

Feminist Theologies

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Feminist theology is gender-conscious, liberation-oriented, contextual, and experience-based theology. As such, it represents an important interdisciplinary perspective within theological reflection. It is therefore particularly important today to understand feminist theology as a theology that incorporates the construction and deconstruction of gender into every facet of its reflection. Personal experiences have been and continue to be the impetus and motivation to embark (anew) on a theological and scholarly journey in search of answers.

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Editorial Note

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1. What Are Feminist Theologies?

German speaking feminist theology^[1] has been and continues to be driven by a quest for justice, the goal of a fulfilling life for all, and the recognition of God's presence in the contemporary world. Its significance extends beyond its role as a precursor and pioneer of gender theories or gender-conscious theologies. Rather, it examines the significance of gender as a constitutive element of social reality within theology and the church. In particular, it focuses on social gender, gender roles, and the societal expectations associated with the assignment of a gender.

Thus, its focus lies on the personal experiences of individuals, particularly women*. ^[2] To combat discrimination, oppression, and invisibility, women* are explicitly placed at the center ^[3] – a matter of equity from a feminist-theological perspective. The goal of feminist theology is therefore to make human experiences visible and audible and to bring them into dialogue with mainstream theology in order to seek out perspectives of liberation.

As early as the 1980s, however, feminist theology was criticized as the “theology of white women,” accused of essentializing “womanhood” and the associated experience and universalizing them as a seemingly shared category. This criticism gave rise to, for example, womanist, ^[4] *mujerista*, ^[5] and other forms of theology. However, feminist theology itself has also engaged with this criticism and, precisely by incorporating the analytical category of gender, has demonstrated that its focus is on analyzing and critiquing theologically grounded patriarchal gender norms and gender roles, and on overcoming them.

2. The History of the Women’s* Movement as the Starting Point for Feminist Theologies

Three significant waves can be identified in the social and political women’s* movement. The first wave, which began in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focused on women’s* suffrage – which was secured in Germany in 1918 – as well as on expanding opportunities for women* in the workforce, access to education, and the discussion of new social values. The first theological approaches emerged as early as this period, particularly with regard to women’s* education and the demand to allow women* access to the pastoral profession.

The second wave of the women’s* movement, which emerged in the 1960s, was strongly characterized by themes of emancipation and self-determination. The theological concepts presented here built upon these themes. Questions of justice and equity came to the forefront. For feminist theology in German speaking countries, the lay movements within Catholicism that emerged after the Second Vatican Council, as well as the activities of the global ecumenical movement were of considerable significance.

In the 2000s, a third wave of the women’s* movement emerged, characterized by postfeminist and deconstructive approaches. This movement challenged the notion of gender, viewing it as a social construct, and drew attention to persistent forms of sexism. The theories of Judith Butler  played a significant role in this context.

The developments of the second and third waves are clearly reflected in feminist theology, although the boundaries with queer theology are fluid. ^[6]

3. Key Doctrinal Questions from the Perspective of Feminist Theologies

3.1 God

The portrayal of God in the Bible is deeply intertwined with the political, social, and religious contexts in which the biblical texts were written. Many biblical stories situate God within a “mythical” worldview, in which human life, within the context of nature, is perceived as dependent on powerful supernatural beings who can actively intervene in world events. Within this framework, patriarchal images of God can be found both in the biblical texts and in church history. One example of this is the designation of God as LORD. Such depictions reflect the dominant sociocultural norms of the time and simultaneously open up spaces for critical reflection and theology that seek alternative, liberating conceptions of God.

The Bible contains a vast number of names and descriptions of God in the Old and New Testaments. For example, God is referred to as the Eternal One, the Name, or the Holy One of Israel. In addition, neutral terms such as “rock” or “fortress” are used to emphasize God’s protection and care. Other linguistic depictions and stories portray God as a being of community and joy, particularly in connection with festivals or weddings. In the biblical parables, the imagery

used draws on everyday scenes from the lives of Jesus's contemporaries to convey divine attributes in a vivid and understandable way, as is the case with the caring shepherd or the just employer.

Whenever people speak of God, they also create images and concepts of God that, in turn, influence how they view themselves and the world. Feminist theology makes it clear: women*, men*, and all people should be able to see themselves reflected in images of God. This can be achieved, for example, by promoting non-patriarchal images of God – such as in worship services – and by experimenting with alternative forms of language such as God/ess.^[7]

“If God is male, then the male is God”^[8]. – this is how the early feminist theologian Mary Daly put it, thereby highlighting how closely images of God and humanity, as well as images of God and the self, are intertwined. Perspectives on liberation emerge from a diverse discourse on God. God, then, need not be either Father or Lord. Perhaps it is rather the name for a counterpart, something outside, a void, a beyond.

3.2 Jesus Christ

The incarnation of God in the male form of the human being Jesus Christ poses a significant challenge, particularly for theologians of the second wave of feminism. A central question is, Can a male savior truly redeem women as well? Feminist theologians criticize in particular a “Christology from above,” as this perpetuates a dualism between God and humanity and thereby also stabilizes and justifies patriarchal power structures.

This critique also addresses the Christology of sacrifice and atonement, as seen in the works of Dorothee Sölle ^{GND} and others. It argues that the symbol of Christ, in its patriarchal interpretation, supports and legitimizes patriarchal power structures. Sölle proposes a shift in perspective rooted in liberation theology, which is already anchored in the early days of feminist theology. This shift moves away from the concept of “suffering for” toward “suffering with” and transforms the understanding of “being a sinner” into “being the one against whom sin is committed.” This also entails changes in anthropology.

The Christian tradition, in its conception of the exclusivity of salvation through Jesus Christ, carries within it potential risks of sexism and racism. Feminist theology responds to this with a reinterpretation of faith in Jesus that emphasizes perspectives of liberation for all people. In doing so, it is important to be aware of Jesus's embeddedness in his Jewish context. This means that when emphasizing the gender equitable approaches of Jesus Christ, there is a risk of Christian anti-Judaism if the patriarchal is uncritically equated with the Jewish. This perspective requires a careful and nuanced understanding of the historical and cultural context in order to avoid such simplifications. Every form of Christology is always context bound and must be updated for its own specific context in life. Fruitful approaches to such a Christology beyond power-related instrumentalizations have been developed in particular by postcolonial theologians such as Musa W. Dube ^{GND}.^[9]

3.3 Grace and Forgiveness

In traditional theology, the cross has often been portrayed as a place of suffering and sacrifice, while feminist critiques have frequently argued against the interpretation of the cross as a patriarchal glorification of suffering. Feminist theology seeks to examine sin and grace from the perspective of the victims, effectively reversing the focus from the perpetrators of sin to the victims of sin.

Early feminist theologians were particularly critical of the Christian doctrine of sin because it focused on women's* sexual “purity” and enabled the exclusion and oppression of women*. Others have raised the question of whether the entire theological category of sin should be abandoned in favor of other ways of speaking about the human condition. Thus, Rachel Baard ^{GND} argues that the Christian interpretive framework of human sin – the tragic flaw at the core of human experience – is also one of the best tools for understanding the evils of sexism, patriarchy, and the traditional doctrine of sin itself.^[10] In doing so, she offers a new rhetoric of sin, one that takes into account the diverse experiences of all people.

4. Current Theological Relevance

These are all important concerns, yet the accusation is repeatedly leveled that feminist theology focuses (only) on women*, dwells on conceptions of femininity, remains stuck in a binary understanding of gender, and thus fails to sufficiently engage with new theories in gender studies and their deconstruction of gender. In feminist theology, however, the focus is rather on independent reflection and the development of an individual theological voice. This movement aims at self-empowerment and questions traditional theological teachings in light of the liberating potential of God's love. In doing so, theological reflection cannot be separated from one's own embeddedness in concrete contexts and the existing (unjust) structures of an imperfect world. Both, according to this conviction, must be taken into account in theological work. In today's world, feminist and queer theologies play a significant role as dialogue partners. Feminist theologies have undergone processes of institutionalization in many areas, and this is also true within the church context.

Recommended Literature

Shaw, Susan M., *Feminist Theology. The Basics*, London 2025.

Handasyde, Kerrie/McKinney, Cathryn/Pryor, Rebekah, *Contemporary Feminist Theologies. Power, Authority, Love*, London 2021.

Ronit Irshai, Art. Feminist Theology, in: *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 04.07.2024 (PDF-Document, <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Judaism/FeministTheologies>), accessed on 24.04.2026.

Citations

- ¹ This article is a significantly revised and abridged version of Jäger, Sarah, *Feministische Theologien und Gender* (in internationalen Perspektiven), in: Eckholt, Margit et al. (Eds.), *Dogmatik didaktisch. Ein Handbuch für Religionspädagog:innen*, forthcoming.
- ² The gender asterisk (*) after "women" serves as a reference to the constructed nature of gender and indicates that this term means more than biology and includes all those who identify as female. Feminist theologians initially focussed their attention on women* and thought in binary terms – men* and women*. For some time now, however, feminist theology has been strongly concerned with gender as a category of knowledge in society that is repeatedly produced – that is, constructed – through language and other cultural practices.
- ³ Cf. Pemsel-Maier, Sabine, *Feministische Theologie*, in: WiReLex, 10.10.2017 (PDF-Dokument, <http://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/100280/>), accessed on 24.04.2026, 2.
- ⁴ Cf. Townes, Emilie M., *Womanist Theology*, in: Keller, Rosemary Skinner/Ruether, Rosemary Radford (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, Bloomington 2006, 1165–1173.
- ⁵ Cf. Isasi-Díaz, Ada María, *Mujerista Theology. A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, Ossining 1996.
- ⁶ Another important paradigm is theological masculinity studies: it challenges traditional concepts of masculinity and demonstrates how these contribute to the oppression of women*. The goal is to reinterpret biblical texts and theological traditions, to develop a theology based on equality, partnership, and respect, and to encourage men* to reflect on both their privileges and the disadvantages they experience under patriarchy, and to actively contribute to the promotion of gender justice. On this topic, see Fischer, Martin/Heß, Ruth, *Systematisch theologische Männerforschung als Beitrag zur Gleichstellung der Geschlechter*, in: Walz, Heike/Plüss, David (Eds.), *Theologie und Geschlecht. Dialoge querbeet*, Zurich/Berlin 2008, 158–190; Krondorfer, Björn, *Die Religion entdeckt den "Mann". Kritische Männerforschung in Religion*, in: *Schlangenbrut* 115 (2011), 35–37.
- ⁷ Cf. Ruether, Rosemary R., *Feminist Interpretation. A Method of Correlation*, in: Russell, Letty M. (Ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Philadelphia 1985, 111–124.

- ⁸ Daly, Mary, *Jenseits von Gottvater*, Sohn und Co. Aufbruch zu einer Philosophie der Frauenbefreiung, Munich 1980, 33, translation by Jacob N. Cerone
- ⁹ Cf. Dube, Musa W., *Other Ways of Reading. African Women and the Bible*, Atlanta 2001.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Baard, Sophia Rachel, *Sexism and Sin-Talk. Feminist Conversations on the Human Condition*, Louisville 2019.

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