

Changing the subject, changing the method? Systematic implications of a turn to everyday practices

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Questo articolo difende la tesi che la «svolta» contemporanea verso la vita quotidiana ha implicazioni a lungo termine sia per il metodo, sia per il contenuto della teologia sistematica (femminista). Vengono esposte considerazioni critiche ed epistemologiche che motivano questa scelta, e viene mostrato che una delle implicazioni teologiche più importanti è un cambiamento di prospettiva: dal «cosa» al «come» della fede. Questo cambiamento conferma le dimensioni estetiche e spirituali della fede come inestricabilmente legate alla dimensione etica.

Introduction

With this presentation I would like to discuss my exploration, my intuition, my conviction, which says that theology and philosophy need not only to broaden their focus, as feminist, liberation, and post-colonial theologians and philosophers state, but that we subsequently need to engage in the search for a different methodology. Or perhaps better: that we need to look for a different way of doing theology and philosophy in order to fully account for a feminist focus and locus of these disciplines. As I see it, the result of this methodological change will influence the content of theology, and I suspect also philosophy, profoundly. Since I am a systematic theologian my central point of reference in this contribution will be theology¹.

First, I will offer some thoughts on the epistemological backgrounds of what is called the anthropological turn in theology. I will present some of the ideas of Michel de Certeau, that in my view can be helpful in developing feminist systematic theology in which the gendered dualism of western thinking, can in a way be overcome.

Next, I will present some thoughts on the content and method of systematic theology. That is, I want to reflect on the systematic theological implications if this anthropological turn is taken seriously. What does this

¹ Parts of this paper were also published in M. DE HAARDT, *A Way of Being in the World. Traces of Divinity in Everyday Life*, in M. DE HAARDT - A.-M. KORTE (eds) *Common Bodies. Everyday Practices, Religion and Gender*, Münster 2002, pp. 11-26

mean for a feminist systematic theological agenda and what becomes the central subject of our reflection? To conclude I will give some examples of how I tried to integrate these thoughts and questions in my own recent research projects and to what kind of insights and questions this approach from everyday practices gave rise.

1. *The anthropological turn: looking at everyday life as source for theology*

Feminist theology and contemporary cultural studies share a preference for everyday life. This ‘anthropological turn’ first and foremost is a criticism of the dominant academic epistemology and methodology. The French historian and cultural scientist Michel de Certeau used the metaphor of the city to describe the position of traditional scholars and the kind of knowledge they generate.² It is like viewing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre. All you see is a wave of verticals in which the actual agitation of the city for a moment is arrested by vision. According to the De Certeau the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos probably is the pleasure of «seeing the whole». The price, however, is that this panorama city is a «theoretical», a visual simulacrum. The ordinary practitioners of the city live are invisible to the eyes of these scholars. However, these city walkers create a manifold story that has neither author, nor spectator, and consists of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces, in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other.

This image contains a strong criticism of ‘the ministers of knowledge,’ who fear any change that would affect their ‘city map,’ (their theological and philosophical edifice) their ideology, and their position. Just like the Black feminist poet Audre Lorde, De Certeau was convinced that «the master’s tool cannot dismantle the master’s house».³ Therefore he chose to analyse the singular, and plural practices of everyday life. These unseen practices of space refer to a specific form of *operations* (ways of operating) to *another spatiality* (an anthropological, poetic, and mythic experience of space), and to an *opaque and blind* mobility, characteristic of the bustling city.⁴ De Certeau investigated how a migrational, or metaphorical, city slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city and vice versa. In other words, his research aimed at «the ‘disseminated proliferation’ of anonymous and ‘perishable’ creations that *allow people to stay alive* and cannot be capitalized».⁵ (italics mine).

² M. DE CERTEAU, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Part 1, ‘Arts de Faire’), Berkeley (CA) 1984, pp. 91-93.

³ As the title of a famous article by Lorde in A. LORDE, *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches*, New York 1984.

⁴ M. DE CERTEAU, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p.93.

⁵ According to L. GIARD in her *Introduction to Volume 1: History of a research project* (originally published as: *Introduction de L’Invention du quotidien, I, Arts de faire*, Paris 1990), *The Practice*

In my view, De Certeau's city metaphor as well as his research strategy can be helpful to make clear at whom and at what feminist theologians are oriented. Our critics are aimed at the academic distance, at quasi gender-neutral abstractions which in fact exclude women, but not only them. Philosophical and theological theories neglect belief and practices of 'ordinary' people, in particular women and other people from the margins. Further, as feminists we dispute the uni-dimensional concepts and models of the canon of knowledge as well as this canon itself, which has its own (mono)-logic, untouched by the movements of the 'believers.' We have a desire to break and transform this patriarchal monotheistic order and highlight and reflect on what in the early days of feminist studies was described as the 'experiences of women'.

However, growing insight into the dangers of essentialism and false universals in referring to 'women's experiences' has gradually led to a feminist theological interest in far more concrete everyday practices of very different women, their diverse contexts and in their manifold practices of 'belief.'⁶

Influenced by such thinkers as Michel Foucault and De Certeau, feminists are convinced that these practices are expressions of an intelligence and inventiveness of people, regardless of their power or – as is more often the case – regardless their lack of formal power. In the words of Foucault, we regard these practices as 'subjugated knowledges'. Notably white feminist theologians often use the works of Michel Foucault to point at the importance of this 'subjugated knowledge.'⁷ In using his analytical tools, it is not only possible to make visible that religion indeed is and can be oppressive, but, far more importantly, it is possible to make visible the religious resistance from the suppressed as well. A central question to this last point is: how to trace this resistance in all its different forms and practices. How to discover these subjugated insights in and knowledge of belief? In which ways is this knowledge related to and mediated by a religious tradition? These questions also affect constructive theology: What are the implications of these data for our understanding of a religious tradition, and its contents and forms? What are the implications for academic theological reflection on religion and religious beliefs? In other words: what are the implications of these changes in subject and method for systematic theology?

of *Everyday Life*, II, *Living and Cooking*, eds. by M. DE CERTEAU - L. GIARD - P. MAYOL, Minneapolis (MN) 1998), p. XVII.

⁶ See, for instance, such different works as: R.S. CHOPP, *The Power to Speak; Feminism, Language, God*, New York 1989; S.D. WELCH, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Minneapolis (MN) 1990; A.M. ISASI-DIAZ, *En la Lucha. A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology*, Minneapolis (MN) 1993; D.S. WILLIAMS, *Sisters in the Wilderness. The Challenge of Womanist Godtalk*, Maryknoll 1993; M. MCCLINTOCK FULKERSON, *Changing the Subject. Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology*, Minneapolis (MN) 1994; M. DE HAARDT, «Kommt, ... esset mein Brot». *Exemplarische Überlegungen zum Göttlichen im Alltag*, in H. MEYER-WILMES (ed), *Tango, Theologie und Kontext. Schritte zu einer Theologie des Alltags*, Münster 2002, pp. 5-32

⁷ See for instance the earlier mentioned works of Sharon Welch or Mary McClintock Fulker-son.

It is with respect to these questions that the works of De Certeau seem to offer further constructive impulses. In privileging the ‘others,’ the theoretical outsiders, he uses the concept of *appropriation* as a primary tool in searching for resisting or surviving practices. It is a concept which can also be found in the works of some feminist authors, notably Delores Williams, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Mary McClintock Fulkerson.⁸ De Certeau uses ‘appropriation’ to name an important mechanism or process with which it is possible to describe the *act of believing*, as well as *what makes people believe*. According to de Certeau, these are the ‘*tactics*’ with which people, day after day, produce a sense of meaning and freedom in their appropriation of the cultural, religious, political, and social instruments, images, concepts and attitudes.⁹

To reflect on actual (religious) practices as processes of appropriation, seems to open up a path to a further exploration of a far more differentiated, polyvalent and moreover, ambiguous, religious reality than the uni-dimensional and mono-logic religion and theology of the academy and the churches would like to deal with.¹⁰ It opens up the fundamental and inescapable, although often repudiated, ‘intertwinement’ of those spheres which in the western culture and the humanities are traditionally separated and put in a hierarchical dualistic and gendered opposition: such as the secular and the sacred, or the popular and the ‘high’ religion/culture. I expect this approach to even offer possibilities for rethinking such gendered dualisms as transcendence and immanence, monotheism-poly, or pantheism, body and spirit.

2. *The wonder of daily life: aesthetics and a sense of presence: a new agenda for theology?*

As said, this privileging of everyday life is an epistemological and methodological choice. It is grounded in an ethical and political conviction that can be translated in a liberation-theological fashion as ‘the option for the poor,’ or, in a more postmodern, or post-colonial perspective, as the option for ‘the other,’ or the ‘excluded.’¹¹ Despite this exclusion, these ‘others’ ‘live’

⁸ The most explicit use of a specific ‘appropriation’ of religious texts, concepts, and symbols in order to ‘survive’ and, at the same time, express their own religious belief and spirituality can be found in the works of Delores S. Williams, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Mary McClintock Fulkerson (note 6), regardless of their very different methods. Liberation theologians also use the concept of appropriation to describe the empowering use of biblical stories by oppressed people. According to Willem Frijhoff, De Certeau is considered as one of the most influential, be it recalcitrant, protagonists of the concept of ‘appropriation’ (W. FRIJHOFF, *Toeëigening: van bezitsdrang naar betekenisgeving*, in «Trajecta», 6 [1997], 2, pp. 99-118, p. 113).

⁹ M. DE CERTEAU, *The Practices of Everyday*, Ch. III, pp. 29-42.

¹⁰ In «*Komm, ... esset mein Brot*», I elaborated on the meaning of the ambiguous in relation to everyday life.

¹¹ On this point, its political and ethical commitment, this approach as I see it differs from, for instance the actual German practical theological interest in the ‘Alltag.’ See my ‘Kom ... eet mijn brood.’

the city. Precisely this city life we want to highlight in theology, because it shows us not only how people survive (as the De Certeau would state), but it also reveals their hopes and expectations, as mujerista theologian Asa Maria Isasi-Diaz asserts.¹² And here is the point theology comes in. For feminist theologians, theology has to make clear what 'God' has to do with human life. In other words, theology must not solely examine the adequacy of its language of God, or ponder the question of whether «we can speak of a transcendent God».¹³ I agree with Mary McClintock Fulkerson when she states: «Feminist discourse does not enter the lists over the question of Gods existence».¹⁴ On the contrary, theology should demonstrate *that* and *what* 'speaking of God' signifies in the lives of ordinary women and men.¹⁵ This implies a gradual shift from the '*what of belief*' to the '*how of believing*' in order to create reliable maps, that is: to create a more 'reliable' conceptual language of 'God.'

However, there is another element embedded in this focus on concrete practices. This refers to a more 'religious attitude' or a 'spiritual sensibility', rather than to explicitly political, epistemological and theological convictions, although these can not be separated from attitude. This sensibility is related to a kind of 'more' that has everything to do with earlier mentioned power to survive or manifestations of hope and visions. Again, the work and person of Michel De Certeau can be helpful to trace this attitude. In describing his work, Luce Giard speaks of de Certeau's optimistic élan, his trust given to others in such a way that no situation appears to him apriori to be fixed or hopeless. This attitude, according to Giard, is

«fed from an aesthetic sensibility that De Certeau expressed through the maintained capacity for being filled with wonder. If Michel De Certeau sees these wonders everywhere, it is because he is prepared to see them everywhere and not only with the educated authorities».¹⁶

This encounter with 'the wonder of daily life', is one of the many forms of the experience of the «Presence» that reveals itself, according to De Certeau, as «that without which life is impossible».¹⁷

In recent years, the articulation of this deep sense of wonder, transcendence, or grace, has been given more attention in theology, particularly by

¹² A.M. ISASI-DIAZ, *En La Lucha*, p. 34.

¹³ As argued by M. SAROT and A. MARCUS in *Denken van Wie ons ontsnapt. Rationele Theologie en de transcendentie van God*, in «Nederlands Theologische Tijdschrift», 54 (2000), 2, pp. 145-157, p. 146 and by A. HOUTEPEN, *God, een Open Vraag*, Zoetermeer 1997, p. 18 (note 6).

¹⁴ M. McCLINTOCK FULKERSON, *Changing the Subject*, p. 372

¹⁵ See S.D. WELCH, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity. A Feminist Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll 1985, p. 1; This conviction regarding the task of theology is found in almost every feminist and liberation theology.

¹⁶ L. GIARD, *History of a Research Project*, pp. xxi-xxii, quotes Michel de Certeau from *Culture in the Plural*, Minneapolis (MN) 1997, and *The Mystique Fable, I, The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century*, Chicago (IL) 1992.

¹⁷ See for this 'Presence' M. DE CERTEAU, *Culture and Spiritual Experience*, in «Concilium», 19 (1966); and also F.C. BAUERSCHMIDT, *Introduction: Michel de Certeau, Theologian*, in G. WARD (ed), *The Certeau Reader*, Oxford 2000, pp. 209-213.

those who criticise the dominant rationalistic and/or exclusive and male character of academic traditions. In my view, this shift in attention to 'the sense of presence' in all its different dimensions, has become the bedrock of theological transformation, or, more specifically, of the transformation of reflection on 'the Divine.'¹⁸ Initially this attention was mainly focussed upon the arts, upon artists and writers, at least in a white Western context. Artists seemed to be regarded by theologians as being among the few groups of people in contemporary Western culture, who are able to give a voice to a sense of presence that was not only more convincing and vivid, but also more critical, complex and ambiguous, than the univocal and monosemic voices heard in the churches or from the theologians. Gradually, this interest in the aesthetic sensibility, as this sense of 'presence' is also called, has been broadened to the day-to-day practices, experiences and sensibilities of ordinary people. As Diane Prosser MacDonald states:

«this dimension goes far beyond the art sitting in protective spaces in museums and performed for selected audiences in symphony halls. In fact, the aesthetic is no work of art at all, but the 'sensate markings' or practices of culture operating in the 'in-between' of everyday life».¹⁹

Additionally, certain Latino/a theologians point out the fundamental rootedness of the aesthetic, the political, and the ethical in a same human praxis, just as they have also indicated the interrelatedness of the aesthetical and the ethical in their reflections on Latino popular religion. However, it is important to note that the aesthetic does neither harmonise the tragic or the suffering. Poetry is no luxury, says Isasi-Díaz.²⁰ As some would say: art express the truth of suffering and hope.²¹

To explore, as theologians, this 'wonder of the daily life, these experiences of a sense of presence' and to articulate its systematic implications, requires an attitude that takes seriously the practices of belief that allow people to 'stay alive' or to survive (De Certeau, Williams), and that as such also reflect their hopes, visions, their desires, relations, their love and their struggles (Chopp, Isasi-Díaz). It is an attitude in which the 'sense of presence' is not understood through a priori theories that work for all times and places, but through the historical, cultural – including gender, ethnic, racial and sexual – specificity which shapes the forms as well as the contents of

¹⁸ See, for instance, M.J. LEGGE, *Inside Communities, outside conventions: What is at stake in doing theology*, in «Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses», 29 (2000), 1, pp. 3-18.

¹⁹ D.L. PROSSER MACDONALD, *Transgressive Corporeality. The Body, Poststructuralism, and the Theological Imagination*, Albany (NY) 1995, p. 136.

²⁰ A.M. ISASI-DÍAZ, *En La Lucha*, p. 35 The expression is a quote from the title of an essay by A. LORDE, *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches*, New York 1984; for further elaboration on this specific topic see: R.S. GOIZUETA, *US Hispanic Popular Catholicism as Theopoetics* in A.M. ISASI-DÍAZ - F.F. SEGOVIA (eds), *Hispanic/Latino Theology. Challenges and Promise*, Minneapolis (MN) 1996, pp. 261-288; A. GARCÍA-RIVERA, *The Community of the Beautiful. A Theological Aesthetics*, Collegeville 1999.

²¹ E. GRAHAM - J. POLLING, *Some Expressive Dimensions of a Liberation Practical Theology. Art Forms as Resistance to Evil*, in «International Journal of Practical Theology», 4 (2000), 4, pp. 163-183.

the articulation of this sense of presence. It is my strong conviction that the exploration of, the research into this 'diffuse' category of 'a sense of presence' is an important task for theological reflection.

But then, one of the important questions following from these foundational considerations is *how to practice* a theology of everyday life? How does one detect a sense of presence in everyday life, and, subsequently, how to reflect on it in such a way that it is a contribution to the transformation of theological conceptualisations and, eventually, the transformation of the doctrine of God? After all, recent Western theological transformations (including those of feminists), however impressive, seldom start from the concrete practices of everyday life. When theologians indeed depart from practice-analysis and/or anthropological insights, it is often difficult to reach beyond a, however necessary and important, critical deconstruction and reformulation of theological agendas, actors, and fundamental theological outlines.²² Here I think of the works of, for instance, Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz and Mary McClintock Fulkerston, although I admire their works very much. The same goes for the work of Kathryn Tanner, who with her plea for everyday life, is not able to reach beyond a highly abstract and formal level, that is, not able to reach beyond the city-view from above.²³

3. *Practices as source for systematic theological reflection: some examples*

In my own work I have recently finished some small projects in which I tried to give flesh and blood to these former considerations. The first was a theological analysis of the price-winning film *Babette's Feast*.²⁴ This analysis was aimed mostly at bringing to the light how the main character, Babette, could survive. I described by which processes of appropriation she could adapt to her new situation while at the same time resisting the prevalent attitudes towards for instance food. In doing and acting so, she – in a way – undermined the actual religious status quo. Subsequently, I showed that her 'survival and resistance' – manifested in Babette's sense of food as a sense of presence – had a transforming power for the community as a whole. While using their same everyday and traditional theological language, the community in fact changed its actual religious attitudes and came to value 'other' behaviour as religiously meaningful. With this analysis I also criticised other theological interpretations of this film. In my view these

²² As, for instance, in the previously mentioned studies by Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Mary McClintock Fulkerston. See: S. JONES, *Women's Experiences between a Rock and a Hard Place*, in R.S. CHOPP - S. GREEVE DAVANEY (eds), *Horizons in Feminist Theology. Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, Minneapolis (MN) 1997, pp. 33-52, 47-50.

²³ As in K. TANNER, *Theories of Culture. A New Agenda for Theology*, Minneapolis (MN) 1997. See S. JONES, *Women's Experiences*.

²⁴ See M. DE HAARDT, *A Way of Being in the World*, pp. 11-26.

interpretations made use of a traditional theological city-map, that is to say: they used a canon of what are thought to be relevant theological meanings and concepts. Using these concepts prevented the interpreters to discern the characters actual practices of the everyday life. They focussed on big theological words as salvation, Eucharist, self-giving love acts, and there by overlook such subversive and meaningful activities as shopping, cooking and eating. Consequently they overlook the 'saving' qualities these activities had for and in within the community.

In the second project I worked with questionnaires. I asked approximately a hundred women, all more or less engaged in the broader women and faith movement in the Netherlands, about their experiences and images of 'God'.²⁵ My aim was to relate the outcome of the questionnaires to contemporary feminist reflections on the Divine. I was – in fact I am – especially interested in all kinds of discussions dealing with transcendence and immanence. The results of the questionnaires contradicted some of feminist theological insights, and indeed were thought provoking. I just mention one striking gap between my empirical data and systematic reflection: in feminist systematic theology you can find a strong defence of the necessity of gendered, that is to say, female images of the divine. However to the contrary, my respondents mainly did *not* choose for female images nor for other personal images while referring to the Divine. But they *did* match with another feminist theoretical preference, notably a preference for immanence. What should we make of that? One of my suppositions centers around the specific Dutch or Western European context of my respondents. More importantly: these results lead me to re-evaluate some of the feminist and other theoretical approaches in which 'transcendence' plays an important role in reflecting the Divine. Using my empirical data, amongst other things, offered a new perspective on the traditional opposition immanence-transcendence, without subordinating the 'immanence' pole. It brought me to the conclusion that a better look at the actual practices of belief indeed has something to offer when trying to go beyond dualistic concepts.

In a third project I made an analyses of the social, political texts of the traditional Catholic Women's organizations in the Netherlands. I tried to detect their 'religious' motivation and engagement in order to reflect on the social and spiritual capital or inheritance of these women.²⁶ The purpose of this reflection has been to contribute to systematic theology from the perspective of these women's spiritual and social identity. I found that they, over the years, had used the very traditional *Imago Dei* motive to justify their political choices and commitments. This motive, saying that man (sic!) is the image of God, is used by these organizations to claim the

²⁵ See: M. DE HAARDT, *Feminist 'God-praxis' in Relation to Feminist Theology*, in N. SCHREURS - T. PLASTOV (eds), *Juxtaposing Context. Doing contextual theology in South Africa and in the Netherlands*, Pietermaritzburg 2003, pp. 98-132.

²⁶ See: M. DE HAARDT, *Grond onder de voeten. De uitdagingen van de leeropdracht 'Vrouwen, geloof en cultuur'*, in «Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies», 9 (2002), pp. 4, 62-76

social, political well-being and autonomy for women. Because even the poorest women and children are the image of god, it is the responsibility of everyone to enable them to live fully. So these women over the years again and again objected against war, against women and child traffic, against unequal payment and so on and so forth. In more recent years the *Imago Dei* motive also functioned as reference point to criticise the Roman Catholic church in her attitude towards women. So in fact, these women made use of a traditional theological motive, which they appropriated for their own use, even if this would work against the interpretation of church authorities. All this did not make these women to become radical feminists, not at all. But it did enable them to be their own religious and social agents and to claim social, political and religious rights where this was not self-evident. It also became clear that one need to look at the actual practices of these women organisations in order to find these women's own interpretation of the meaning of religion and spirituality: spirituality and belief as a kind of practice. How then to reflect on the systematic meaning of these religious practices? Within the social sciences and the humanities, including philosophy and theology, the activities of the women's organisations belongs to the marginalized scientific domain of anthropology that, in a way, in theology and spirituality corresponds with the domain of devotional and popular piety. According to Kees Waayman, one of the Dutch experts in spiritual theology, its marginalisation comes from the fact that this form of spirituality «concerns itself with everyday matters as procreation, health, interpersonal relation and property». The institutions of theology and the church, consider this devotion or this engagement as vulgar and therefore depreciate it. So in fact, there was hardly an opportunity to classify these women's practices and to reflect on the 'subjugated knowledge' that lies beneath it. However, using de Certeau's notion of 'appropriation' to evaluate these women's practices in name of the *Imago Dei* motive, opened up possibilities to describe these women's knowledge and insights as 'tender competence'. With this notion I was able to name and demonstrate not only the qualities and competence of these women's religious practices, but also the mechanisms of exclusion in traditional reflection on the meaning of everyday practices.

I consider these examples of recent research as attempts to overcome the drawbacks of a systematic reflection that denies the importance of everyday practices for theory. It is only a start, and these reflections from everyday life can and should take many forms and directions. But I am convinced that in the end this change in subject and method will indeed offer significantly different theoretical insights.