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# **Towards a Feminist Wisdom Spirituality of Justice and Well-Being**

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In the last decades spirituality has become a key-topic not only in th\*olgy but also in commercialized forms of Self-help groups and the New Age movements. Spirituality has become a big business. Leading companies everywhere are tuning into the power of spirituality as they look for conveying company goals and for inspiring their people to do their best in the global market place. In the process, spirituality has become a popular but also an enigmatic and vacillating term that means different things to different people. By focusing on wisdom/Wisdom, human or divine, as the horizon of a feminist spirituality of struggle, I want to probe the possibilities for articulating a political Wisdom spirituality that sustains rather than mutes struggles for survival and liberation. Such a spirituality has to focus

on wo/men's<sup>1</sup> struggles to survive and transform relations of domination. At its heart is the discernment of Spirit-Wisdom's working in different global contexts.

## Wisdom

In the past two decades feminists have rediscovered and recreated the submerged traditions of Divine Wisdom in all their splendor and possibilities. Feminist the\*logians<sup>2</sup> have discovered anew the creativity of wisdom/Wisdom and have searched for Her presence in the spaces "in-between," the blank spaces between. They have sought "to hear Wisdom into speech," to use the expression coined by Nelle Morton, one of the first feminist the\*logians and teachers of wisdom/Wisdom, who recognized that "Wisdom is feminist and suggests an existence earlier than Word."<sup>3</sup>

In the bible, "Spirit (Ruach)" – "Presence (Shekhinah)" – "Wisdom (Chokmah)" are all three grammatically feminine terms. They refer to very

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- 1 In order to lift into consciousness the linguistic violence of so-called generic male-centered language, I write the term wo/men with a slash in order to use the term "wo/men" and not "men" in an inclusive way. I suggest that whenever you read "wo/men" you need to understand it in the generic sense. Wo/man includes man, she includes he, and female includes male. Feminist Studies of language have elaborated that Western, kyriocentric, that is master, lord, father, male centered language systems understand language as both generic and as gender specific. Wo/men always must think at least twice, if not three-times and adjudicate whether we are meant or not by so-called generic terms such as "men, humans, Americans, or professors." To use "wo/men" as an inclusive generic term invites male readers to learn how to "think twice" and to experience what it means not to be addressed explicitly. Since wo/men always must arbitrate whether we are meant or not, I consider it a good spiritual exercise for men to acquire the same sophistication and to learn how to engage in the same hermeneutical process of thinking twice and of asking whether they are meant when I speak of wo/men. Since according to Wittgenstein the limits of our language are the limits of our world, such a change of language patterns is a very important step toward the realization of a new feminist consciousness.
  - 2 In order to indicate the brokenness and inadequacy of human language to name the Divine, I have switched in my book *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet. Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*. New York: Continuum, 1994 from the orthodox Jewish writing of G-d which I had adopted in *But She Said* and *Discipleship of Equals* to this spelling of G\*d which seeks to avoid the conservative malestream association which the writing of G-d has for Jewish feminists. Since the\*logy means speaking about G\*d or G\*d-talk I write it in the same way.
  - 3 MORTON, Nelle. *The Journey is Home*. Boston: Beacon, 1985, 255p. See my books *WisdomWays: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001; Spanish Translation *Los Caminos de la Sabiduría. Una Introducción a la interpretación feminista de la Biblia* Santander: Sal Terrae, 2004 and „*En la senda de Sofía. Hermeneutica feminista crítica para la liberación*. Translated and edited by Severino Croatto and Cristina Conti, (Buenos Aires: Lumen-Isedet, 2003); Portuguese translation in process by Nhanduti Editora.

similar female figurations in the Hebrew Bible<sup>4</sup> who express G\*d's saving presence in the world. They signify that aspect of the Divine which is involved in the affairs of humanity and creation:

For within Her is a spirit intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle,  
*Active, incisive, unsullied, lucid, invulnerable, benevolent, sharp,  
 Irresistible, beneficent, loving humans, steadfast, dependable, unperturbed  
 Almighty, all-surveying, penetrating all intelligent, pure and most subtle spirit.  
 For Wisdom is quicker to move than any motion;  
 She is so pure, she pervades and permeates all things.  
 She is a breath of the power of G\*d, pure emanation of divine glory  
 Hence nothing impure can find a way into her....  
 Although alone, she can do all; herself unchanging, she makes all things new.  
 In each generation she passes into holy souls,  
 She makes them friends of G\*d and prophets;  
 For G\*d loves only the one who lives with Wisdom.  
 She is indeed more splendid than the sun, she outshines all the constellations;  
 Compared with light, she takes first place, for light must yield to night,  
 But over Wisdom evil can never triumph.* (Wisdom 7:22-25. 27-30).<sup>5</sup>

Traditional the\*logy has focused on the Spirit, who is in Latin grammatically masculine, whereas feminist the\*logy has rediscovered the Divine in female Gestalt or form. Jewish feminists have rediscovered a spirituality of Shekhinah who plays a significant part in some Jewish traditions, and Christian, especially Catholic feminists have elaborated the female figure of divine Wisdom (which in Greek is called Sophia and in Latin Sapientia). Several books of the bible speak about Her, some of which, however, are not found at all or only in an appendix in Protestant versions of the bible.<sup>6</sup> Divine Wisdom-Sophia-Sapientia plays a significant role in Orthodox th\*ology but less so in modern western the\*logy.

In biblical as well as in contemporary religious discourses the word *wisdom* has a double meaning: It can either refer to a quality of life and of a

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4 I use Hebrew Bible instead of Old Testament and Christian Testament instead of New Testament because Old and New Testament are Christian expressions that announce the superiority of Christianity over Judaism.

5 I am quoting from the text of the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the bible but have changed masculine language for G\*d and humans.

6 The following books that are called by Protestants "apocryphal" or "deuterocanonical" are usually printed in Protestant bible editions in an appendix placed after the Christian Testament. They are found in the Roman Catholic, Greek, and Slavonic canon: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, also called the Wisdom of Jesu Ben Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, 3 Maccabees (only in Greek and Slavonic bibles), 4 Maccabees (only in an Appendix to Greek bible), 1 Esdras (in Greek bible; = 2 Esdras in the Slavonic bible), Prayer of Manasseh (in Greek and Slavonic bibles; as appendix in the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Catholic bible), Psalm 151 (following Psalm 150 in Greek bible), and additions to the books of Daniel and Esther.

people and/or it can refer to a figuration of the Divine. Wisdom in both senses of the word is not a prerogative of the biblical traditions but it is found in the imagination and writings of all known religions. It is trans-cultural, international and inter-religious. Wisdom is practical knowledge gained through experience and daily living as well as through the study of creation and human nature. Both word meanings, that of capability (wisdom) and that of female personification (Wisdom), are crucial for articulating a feminist biblical spirituality that seeks to fashion biblical readers as critical subjects of interpretation.

Wisdom is a state of the human mind and spirit characterized by deep understanding and profound insight. It is elaborated as a quality possessed by the sages but also treasured as folk wisdom and wit. Wisdom is the power of discernment, deeper understanding, and creativity; it is the ability to move and to dance, to make the connections, to savor life and to learn from experience. Its root meaning comes to the fore in its Latin form *sapientia*, which is derived from the verb *sapere* = to taste and to savor something. Wisdom is intelligence shaped by experience and sharpened by critical analysis. It is the ability to make sound choices and incisive decisions,

Wisdom in distinction to intelligence is not something with which a person is born. It only comes from living, from making mistakes and trying again and from listening to others who have made mistakes and tried to learn from them. It is a perception of wholeness that does not lose sight of particularity, relativity and the intricacies of relationships. Wisdom understands complexity and seeks integrity in relationships. It is usually seen as integrating the left and right brain in a union of logic and poetry, as bringing together self-awareness and self-esteem with the awareness and appreciation of the world and the other. Wisdom is neither a specialized discipline nor a discrete field of study. It is a radical democratic concept insofar as it does not require extensive schooling and formal education. Unschooling people can acquire wisdom and highly educated people might lack it.

Wisdom, however, is most fascinating to feminists as a representation of the Divine in female "Gestalt" or form. She is a Divine female figure who in extra-biblical traditions is represented by a variety of Goddesses and Goddess traditions. The biblical texts about Divine *Wisdom-Chokmah-Sophia-Sapientia* retain the subjugated knowledges and the submerged language of the Goddess within Christian tradition just as the Divine *Shekhinah* – Presence does within Judaism. Although the feminist scholarly search for the footprints of Wisdom-Sophia in biblical writings encounters a host of historical-theological problems, it is nevertheless commonly accepted that the biblical image of *Wisdom-Chokmah-Sophia-Sapientia* has integrated Goddess language and traditions.

Whereas the biblical Wisdom literature generally has been seen as

kyriocentric literature written by and for elite educated men, more recent feminist studies have argued that post-exilic wo/men in Israel and Hellenistic Jewish wo/men in Egypt have conceived of Divine Wisdom as prefigured in the language and image of Egyptian (Maat, Isis) or Greek (Athena or Diké ) Goddesses. According to a very well known-prayer, all the different nations and people use divine titles derived from their own local mythologies when they call on the Goddess, Isis. They do so in the full knowledge that Isis is one, but encompasses all.

In the same way as the widespread Isis cult and mythology, so also the variegated Wisdom discourses of post-exilic Palestinian sages elaborate the image and figure of Divine *Chokmah-Wisdom* as the “other name” of G\*d. Her ways are ways of justice and well-being. In the figure of *Chokmah-Sophia-Wisdom*, ancient Jewish scriptures seek to hold together belief in the “one” G\*d of Israel and the language and metaphors of a female Divine being. Hence the texts struggle to subordinate Wisdom to YHWH:

*From everlasting I was firmly set,  
From the beginning before earth came into being.  
The deep was not, when I came into existence,  
There were no springs to gush with water....  
When G\*d fixed the heavens firm, I was there...  
When G\*d assigned the sea its boundaries  
- and the waters will not invade the shore-  
When G\*d laid down the foundations of the earth,  
I was by G\*d's side, a master craftswoman, delighting G\*d day after day,  
Ever at play in G\*d's presence, at play everywhere in the world,  
Delighting to be with the children of humanity. (Proverbs 8:23-24.27.29-31)*

In recent years scholarship and texts about Divine *Wisdom-Chokmah-Sophia* have received intensive feminist attention because of the female gender of *Chokmah-Sophia-Wisdom*. Feminists in the churches have translated the results of biblical scholarship on early Jewish and Christian Wisdom discourses into the idiom of song, poem, story, art and ritual. This practical and creative feminist attention to the divine female figure of Wisdom has brought the results of scholarship on biblical wisdom literature to public attention and has raised public objections.

For instance, in 1993 Protestant feminists sponsored a conference in Minneapolis that not only featured lectures on Divine *Sophia* but also invoked and celebrated her in prayer and liturgy. This Re-Imagining Conference was allegedly the most controversial ecumenical event in decades. Conservatives claimed that it challenged the very foundations of mainline Protestantism in the USA. The reaction of the Christian Right to this con-

ference was so violent that one high-ranking woman lost her church job and others have run into grave difficulties.<sup>7</sup> This struggle indicates the significance of Divine *Chokmah-Sophia-Wisdom* for contemporary Christian self-understanding.

Some European feminist theologians have raised serious historical and theological objections against attempts at recovering the earliest Sophia discourses in order to valorize "Lady Wisdom." They have argued that one must reject the figure of Divine Lady Wisdom as an elite male creation that serves both misogynist and elitist interests. The fascination of feminist theologians with *Wisdom-Sophia* is misplaced, they maintain. Wisdom speculation is at home in Israel's elite male circles and bespeaks their interests. They also point to the possible theological dangers inherent in such biblical language and imagination.

### **Shekhinah**

A similar debate is taking place among Jewish feminists with respect to the Shekhina, a biblical figure akin to *Chokmah, Sophia, Sapientia, Wisdom*. The Bible contains only a few references to "the glory of the *Shekhina*" and to "the wings of the *Shekhina*." While the meaning of these verses is not at all obvious, the Rabbinic Sages of the Talmud and Midrash interpreted them as having to do with situations in which the manifestation of God and God's nearness to humankind or to specific individuals is spoken of.

In the course of gradual theological developments that came to fruition in the *Kabbalah*, the (mystical) literature of the High Middle Ages, the designation '*Shekhina*' came to be understood not only as feminine but also as the personification of God's immanent presence in the world. Kabbalistic texts, written by men and prone to extreme objectification of women and femininity,<sup>8</sup> depict a highly esoteric view of creation as a process in which God manifests God-self in a series of emanations. In the terminology of the *Kabbalah*, God is referred to as *Eyn Sof* (Without End), and is never pictured in human form. In order to create the universe, *Eyn Sof* created 10 *Sefirot* (emanations) each corresponding to a different element of his/her divinity. Half of these emanations are portrayed as masculine, half as feminine. The "lowest" of the emanations, *Shekhina*, is the aspect of God closest to this world. The *Shekhina*, a feminine hypostasis of God in Kabbalistic thought, must be re-united with the male Holy One Blessed Be He, in order for "*tikkun*" or cosmic reparation to take place.

7 See BERNEKING, Nancy J.; JOERN, Pamela Carter (eds.). *Re-Membering and Re-Imaging*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995.

8 For a detailed analysis of gender in Kabbalistic literature see WOLFSON, Elliot R. *Circle in the Square*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

With the rise of Jewish feminism in the late 1970s the *Shekhina* took on new life. Eager to find non-masculine ways to think about God, some Jews feminists embraced the *Shekhina* in much the same way that non-Jewish feminists embraced a variety of pre-Christian goddesses and Christian feminists embraced *Wisdom-Sophia*. The *Shekhina*- songs and rituals of Jewish feminists have tended to crystallize around two interlinked themes: healing of women's ills and creating of women's communities. In all-wo/men groups, Jewish feminist have forged communities of spiritual sisterhoods, have explored Jewish sources for hints about the lives of our foremothers, have created novel biblical exegesis, and have searched for spiritual responses to the transitions, triumphs, and life crises that members have faced over the years. *Shekhina* - prayers seem to have gathered the most momentum among groups of Jewish wo/men throughout the United States, and more recently around the world, who have been gathering to help one another find spiritual healing in the aftermath of rape, hysterectomy, miscarriage, and other losses.

For instance, Nancy Helman Schneiderman describes a wo/men's healing ritual that she organized after she had a hysterectomy. I quote here the part of the ceremony that most explicitly related to the *Shekhina*:<sup>9</sup>

"Two holes, about a foot deep, have been dug in the garden before the ceremony. I stand between them holding my womb in a hard pottery bowl to have it blessed and purified by the pouring of water from a pottery pitcher. *I now join both parts of my life together by the planting of my womb. We draw from our depths the essentials of our sustenance. Our spiritual thirst has caused us to look for new ways of cleansing our bodies and souls.*

All say: (While a friend pours water over the womb)

*Women are like water.*

*We flow and flow and flow.*

*Shekhina is like water.*

*She bubbles from below.*

Nancy: (Transfers womb to greenware bowl for planting.)

*I offer my womb as a covenant, returning it to the earth, honoring the Source of all life. As I plant it in the ground, my mourning is complete and I am released from this part of my life. (We planted two pear tree saplings, one over the womb and the other in the empty hole.)*

Emerging in Jewish feminist ritual is an image of the *Shekhina* as female who is associated with such 'feminine' elements as the moon, and an image of Her as a bringer of comfort – particularly, although not exclusively, to wo/men. Talmudic understandings of the *Shekhina*'s immanence, and Kabbalistic understandings of the *Shekhina*, being that part of G\*d that

9 "Midlife Covenant: Healing Ritual after Hysterectomy" in LEVINE, Elizabeth Resnick. *A Ceremonies Sampler: New Rites, Celebrations, and Observances of Jewish Women*. La Jolla: Women's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education, 1991, 55-60.

is closest to humans, is given new the\*logical dimensions: The Shekhina is “deep within us” and always accessible to us, we simply need to learn how to look and listen.

However, critical Jewish feminists have pointed to the dangers of such a revival of the *Shekhina*. Marcia Falk, whose *Book of Blessings* has become a liturgical classic among Jewish feminists, for instance, has rejected *Shekhina* as a suitable term for Divinity:

*The Shekhina was not originally a female image; it did not become so until Kabbalistic times. And when it became explicitly associated with the female, it did not empower women, especially not in Kabbalistic thought, where male and female were hierarchically polarized.... In Jewish tradition, the Shekhina has never been on equal footing with the mighty Kadosh Baruch Hu, the Holy One Blessed Be He, her creator, her master, her groom, the ultimate reality of which she was only an emanation.*<sup>10</sup>

Susan Sered also points to the critical problems that the *Shekhina* poses for Jewish feminists:

*The Shekhina is part of a culture that genders not only aspects of God, but also time (the Sabbath is gendered feminine in Jewish culture), space (Jerusalem is gendered feminine in Jewish culture), and the visible ‘heavenly bodies’ (the moon is gendered feminine in Jewish culture). The attribution of gender to God, time, and space presents gender as immutably built into the geography of the cosmos. Eternally infused with gender, the universe is understood to be “naturally” gendered. Human resistance to gender roles, in that case, is both aberrant and futile – the universe itself is imbued with gender.*

*The problem of the Shekhina raises extremely difficult questions that have to do with the possibility of feminist reclamation of any sort of gendered religious symbol. Can it EVER be to women’s benefit to choose to align themselves with feminine symbols and symbolic objects that are at best objectifications of gender difference, and at worst sacred prescriptions for a hierarchical social order? Isn’t it likely to be the case that the reclamation of gendered religious symbols will simply re-animate and re-energize notions of the perpetual gendering of the universe -- notions that serve to constrain the possible life paths open to all individuals by making it seem as if socially constructed gender roles are mirrored in – or mirrors of -- Divine and cosmic attributes?<sup>11</sup>*

Similar questions can be raised with regard to *Chokmah-Sophia-Sapientia-Wisdom*. The spirituality of the Divine Feminine that extols the ideal of the *Lady* has a long ideological tradition in biblical religions and is still

10 FALK, Marcia. Notes on Composing New Blessings. In: PLASKOW, Judith; CHRIST, Carol P. (eds.). *Weaving the Visions: Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*. São Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989, 129-130.

11 SERED, Susan. Jewish Wo/men and the Shekhina. In: SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, Elisabeth; AQUINO, Pilar (eds.). *In the Power of Wisdom: Feminist Spiritualities of Struggle*. *Concilium*, 2000/5. London: SCM Press, 2000, 78-90.

pervasive in feminist spirituality. The *Eternal Feminine* or the Cult of *True Womanhood* which I have dubbed the discourse of the “*White Lady*” was developed in tandem with Western colonization and romanticism that celebrated Christian white elite European women/ladies as paradigms of civilized and cultured womanhood. This ideology had the function to legitimate both the exclusion of elite wo/men from positions of power in society and church and at the same time made them colonial representatives who mediated European culture and civilization to the so-called savages.

This image of the *Eternal Feminine* and the cult of the *Lady* is a projection of elite, western, educated gentlemen and clerics who stress the complementary nature of wo/men to that of men in order to maintain a special sphere for upper class white wo/men. This construct does not have the liberation of every wo/man as its goal but seeks to release the repressed feminine in order to make men whole. Associated with this cult of the *White Lady* was and is a spirituality of self-alienation, submission, service, self-abnegation, dependence, manipulating power, backbiting, powerlessness, beauty and body regimen, duplicity and helplessness – “feminine” behaviors which are inculcated in and through cultural socialization, spiritual direction, and ascetic disciplines such as dieting and cosmetic surgery. In and through traditional biblical spirituality wo/men either internalize that they are not made in the Divine image because G\*d is not She but He, Lord/Slave-master/Father/Male, or they are told that if they fulfill their religious and cultural calling to supplement and complement the Divine Other, they will embody the Divine Feminine. In both cases cultural and religious structures of self-alienation and domination are kept in place in and through biblical Wisdom spirituality and the the\*logical articulation of the Divine as Lord.

Feminist objections against the valorization of the biblical Wisdom tradition also point out that this tradition is permanently suspect not only as an elite male tradition but also as one that, in a dualistic fashion, plays out the “good” woman against the “evil” woman.<sup>12</sup> Such a misogynist tradition cannot be concerned with justice at all. However, other scholars specializing in Wisdom literature have rightly objected to such a negative evaluation of the Wisdom traditions. They have pointed out not only that Wisdom discourses are permeated with the teachings of justice<sup>13</sup> but also agree that in the first century, prophetic-apocalyptic and sapiential (Wisdom) traditions were intertwined, integrated and changed. These traditions espouse a

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12 However, in fairness to the Wisdom traditions it must be pointed out that the prophetic or apocalyptic traditions are equally suspect because they are also permeated by kyriocentric bias.

13 See also CAMP, Claudia V. *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*. Sheffield: Almond, 1985, (Bible and Literature Series, 14).

cosmopolitan ethos that can respect local particularities without giving up claims to universality.

In addition, the advocates of Wisdom argue that the wisdom traditions had long been democratized and that much of the sapiential traditions of the gospels reflect folk wisdom which very well could have been articulated by and for wo/men. Finally, they point out that feminist exegetical-historical objections against the feminist regeneration of Divine *Chokmah-Sophia-Wisdom* may also be due to different confessional locations and indebtedness to Neo-orthodox th\*ology.

Moreover, a closer look at the biblical Wisdom traditions reveals that these traditions do not portray Divine Wisdom in terms of the *Lady*. Divine Wisdom is a cosmic figure delighting in the dance of creation, a “master” crafts wo/man and teacher of justice. She is a leader of Her people and accompanies them on their way through history. Very unladylike she raises her voice in public places and calls everyone who would hear her. She transgresses boundaries, celebrates life, and nourishes those who will become her friends. Her cosmic house is without walls and her table is set for all.

Hence, I suggest biblical discourses on Divine Wisdom are still significant today not only because they are a rich resource of female language for G\*d but also and more importantly because they provide a framework for developing a feminist ecological the\*logy of creation and a biblical spirituality of nourishment and struggle. Moreover, they embody a religious ethos that is not exclusive of other religious visions but can be understood as a part of them, since wisdom/Wisdom is celebrated in all of them. The earliest Sophia-traditions that still can be traced in the margins of early Christian works intimate a perspective that combines Jewish prophetic, Wisdom and *basileia* (which means the political realm of G\*d or G\*d’s vision of a transformed creation and world) traditions as central to a political, open-ended and cosmopolitan religious vision of struggle and well-being for everyone. In short, biblical wisdom/Wisdom spirituality is a spirituality of roads and journeys, public places and open borders, nourishment and celebration. It seeks for sustenance in the struggles for justice and cultivates creation and life in fullness.

The goal of wisdom/Wisdom teaching is to enable one to cope with life and to impose a kind of order on the myriad experiences that determine a person. Wisdom teaching is an orientation to proper action, to knowing when to do what. It means to engage in value judgments that urge a certain course of action. Truthfulness, fidelity, kindness, honesty, independence, self-control, doing justice means to walk in the way of wisdom/Wisdom. In short, wisdom/Wisdom holds out as a promise the fullness and possibility of the “good life;” it is a search for justice and order in the world that can

be discerned by experience. Wisdom teaching does not keep faith and knowledge apart, it does not divide the world into religious and secular, but provides a model for living a “mysticism of everyday things.”

### **The Radical Democratic Space of wisdom/Wisdom**

In distinction to traditional spirituality, which is individualistic and privatized, the practice and space of Wisdom spirituality is public. Wisdom’s spiraling presence (*Shekhinah*) is global, embracing all of creation; Her voice is a public, radical democratic voice rather than a “feminine” privatized one. To become one of Her justice-seeking friends, one needs to re-imagine a feminist spirituality of justice as the spiraling circle dance of Wisdom.<sup>14</sup> It means to re-imagine feminism as a Spirit/spiritual movement in the open space of wisdom/Wisdom who calls us out of isolation and invites us to join Her justice movements around the world. She invites us to re-invigorate a feminist movement for change and transformation that is inspired by a vision of justice and human flourishing or well-being. Such a movement is best envisioned in the radical democratic space of wisdom/Wisdom, as the *ekklesia of wo/men*.

A *radical*, that is *grassroots* (from Latin *radix*=roots), democratic wisdom/Wisdom space is carved out today by social movements for change. Wo/men’s grassroots movements around the globe have initiated processes of democratization that allow wo/men to determine their lives, participate in decision making and contribute to the creation of a just civil society and religious community. When I use the word democracy I do not mean representative formal democracy, however.

Three broad understandings of democracy and democratization can be distinguished: liberal democracy, Marxist/socialist democracy and direct participatory democracy. *Liberal democracy* entails a shift from the direct rule of the people to representative government that protects individual rights, equal opportunity, constitutional government and separation of powers. *Marxist/Socialist* democracy argues that effective participation of citizens in the political process is prevented by class and other inequalities. Human emancipation is only possible with the overthrow of the capitalist system. However, socialist democrats increasingly seek to incorporate pluralism and multiculturalism into the theory of democratization.

*Participatory* radical democracy insists on the literal understanding of

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14 I have elaborated such a Wisdom dance in terms of biblical hermeneutics. It’s seven steps are a hermeneutics of experience, of domination, of suspicion, of evaluation, of remembering or historical re-construction, of imagination and of transformation. However, such Wisdom strategies of meaning making are not restricted to the bible. Rather Lieve and I have used them in workshops in Brazil and Ecuador to explore the workings of power, Condomblé, Christology, constructing a wo/men’s center, or Mary.

democracy as “rule of and by the people.” It distinguishes itself from other forms of democracy by the conviction that such “people democracy” is actually realizable. It entails equal opportunities for all to take part in decision making in matters affecting not only the political realm but also the workplace, the community, the church, and interpersonal relations. It encourages wo/men to take control over the course of their lives and supports structural arrangements that encourage us to exercise self-determination, respect the rights of others, to take part in debates about the “common good,” and to create new institutions that are truly participatory and egalitarian. Participatory democracy recognizes that

Democracy needs to continue to undergo a process of re-creation and that a more active and substantial participation can only take place as a result of experimentation with new and different ways that seek to enhance citizen involvement and discussion. In a sense, democracy can never be achieved in any final form – it has to be continually re-created and renegotiated.<sup>15</sup>

Grassroots movements are the embodiment of such ongoing democratization processes. They are community-based initiatives, base groups, or peoples organizations that address practical everyday problems, are committed to improve living conditions in a particular location, and promote values associated with local, decentralized democracy. They redefine the form and content of politics by seeking to create and to expand spaces for democratic decision making, consciousness raising, individual self-development, group solidarity, and more effective public participation. Wo/men are and have been at the forefront in creating and shaping such global processes of democratization.

In modernity most of the social movements for change have been inspired by the dream of radical democratic equality and equal human rights. Since the Western democratic ideal has promised equal participation and equal rights to all but in actuality has restricted power and rights to a small group of elite gentlemen, those who have been deprived of their human rights and dignity have struggled to transform their situations of oppression and exclusion. However, such radical grassroots democratic struggles are not just a product of modernity, nor is their ethos and vision of radical democracy a product restricted to the West. Rather, their ethos and vision is inspired by a radical democratic wisdom/Wisdom spirituality that empowers people for changing structures of domination.

Just as traditional Christian spirituality so also a feminist wisdom/Wis-

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15 BYSTYDZIENSKI, Jill M.; SEKHON, Joti (eds.). *Democratization and Wo/men's Grassroots Movements*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, 9. This book analyzes the variety of ways in which wo/men from sixteen different countries struggle “for more control over their daily lives while simultaneously creating and extending opportunities for greater participation.”(18).

dom spirituality seeks to name dehumanizing and life-destroying evil and deception as well as to identify sources of well-being. Such practices of critical reflection and informed adjudication can be likened to the traditional "spiritual practice" of "discerning the Spirit." But whereas malestream spirituality requires obedience to "spiritual direction," a feminist Wisdom spirituality insists on justice. Like malestream spirituality it presupposes that we cannot see reality and ourselves clearly but that we need the light and guidance of the Holy Spirit, Divine Wisdom. However, it does not assume that we need a spiritual director, spiritual "father" or spiritual "master" to escape self-deception and the "snares" of the evil One. Rather, a feminist spirituality replaces the kyriarchal<sup>16</sup> discipline of "spiritual direction" with the practice of a systemic analysis of domination and subordination.

Whether we are able to recognize the structural patterns and mechanisms of domination and dehumanization depends on the lenses or analytic categories we use. Social analytic categories offer "lenses" with which we can approach the socio-historical rhetorical situations and contexts of our own lives. Such lenses of spiritual interpretation in the "open house" of Wisdom seek to tear down the walls and patterns that dehumanize and divide us from creation and from each other.

The patterns of domination can be seen as functioning like the choreographic design that determines the steps and movements of a dance, although often such designs are not conscious to the dancers. Similarly, some kind of a socio-political and religious "choreography" of domination is always at work not only in biblical texts and interpretations but also in our own experience and rhetorical situation, even though such patterns are often not conscious or critically reflected.

To take an example from my own religious background: In order to understand Roman Catholic patterns of domination one must ask: What kind of the\*logical and ecclesial self-understanding comes to the fore for instance in the banning of condoms or in the prohibition of wo/men's ordination?

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16 I have developed a complex analysis of interstructured and multiplicative dominations and coined the neologism *kyriarchy/kyriocentrism* [from Grk. *kyrios* = domination of the emperor, lord, master, father, husband, elite propertied male] as descriptive of the workings of empire. This neologism seeks to express the intersecting structures of dominations and to replace the commonly used term patriarchy, which is often understood in terms of binary gender dualism. As an analytic category, kyriarchy, articulates a more comprehensive systemic analysis of empire in order to underscore the complex interstructuring of dominations, and to locate sexism and misogyny in the politicalmatrix or, better, patrix of a broader range of dominations. Feminism in this sense is a critical theory and praxis that seeks to transform kyriarchal i.e. emperor, lord, slave-master, father, elite male determined power relations of domination. See my books *But She Said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: Beacon, 1992, and *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context*. Boston: Beacon, 1998, as well as the introduction to *Searching the Scriptures*. New York: Crossroad, 1993-1994.\_

How is the Roman discourse of power and sexuality constituted and what is its motivating force? What is the social location of these categorical prohibitions and what are its the\*logical ramifications? Why does Rome resort to strategies of censure and repression instead of argument and persuasion? What are the fears that continue to motivate wo/men's exclusion from the sacred or their control of procreation?

In order to make conscious the "choreography" of domination we need to use feminist social analytic tools that also can identify an alternative "choreography." Such an analytic is an assembly of critical concepts and categories that are necessary for critically naming the "choreography" or patterns of domination. Different socio-cultural analytics have been developed by liberalism, Marxism, colonialism, socialism, fascism, capitalism, feminism, postmodernism and other socio-political theories.

Since malestream theories, however, generally do not focus on the situation of wo/men but take elite men - or better Gentlemen - as the paradigm for being human, critical liberationist feminists have developed a socio-cultural-religious analytic that can provide an interpretation of ourselves and the world in which no wo/man is any longer exploited, marginal and subordinate. In order to be able to adequately "decode" situations of wo/men's oppression and to engage in the ongoing process of transformation, we need to internalize categories of analysis that can help us to recognize malestream socio-political and religious-cultural kyriarchal identity formations and discourses of dehumanization.

The ability of subordinated and oppressed people to imagine a complete overthrow of relations of domination and situations of injustice depends on the articulation, circulation, radicalization and institutionalization of radical egalitarian democratic wisdom/Wisdom discourses. As de Toqueville pointed out a long time ago, once people have cultivated the spirit and legitimacy of the principle of justice and equality they will seek to extend it to all spheres of life.

In and through cultural, political and religious discourses the social structures in which we are positioned are interpreted. Since we cannot stand outside of the interpretive frameworks available in our society and time, we "make sense" out of life with their help. For instance, one wo/man might be influenced by neo-conservatism and believe that her social position results from the fact that she worked harder in life than the wo/man on welfare who lives down the street. Another wo/man shaped by right-wing religious fundamentalism might explain her situation by the fact that she is blessed by G\*d because of her virtuous life, whereas the unmarried mother on welfare has gravely sinned and therefore is punished. Again another wo/man might believe that her success as a wife and mother is due to her feminine attractiveness and selfless dedication to her husband

and children, and that the fate of the wo/man on welfare is due to her lack thereof.

### **A wisdom/Wisdom Spirituality of Resurrection**

If we always have to resort to existing interpretive discourses for making sense of our lives, then the importance of a wisdom/Wisdom spirituality of justice becomes obvious. Since malestream the\*logical hegemonic discourses provide the frameworks in which we “make meaning” in oppressive situations, feminist the\*logical discourses must provide discourses that illuminate not only the choreography of oppression but also the possibilities for a radical democratic society and religion.

A feminist Wisdom spirituality of justice has rediscovered Jesus as Sophia-Wisdom’s prophet, who was executed as the Christ, who was vindicated by G\*d as the Living One, and who is always ahead of us, must be articulated and proven “right” again and again and in variegated ways, within the continuing struggles of the ekklesia of wo/men for survival, justice and well being. Such an Easter spirituality derives its life-enhancing powers from our engagement in struggles for justice in society and church. It inspires the ekklesia of wo/men gathered around the table of Divine Wisdom. Instead of looking to authorities for solutions and answers, a critical Catholic spirituality of justice insists that G\*d and the resurrected One can only be experienced among the Living Ones. The Living One is not to be found among the dead.

The stories of the “empty tomb” are ambiguous and open ended. They invite us to cultivate a Wisdom spirituality of justice that is inspired rather than threatened by such openness. In the face of the empty tomb the search for orthodox control and scientific certainty becomes questionable. Instead the spirituality of the empty tomb valorizes a compassionate practice of honoring those who are unjustly killed in body or spirit. The empty tomb story celebrates wo/men as faithful witnesses who do not relinquish their commitment and solidarity with those who fall victim in the struggle against dehumanizing powers. Most importantly, it affirms that the struggle of Jesus’ and all struggles for justice have not ended in execution and death. The tomb is empty!

The Living One is not going “away,” to live in heavenly glory, not leaving us to struggle on our own. The “empty tomb” does not signify absence but presence: it announces the presence of Sophia’s prophet on the road ahead, in a particular space of struggle such as Galilee. According to Matthew Jesus as the Living One, as the embodiment of Divine Wisdom is present in the “little ones,” in the survival struggles of those who are impoverished, hungry, imprisoned, tortured, and killed today.

The “empty tomb” proclaims the Living one as present in the faces of our grandmothers who have struggled for survival and dignity, in the ekklesia of wo/men gathered around the table of Divine Wisdom.

To sum up my argument: A feminist wisdom/Wisdom spirituality of justice challenges us to create and participate in a movement of Wisdom’s friends, and asks that we get involved in such Wisdom movements for change and transformation. It involves moving out of internalized relations of domination and into the radical democratic space of Divine Wisdom, the ekklesia of women; it means envisioning a multicultural and multireligious grassroots democratic movement for the well-being of all; it means to initiate and get involved in consciousness-raising Wisdom groups. It means to become engaged in the ekklesia of wo/men, which all over the world envisions, debates, and puts into practice such a radical democratic future of well-being for everybody without exception.

Lieve Troch whose life and work this volume celebrates and honors, has tirelessly worked to teach such a wisdom/Wisdom spirituality of justice and to make the radical democratic ethos of the ekklesia of wo/men a lived reality around the world. It has been a joy to collaborate with her in this work over the years. I hope we will continue to meet as wisdom/Wisdom friends in the work of justice again and again in the coming years. Ad multos annos, Lieve!

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