. Hogan recognizes the biggest challenge to us all, though: how to maintain a stance of conceptual instability, while not giving way to an epistemology that is completely relativist. This, again, is a challenge that *presupposes* a power for the feminist discourse that is, within the postmodern reality of a network of adjacent discourses, involved in the making of new, liberating discourses.

## ***Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews***

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At long last then, we have a feminist theologian who understands and embraces the power of her own discourse, who acknowledges its configuration of power. Therefore, she need not promise answers, or pretend to be fixed, unchanging or true herself. Linda Hogan is not so insecure as to require the last word or final say. She already has the power.

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