

STRONG WOMEN, STRONG VOICES: AUTHORITY, VISIBILITY, AND INVISIBILITY
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ICETH CONFERENCE WOMEN'S AUTHORITY AND VISIBILITY IN OUR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES
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Introduction:

I am pleased and honoured to be here and to have the opportunity to address you. In my view, it is, in a sense, strange and brave – one could perhaps even call it a counter-movement – for women to work together in a new European (inter)religious organisation, notably an organisation of women's theologians. After all, the situation with respect to religion and religious institutions in Europe is highly complex and paradoxical. The official institutions are stimulating ecumenical and interreligious initiatives less and less, since they are seeking – at least in the case of most Christian churches – to re-establish a more 'distinctively Christian' – be it distinctively Roman Catholic or Protestant – a distinctively Muslim or Jewish identity. Perhaps even more important, European religions are seeking to establish or re-establish a more 'political' and 'distinctively religious' influential identity in the predominantly secular social and political reality of Europe. In this light, therefore, interreligious collaboration, let alone reflection on possible commonalities – one of ICETH goals – is not considered a suitable strategy at this moment.

For religious women, and perhaps especially for women theologians, the situation is even more complex and paradoxical. And, again in relation to the goals of ICETH, striving for equality in our religious traditions in all fields and on all levels, to connect scholarship and ministry, all this makes our situation, our position, and our relation to our religious traditions not only complex and paradoxical but also very ambivalent in more than one way: ambivalent not only with respect to a society that in many ways seems to be becoming less tolerant of religion, but also ambivalent with respect to secularists, especially the feminists among them, who are questioning the possibilities of both a critical stance towards religion and gender equality *within* religions. And there is also ambivalence with respect to the authorities, rules, and practices of our own religions institutions that in many ways still deny, diminish and prevent women from having religious audibility and visibility.

But this ambivalence becomes all the more poignant and urgent – and I would suggest all the more creative too in light of women's acknowledgement of the formative, inspiring and sustaining spiritual powers of our religious traditions. In a way, it is precisely these sustaining spiritual powers that keep us sane and powerful, despite developments in society and religion. It is therefore inevitable for women, critical religious women, to have ambivalent feelings toward our religious traditions.

However, it is my strong conviction that this ambivalence was and is a powerful virtue for women in religious traditions. In my view, it is exactly this ambivalence that has fuelled the most creative, inspiring, and persistent women's religious visions, concepts and images as well as transformative religious practices. It is precisely this ambivalence that allowed us women to appropriate our religious traditions in such a way that the sustaining, subversive, liberative, emancipatory and celebrating powers of our traditions are presented in new and transformative ways. – thanks to and despite the patriarchal character of our traditions.

As theologians working in different places, we not only speak the language of our

traditions, but we speak this language out of our own voices and out of our own interpretations of our traditions. In this sense, out of our ambivalence and our sense of belonging we have created and are creating our own authority and visibility. In what follows I will present you with some of my most inspiring examples, to make them visible, and to see if and what else can be learned from these forms of religious authority and to see what this has to offer to interreligious cooperation and dialogue.

Let me start with a personal note.

I am an academic theologian, not a preacher, not a pastor, and I do not work directly for the church. So my views on the central theme of this ICEH conference, authority and visibility have to do primarily with the academic and educational context in which I work.

But there is more: As a typical Roman Catholic girl for my time and age, I enjoyed a typical 'Catholic girls' upbringing: kindergarten, primary and secondary education all at my neighbourhood convent schools in Nijmegen, a city not too far from here. And there I found the first examples of the women in my tradition who were and still are my most inspiring 'strong examples'. But before I go further into the dimensions of authority and visibility I find in those women, let me make some remarks in the light of recent high-profile cases of sexual abuse and other forms of abuse by priests, monks, and also nuns, all members of my own religious tradition. Although it is still hard for some to believe, women are not exempt from being 'abusers'. This fact was brought to a wider public by, among other things, the 2002 movie, *The Magdalene Sisters*. That movie convincingly showed the dark and abusive sides of women's religious life and religious ideology and made them more than visible. I have no intention of denying any of these and other 'aberrations' of male and female 'authorities', neither with regard to their practices nor with respect to their rules and ways of life. It is one sad example of a religious kind of authority, women's religious authorities too, that we can only and wholeheartedly reject. That said, I am still convinced that – without romanticising or becoming nostalgic – a great deal of inspiring women's authority and visibility can be found, both in the past and in the present, in the work done by nuns.

So, let me turn again to my first strong role models. My 'nuns' belonged to the Ursulines, a religious congregation founded in 1535 in Italy by Angela Merici. In the last century the Ursulines were, worldwide, one of the largest 'educational religious congregations'. In the Netherlands they – together with other men and women educational religious congregations – played a major role in the emancipation of Dutch Catholics. The strong gender segregation that characterised traditional Catholic education implied that girls were educated by women, predominantly nuns, and boys by men, predominantly religious males/priests.

Many famous Dutch Catholic women – who hold important positions in society, politics, and even the church – were formed and educated by these Ursulines or by one of the other 'famous' women religious congregations (such as the Sisters of Jesus, Mary and Joseph) These schools were famous for the excellent education they offered; there are many stories one could tell, but this is not the place nor the time to do so. My interest here is related to the theme of the conference: these women's great authority as well as their great visibility. These hard-working nuns played an important role in the emancipation of the Catholic population, of Catholic women, in the Netherlands – and in many other countries all over the world. It was not only in the field of education that these women had an enormous impact; they left their mark in health care and social

work as well: in fact they were the co-founders of many methodological and institutional developments in these fields.

These fields and other related forms of work were traditionally called works of *caritas*, 'mercy' or 'love' in their reference to the religious inspiration and motives of these forms of 'care'. And we all know that I am also speaking of work that traditionally was and is considered 'women's work'.

I am not claiming that this kind of women's work is typically Roman Catholic. To the contrary. If one is looking for commonalities between and within religions, which is one of the aims of ICETH, my guess would be that in this field of religiously motivated and inspired forms of care, with 'labels' such as *caritas*, mercy, love, one can find many spiritual similarities, a great deal of similar religious activity, and many women authorities.

It seems to be no coincidence that the 99 beautiful names of God in the Qur'an include 'The Merciful' and 'The Mercy-Giver' and that that Muslim women refer to this Mercy to justify gender equality and women's religious authority (Here it also seems to be no coincidence that that name is etymologically rooted in the Arabic word for womb.) Jewish and Christian women also refer to core elements, images, and concepts in their traditions – for instance, that women are Imago Dei – to justify their acts of *caritas* and mercy and to claim their authority to do so. What they/we are in fact doing is also a creative and transformative appropriation of these central images and concepts by giving them new interpretations, by applying them to women as well.

This kind of women's authority and spirituality, which I came to know via the nuns who were my teachers, has to do with religiously motivated deeds and actions, has to do with contributing to human well-being and flourishing and thus it has to do with justice too. It does seem, however, to be an open question as to whether this – at least with regard to the past – has to do with gender equality in our contemporary understanding. But here again, in Roman Catholic circles in the Netherlands and in many other places of the world, nuns were and still are in the forefront of the most critical and gender-justice seeking persons. However, in my view, this kind of spirituality – down to earth and directed to the needs and the flourishing of others – is one of the core elements of religion. At least, it is if it is true that religion, all religion, has everything to do with – in terms of my Christian tradition – 'salvation', or becoming whole. Just as I have found these foremothers of authority in my own life and in my own tradition – even though it took feminist studies in history and religion to rediscover many of those women – I am convinced that every religion has its own sources and its 'examples' of this kind of foremother, of this kind of women authority. These are strong and visible women who, relatively autonomously and anonymously, contributed to their tradition and to society in general. These are strong and audible voices, who use their authority, their strategies, and their relative power, to work for the common good on their own terms.

But for me, these nuns were first and foremost the first women *intellectuals* and thus intellectual authorities I met. They had studied all kinds of disciplines: mathematics, history, languages, natural sciences, classics, medicines, and whatever other field there is. In their all-girl schools they did not make any distinction between the traditional 'soft' women's education and 'hard/real' sciences or scholarship. In their all-girl schools maths and sciences were classes like any other.

They valued a qualitatively good and strong education as an important part of life and

valued the education of women not only as an important personal value but also as an important contribution to church and society. And more importantly, they made no distinctions. Again, let me be careful in what I say, at least in theory they made no distinctions and in principle welcomed everybody of whatever religious or social background into their schools.

In Europe the influence of these women as educators and intellectual authorities has declined, at least in the field of education. In other places of the world they still make important contributions to educating women for important roles in church and society. This, for example, is the explicit goal of the new theological curriculum at the Mater Dei Academy in Old Goa, India. This academy, an initiative of the Women's Section of the Conference of Religious in India, fosters and encourages both academic work in women's studies as well as theological reflection on all levels, with a view to the contribution of women to the future of the church and society in India. This is not only a case of intellectual education. Here, the specific approach and need for intellectual quests and integration of life experiences has led to this centre of theological women's studies in India.

In this project and approach I recognise the kind of authority I greatly admire in the lives and work of the famous women religious multi-talented intellectuals like the Mexican scholar, poet, and cook Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz or the German abbess, scholar, mystic, composer, and medicine woman/gardener Hildegard von Bingen. They too brought life experiences into science, brought spirituality into an energetic way of acting. These two extraordinary women and their rich heritage were almost forgotten as well but were rediscovered in the twentieth century and reclaimed by women because of their authority.

These Indian women religious have learned from their famous predecessors: they are not only intelligent and engaged, but they are also, like Juana and Hildegard, 'clever' in the strategic sense of the word. (Although this did not save Juana from 'ecclesial punishment and banishment' to the kitchen instead of the library. But even, for her, the kitchen was a place of both study and spiritual revelation.) In India they took their time to develop these ideas, to find academic partners with which they could affiliate and they 'found' – strategically very important – ecclesial support: they were able to convince the Archbishop Patriarch of Goa to give his name and title as the Patron of the Institute. In my view, this is an enormous and great achievement, demonstrating the tenacious attitude and the intelligent, wise, practical, and strategic insights that are important and necessary characteristics of women's authority in the churches. I will return to that later.

Further, my school nuns were – besides my mother – the first managers I met. They were directors of schools and hospitals, building great networks of institutions, offering contexts and opportunities to develop education, care, etc. but also offering opportunities to their female students and colleagues to develop themselves, to become their own authorities.

Again, I think it is here, at the history of past and present women's (religious) practices, that many commonalities – and differences too – can be found among the different religions. In my view, the exchange among these women is part of a successful interreligious conversation. To exchange the stories of these women, what they did, how they worked, their problems, strategies, and success, can be enlightening. What was

their inspiration? How could they endure? I think it is important to share these stories, to remember, and to make visible again these strong women authorities and their contribution to religion and society. If we become too optimistic, the achievements of these great women run the risk of becoming forgotten, and the same goes for these women themselves: in recent decades they too were almost made invisible.

Many of these women religious had some kind of formation and training in the theological and spiritual traditions of their Christian, in this case Roman Catholic, tradition. I suppose the same goes for religiously motivated women authorities in other religions. For theologians, this offers an excellent opportunity to inform one another of the different spiritualities and the actual practices to which they have given rise. It is an excellent way to learn about commonalities despite religious differences. In this sense, we do not have to 'understand' one another's religion to see, share, and understand how religious motivation can work, can lead to religious authority and visibility.

Let me try to conclude with some characteristics or basic elements I found in this kind of 'women's authority', elements that I hope can be helpful for your discussions as well.

As stated earlier, there is a strong religious motivation that fuelled the actual practices of these women. Sometimes, depending on the situation and the strategy, this religious motivation is explicitly presented as such, like the women religious in India. Other times, this is hardly explicated, for instance, in the work of contemporary women religious working against women trafficking. Most of the expertise and 'practices of education and care' are aimed at 'justice', especially with regard to women and children. As stated above, these are considered 'women's issues'. It was (is?) a marginalised domain and thus by implication a marginal authority. But, as I would stress over and over again, it is a very important area of life. It is this same religious motivation, in my Catholic case, justified theologically by the idea of woman as the image of God, that motivated these Catholic women's struggle for more participation in the church. This sometimes happens in direct confrontation with the churches, sometimes in collaboration with the church. In all cases and in all its ambiguity, it is precisely the creative appropriation of this very old religious image that fuels women's engagement for a different and more just world and church. This engagement is religious through and through, and it has led to a specific kind of spirituality and authority that is earth- and life-bound.

In this religious, social, and political engagement with the so-called 'trivial' and everyday elements of life, such as education, health, and all kinds of social work aimed at justice and gender justice, women are leaders, and they can and do meet, regardless of our differences in background, cultures and religion. It is in these fields where women all over the world have gained knowledge, expertise, authority. It is here that we can exercise a far more open and joyful sense of otherness and strangeness. Again, women have a great deal to offer in this field of dialogue and differences. Because of our inherited traditions of 'caregiving' and education in the broadest sense of the word – traditions and expertise that are neither essential nor natural – we do know that life, however we want to organise or control it, in all its complexity cannot be controlled. Life is not static but vulnerable, volatile, and always in need of attention and care. We also know that one needs an open attitude in order to read, hear, and feel the signals not only of life but also of God's presence in this life.

I call this specific knowledge and authority grounded in an earth- and life- oriented spirituality Tender Competence. It is an attitude and authority that is not easily learned but must be acquired again and again. Courage, patience, and perseverance are needed, as we know from daily life, but the same goes for the religious traditions and the political context of Europe. This attitude of tender competence in which care, attention, vulnerability, openness, and empathy are the specific characteristics of the 'tenderness' that qualifies this competence or authority, is not self-evident, not in our religious traditions, and not in our wider global and European culture. It is therefore a critical counter-authority, since, in both religion and society, the dynamics of control, of inclusion and exclusion, of 'us' versus 'them' are far more dominant. We need women's organisations, women's voices, and women's authorities made visible in our countries, in our religious traditions, in Europe and worldwide. These are places in which this attitude and authority can be practised *and* demonstrated, made visible. In my view, this 'different' form of authority, these different forms of dealing with religious differences, can bring solidarity and generosity, because of *and* despite our differences; because and despite of our religion And I think not only Europe but our religious traditions as well are in desperate need of this kind of religiously based authority.