

# With Wisdom, Wit, and Resistance, Women Weave a New Europe:

## *A Report from the Third European Summer Academy for Women*

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More than a hundred women from 27 countries in Europe and the Middle East gathered for the Third European Summer Academy in the Protestant Study Center in Boldern, Switzerland. From August 9 to 16, 1997, the group explored new ways to a more harmonious, just, interreligious and intercultural living in Europe. The theme, 'Striving for Community: With Wisdom, Wit and Resistance Women Weave a New Europe', pursued the Summer Academy goal of building a more peaceful world.

The speakers and workshop presenters portrayed a truly global mix. Dr. Gret Heller,<sup>1</sup> was the opening speaker. In her view, the coming together of Europe is a truly feminine construct, and her outlook was overall positive.

Dr. Heller and Professor Susanne Schunter-Kleeman,<sup>2</sup> saw the birth of a new Europe "not happening in the spirit of peaceful transnational interconnections, but in the spirit of violence. The doctrines of globalization, of the 'globalitarian' regimes and policies are restricting the social rights of citizens to the principles of free competition, and all spheres of societal life are suffering from the arbitrariness of financial markets." Professor Schunter-Kleeman sounded a warning on the new single market as marginalizing more groups, especially groups in which women are in the majority. Among these groups are families with many children, the chronically ill, the handicapped, the 'working poor', the elderly poor, and unemployed youth. There exists, in her view, "a cumulation of dangers - discrimination in the work place and in employment practices, more difficult access to social security systems linked to remunerated work, risks of pauperization because of work and public spending cuts - which lead to the fact that women are more at risk to become and to remain poor."

Dr. Riffat Hassan<sup>3</sup> presented an

illuminating comparison of women in Islam and Christianity. She addressed three foundational assumptions underlying the view of women in both Islamic and Christian traditions: the creation of woman, the responsibility of woman for 'Man's Fall,' and the reasons for woman's creation. In her conclusion she stated:

*There is hardly any doubt that women have been discriminated against by patriarchal Christianity as by patriarchal Islam. However, the re-reading and re-interpretation of significant women-related Biblical and Qur'anic texts by feminist theologians has shown that it is possible to understand these texts in more than one way, and that - in fact - understanding them in egalitarian rather than in hierarchical terms is more in keeping with the belief, fundamental in both religious traditions that God, the universal creator and sustainer, is just to all creation.*

Aruna Gnanadason<sup>4</sup> spoke eloquently and movingly about violence against women. She shared with the participants a number of testimonies on physical, emotional, and structural violence women suffer from around the world. In her words, "women have recognized that they need to speak out about the violence - they need not be silent any longer. They need not bear silently the scars of a dehumanized society, which has systematically condoned and even legitimized different expressions of violence." She linked the violence women experience in the privacy of their lives to "other systemic forms of oppression which include the militaristic and violent patriarchal culture." Gnanadason urged women to "explore ways by which we can support each other in our struggles for a just and violence free world"; however, in order for women to succeed in this task,

*we need to walk together, naming our differences, acknowledging the contradictions that do exist among us, transcending human made divisions and fortresses and systematically building a global chain of solidarity of sisterhood. This cannot be done lightly, it has to be a conscious*

*political choice. In a world of so much mistrust and fear ... we need to create the space so that we can look into each other's eyes unafraid.*

While the moving presentations of Eleonore Wiedenroth and Flois Knolle-Hicks on racial intolerance and violence demonstrated how women do violence against one other, and what the consequences of this violence can be, Aruna Gnanadason's poem on the circle of feminist power captures the essence of how we might change and what we should strive for:

*Our bodies - our selves  
Violence against women destroys community*

*I stand here unflinching  
As wave after mighty wave hits at me  
Rips into my face .... my body,  
Cuts into my heart ....*

*This, the wave of patriarchal violence,  
And that, the power of "development"  
Threatening all I am and all that I know.  
This the wave of poverty and hunger,  
And that, the power of reproductive technologies,  
Which have colonised even my womb.  
This, the wave of racism and xenophobia,  
And that, the power of religion, its theology,  
Its doctrines that legitimise my pain.  
This, the wave of wasteful consumerism,  
And that the rift between people and all the earth,  
With the destruction and tyranny it entails.  
This, the wave of globalization of the market,  
And that, the fragmentation of communities, of cultures,  
Of ways of life and also of our souls .....*

*Wave after mighty wave hits at us,  
But we stand here undaunted,  
Unafraid ...  
Because we hold each other tenderly  
In the warm circle of feminist power.*

*This arm encircles the pain of the violence he inflicted on you my sister,  
And that, embraces the hurt of a woman marginalised by her colour and her race.  
This arm encircles the woman who is a victim of rape and abuse in a war torn country,  
And that embraces you my sister who is too old, or too fragile or too ill.  
This arm encircles the woman who is just too lonely, too isolated, and very alone.  
And that, embraces my lesbian sister who experiences violence at every turn.  
This arm encircles the tears of a woman who has lost a son - a victim to malnutrition.*

*And that, embraces the wounded feet and hands of a girl child who has been sexually abused.*

*Yes, we hold each other up in a circle of feminist power  
And we stand here unflinching .  
We stand here unafraid ...  
We look into each other's eyes with courage and energy  
A circle of life .... resilient power ... and of love .*

*Then :*  
*We will hold each other up in a circle of feminist power  
And we will stand here unflinching ,  
We will stand here unafraid ....  
We will look into each other's eyes with courage and energy  
A circle of life ..... of resilient power ... and we will dance ...*

*We will hold each other up in a circle of feminist power ...  
And we will dance ... and we will dance ...and we will dance ....*

The daily workshops offered a choice ranging from building interreligious communities and feminist theology, to music and resistant fashion. The workshop groups formulated a draft declaration, which is summarized here (subject to modification):

*Trafficking in women.* Since the end of the socialist systems women from Eastern Europe, lured by golden promises, have been persuaded to move to the West and then forced into prostitution. The steps that should be undertaken to remedy this situation can be summed up as follows: careful protection measures for the physical and psychical integrity of women; a good legal framework and its concretization through practical administrative measures; media cooperation in keeping the public informed; counseling offices set up by independent women's and diagonal organizations supported by the churches and the European Union. At the same time, and in order to develop successful preventive measures, it is important to promote and maintain contacts and cooperation between counseling networks in order to develop successful preventive measures.

*Tschernobyl victims and democratic initiatives in Belarus.* Since the referendum of Nov. 24, 1996, any signs of democratic development in Belarus have been obliterated. Freedom of the press, trade unions and demonstrations have been abolished. Arbitrary arrests and fast trials have become routine.

Democratic NGO's are frequently labeled as criminal. An organization under particular threat is 'To the Children of Tschernobyl' foundation which coordinates 500 initiatives abroad and 72 in Belarus. The leaders of the foundation, Drs. Grushewoj and Grushewaja, had to seek political asylum in Germany because of an arrest warrant, defamation, and persecution. We appeal to the churches, the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches to protest against the arbitrariness of the dictatorial regime and to support the foundation so that it can continue to give individual assistance to people in need.

*Women's bridge Sarajevo - Mostar - Belgrade.* We support the networking of women's initiatives in cities marked by war and violence, which serve the purpose of healing traumas suffered by women and girls, offer counseling for social and personal needs, and promote initiatives for economic autonomy. This contribution is important for the prevention of violence against women and for democratic reconstruction. We consider this networking as a model for other regional conflicts in Europe.

*Feminist theology.* We affirm that feminist theology is doing theology as women, starting with the experiences of women in their everyday life and remembering women in the context of the Christian faith. By doing this, we discover a faith dimension which adds to existing ways of doing theology. We have learned a great deal from the rich body of feminist research now available in the fields of exegesis, systematic theology, and spirituality. However, we feel there is a gap between theology and the educational process required to involve women (and men) in this thinking. We express the need for a comparatively simple curriculum



Teny Pirri - Simonian

combining scholarly insights in simple form, with a new holistic methodology for use in grassroots programs with women. We recommend a preparation of such ecumenical compendium for doing feminist theology in women's groups. It should be easily adaptable to local situations and different Christian traditions.

*Interreligious dialogue.* The Third Women's Summer Academy has opened a path to interreligious community building by initiating an encounter between European women of different faiths. The initial step in the process, learning about the self and the other, needs now to be expanded to include closer examination of ways how Christian and Muslim women live in their respective societies

and look into possible ways in which these women could work together to translate the knowledge and insight gained in the Academy into an educational process. This could perhaps be best accomplished within cultural contexts where interreligious encounter is lived daily. We recommend the repetition of the Academy experience in Albania, Bosnia, or Lebanon.

One of the workshop groups also worked on a response to the Global Ethic document, prepared by Hans Kung<sup>5</sup> and likely to be adopted as a universal declaration by the United Nations. This document, which reflects the white, Western cultural and religious values, is primarily 'androcentric', with humanity largely defined and measured through the male experience. According to the document, the world is in crisis because of "the lack of a grand vision, the tangle of unresolved problems, political paralysis, mediocre political leadership with little insight or foresight, and in general too little sense for the commonweal."<sup>6</sup> It proceeds to present a "global ethic - a minimal

fundamental consensus concerning binding values, irrevocable standards, and fundamental moral attitudes.”<sup>77</sup> There is nothing wrong with the principle itself. Hardly any one would argue against “the full realization of the intrinsic dignity of the human person, the inalienable freedom and equality in principle of all humans, and the necessary solidarity and interdependence of all humans with each other.”<sup>78</sup> It is perhaps because of its method of conception that the document has aroused criticism. Although calling for “a fundamental consensus on binding values, irrevocable standards, and personal attitudes,”<sup>79</sup> it is, nevertheless, a document drafted (as far as I know) by a small, select group of affluent, white, Western males. It might have been more reasonable to gather a more representative group to do the initial drafting. As it is now, it is one more example of the Western (male)-dominated world view being imposed on the rest of the world.

*‘Images of the Compassionate Presence’* was a thought-provoking art exhibit which ran during the Academy. A series of paintings, drawings and monoprints by Janice Pozzi-Johnson, presenting God and his love for humanity from the perspective of feminist theology. The artist has been inspired by the concept of God’s compassionate ‘womblove’ and describes the birth of these works as her attempt at finding a new, “alternative symbology that speaks to the birthing, nurturing, ever-creating, and re-creating dimensions of the Divine which enfold, sustain, and give hope to the human family.” Her image of God is of “God who longs to gather us as mother hen gathers her brood under her wings; the God in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall never come.” Her work especially the large canvases, impressionist images of the womb, the ovum, and the pregnant belly, are not without their critics. It was very difficult for me, a woman though I am, to identify with the symbolism in these paintings, and to reconcile them with my concept of God. Artistically, although some of the canvases had an interesting luminescent ‘glow,’ the works did not speak to me either. The largest of the pieces, ‘How I have Longed to Gather You,’ in particular, was rather flat and single dimensional. The image of the Divine was represented as a rendering of a grieving woman with somewhat Middle Eastern features, with a brood of skeletal characters in her arms. Although the image may reflect the spirit of love God has for mankind, it fails to capture the magnitude of that love. I do understand, however, how the paintings may speak to women suppressed by patriarchal images of God. To me God has never been ‘gendered’ - just as it is not appropriate to cast God in a male role, it is not wise to cast God in a

female role either. Both ‘castings’ will impose on God qualities that are very human, something that we can understand through our human experience. This human experience, however, is by definition limited to humanly comprehensible concepts and ideas. To equate God to a mother hen, or the creation of the universe to the birthing process reveals our very limited and simplistic human vision, quite as limited as equating God with a father image. In a sense, though, I admit that Pozzi-Johnson’s paintings do raise awareness of the finite ways we tend to perceive God, and that her approach might provide spiritual strength and new, fuller images of the Divine to many women - and men. At the same time, however, she simply presents a flip side of the patriarchal coin - the matriarchal image of the Divine. It would perhaps be more constructive to look for symbology that would be more inclusive, rather than exclusive, symbology that would allow us to transcend the human imagery.

What was remarkable about the Academy, was the bonding and the sense of togetherness that was experienced by the participants. Many friendships were forged and networking is going to continue long after the Academy. The driving force behind the effort is a three-woman team: theologians Reinhild Traitler and Elisabeth Räiser of Switzerland and Teny Pirri-Simonian, education secretary of the World Council of Churches (originally from Lebanon).

Lebanon was represented in The Academy by three women: Manoushak Boyajian from the Middle East Council of Churches and Mona Khalaf and Irma Ghosn from the Lebanese American University.

1 Former Speaker of the Swiss Parliament, former Swiss ambassador to the Council of Europe, and presently the Ombudsperson for human rights issues in Bosnia-Herzegovina in Sarajevo.

2 Political scientist, co-founder of the Women’s Studies and Research Program at Bremen University, and a member of the Working Group on Alternative Economics.

3 Professor of Religious Studies at the Louisville University in Kentucky.

4 Coordinator of Women’s Programme, Justice and Peace Creation Unit, World Council of Churches.

5 Kung, Hans (1996) *Yes to a Global Ethic*. London: SCM Press

6 *ibid.*

7 *ibid.* p.13

8 *ibid.* p.14

9 *ibid.* p.15