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Why Sophia? Feminist Theological-Ethical Analysis in a Digital Age

1. Introduction: Sophia, feminist theology and the digital age as a Trans*Time

Feminist theology remains relevant with regard to digitalization and the use of robots, as well as social media, and the corresponding technological "devices". The reason for this lies in the way that digital devices and robots already shape daily lives and are in themselves not gender neutral. From another perspective, the question is significant as to how far a specific feminist perspective, i.e. a perspective directed specifically towards women, has relevance today. Personal lives seem to be flexible and freely selectable, as do gender identities, i.e. personal assignments to one gender or beyond one gender. Images of women, men, and transgender people are seen as being in flux, and have been deconstructed by Judith Butler (e.g., Butler 1990) and other postmodern thinkers. Digital technologies also contribute to making gender flexible. Therefore, this essay will focus on the role of feminist theological ethics in a digital age, one characterized by an ongoing need for a feminist perspective due to (among other) issues of justice. This feminist perspective will be combined with perspectives that transcend the binary gender perspective and bring into focus the fluidity of gender and the trans*versions of being. The idea in this essay is by focussing on the figure of Sophia – who appears in the Bible and is important in feminist theology but who has also trans*aspects and appears as a "social robot" – to show the aspects that a feminist theological ethics should develop in relation to the digital age.

Digital technologies permeate our everyday lives – whether as social media in their networking function, as artificial intelligence that collects and evaluates data streams and creates entirely new "digital identities", or as robotics that can create cyborgs, i.e. hybrid entities comprising machine and living organism. The US sociologist Rogers Brubaker interprets our present as a time of transitions, i.e. as "trans-times", which also alludes of course to transgender and transracial, and related social categories such as female and male, which also due to digitalization are in flux (Brubaker

2016). At the same time, the digital age, as already mentioned, also and still involves discrimination against women, which is manifested in hate speech, misogyny (Ganz and Meßmer 2015), perpetuations of old role patterns (also expressed in the way that devices are designed, e.g., Criado Perez 2019; Both 2012) and the struggle against everything that deviates from a supposedly "natural norm". One of the ambivalences of the digital age becomes apparent here: while the growing technological opportunities allow new social and anthropological patterns of interpretation to emerge, the old, partly essentialist gender patterns and gender roles appear to remain in place – and the inequalities regarding those who are labelled "woman" or who see themselves as such have persisted. Thus, we can argue that feminism retains its importance, and I will discuss in the following what tasks a feminist theological ethics has in this context, what it could comprise, and how it could be developed in the future.

2. Challenges for a feminist theology as ethics

Given this description of the current period, what challenges does a feminist theology with a focus on ethics face?

    First, the issue of gender norms and relations remains relevant in digitally mediated societies, too. There is, in other words, still a need for feminist theology, its approaches and ways of thinking. One particular feature of feminist theology is its perspectivity. Feminist theology also engages in a critique of science and society, and in doing so argues for equality for women and against patriarchal structures, thereby also showing its ties to women's movements critical of injustice in society. And, despite the relevance of perspectives specific to women, we must also always bear in mind that categories such as "woman" and "man" are no longer clearly definable, and that deconstructivist ways of thinking are also significant. As will also become apparent in the following studies, this means expanding the "collective term" feminist theology (Jost 2017, 9), and relating feminist theology itself to gender studies, as well as to intersectional, queer and postcolonial approaches.

    Second, the growing relevance for society of digital and technological equipment, as well as robotics, is emerging as a challenging object of interest for feminist ethics and gender issues, with such equipment also displaying ambivalence. On the one hand, they open up fascinating possibilities, Donna Haraway already pointing out in her Cyborg Manifesto in the 1980s (Haraway 1995 <1985>) that, through technologization, hybrids

emerge, which she describes as cyborgs that can help overcome gender norms. On the other, though, digital devices are not gender-neutral tools, but can have implicit or explicit gender markers. For example, computer scientist Safiya Noble (2018) draws attention in her book *Algorithms of Oppression* to the fact that digital technologies such as algorithms are not neutral or objective in their analyses but can produce discriminatory results. It is therefore important for ethical analysis in its applied form to look not only at questions of justification, but also at the scope of action and the associated technological devices. This I will demonstrate later in relation to the "social robot" Sophia.

Third, there is the challenge regarding the ethics and the traditions in feminist theology that we should draw upon. Essential here are above all for me matters of equality and justice as well as responsibility, and an ethics that both deals with feminist perspectives, i.e. issues concerning women, and is gender sensitive. Beyond the possibilities of ethical justification and the anchoring of content, ethical questions also have hermeneutic and epistemic dimensions. This means that my understanding of feminist ethics also involves reflecting on what can be understood and known. This is relevant because, like the theologians Dion Forster and Graham Ward, I believe that "cultural and social imaginaries" contain cultural and social ideas that operate, so to speak, in the subconscious. On the one hand, people use these ideas to give meaning to their experiences, and on the other the ideas contain deeper normative orientations (Forster 2020) and ideas of gender.

With this in mind, I will now take up the Sophia traditions of feminist theology, since this will allow us to address ideas of equality and issues of hermeneutics and epistemology.

3. Sophia in feminist theology and her trans*dimension

Sophia, Wisdom, Chokhmah, is important in feminist theology (Hailer 2001). Sophia is not only understood as wisdom but becomes personified wisdom (Hausmann 2009: 3) and is described as a figure with female features in close relation with God (Maier 2007:1) and further more with Jesus Christ. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, Sophia became a central Biblical figure for feminist theologians, many women, and women's groups in the church. Proverbs 8, a text of wisdom literature, features the figure of Sophia, who publicly calls for and encourages people to embrace prudence, truth, and justice, and who is depicted as God's favourite, as someone very close to God. It is through her, that God does also the work of creation;

she plays on God's earth and takes her delight in human beings. In Proverbs Sophia is also portrayed as a "teacher, preacher and principle of authority but also as a lover … She is constantly trying to lure human beings to life, to leave foolish ways and walk in the ways of wisdom, which are ways of insight, justice, and peace." (Kim 2002, 107). Sophia also appears in the Book of Sirach and gives a speech (Sir 24). She is considered not only to have been created from the very beginning but also to be connected to the Torah. This transformation of Sophia can be described as follows: "We see an increase, then, in Sophia's feminine characteristics and roles in the book of Sirach as compared to the book of Proverbs." (Kim 2002, 108) And her cosmic character is also emphasized. Another transformation takes place in the Book of Wisdom of Salomon since here she is "presented as a figure of God as pure spirit while, retaining her role as creatrix and governor of the cosmos." (Kim 2002, 111) She has also become a mediator between God and human beings, which involves the dimension of saving people.

The teacher of wisdom is then found in the New Testament in Jesus Christ; or, rather, he himself is then also depicted as the wisdom of God. Therefore, in early Christian contexts we can see another transformation in the understanding of Sophia:

> "The tradition of personified Sophia flourished anew when communities of Jewish Christians started to reflect on the saving significance and identity of Jesus of Nazareth. They tapped deeply into the tradition of personified Sophia to articulate the saving goodness they experienced in Jesus the Christ, finding many similarities in the two. Belief in Jesus as Sophia's envoy or as Sophia's embodiment appeared very early in various areas – in Western Syria or Palestine (Q) and in Corinth (1 Cor. 1–4). Since Jesus the Christ is depicted as divine Sophia, confessing Jesus as the incarnation of God imaged in female symbol is biblical. A Sophia Christology asserts that Jesus is Sophia in human form." (Kim 2002, 115).

By interpreting these Biblical and early Christian texts, feminist theology – and we should mention here feminist exegesis and above all Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1995) – has developed both in and with Sophia an implicitly female image of God. So, Elizabeth A. Johnson showed how Sophia as the biblical symbol of wisdom nourishes an inclusive view of God in a trinitarian way when she writes:

> "The trinitarian template discloses this one God in the world in multifaceted ways. Spirit-Sophia who blows where she wills, pervading the world with vitalizing and liberating power, brings divine presence in the world to its widest universality. Jesus-Sophia, preaching the nearness of the reign of God, embodying in his own relationships with the poor and outcast the compassionate love of heaven for earth, being crucified for it, and raised to glory in the Spirit as pledge of the future for

all, brings divine presence in the world to the point of its most precise particularity. Holy Wisdom, the unoriginated Mother of all things, upholding the world as the generating and continuously sustaining source of the being and potential for new being of all creatures, radicalizes divine presence in dark mystery." (Johnson 2018, 241f.).

The importance of Sophia for feminist theology thus lies first of all in her opening up of perspectives for bringing Sophia and female features in relation with God and Jesus Christ. At the same time, Sophia as wisdom has become something of a "social imaginary" (Forster 2020, 91) in present day Christianity, the Swedish theologian Ninna Edgardh Beckman enthusiastically reporting that Sophia was part of the liturgy at the First European Women's Synod in Gmunden in 1996, and that she was the subject of songs and lectures, thus becoming a mediating, unifying figure. Sophia brought the participants together, despite their individual and religious differences, and acted as a "social imaginary" to transmit hope of justice for all. Beckman reports that Sophia motivated "women ... to bring down ... the old power hierarchies in the church, and became a source of strength for those longing for spiritual nourishment and empowerment to live as women in today's society". For Beckman, Sophia, as a wise woman, stands for and motivates equality, justice and care for nature and people (Beckman 1997, 43).

Beyond this feminist interpretation of Sophia, we can also emphasize the transformational character of Sophia, who was first a female figure, before then being seen as spiritual in a male figure as Jesus. Therefore, Sophia could also be interpreted as a "trans*being", thereby opening up the binary gender boundaries. Although these are just some thoughts on how one could develop an interpretation of Sophia in relation to the plurality of gender concepts, the idea that is relevant in the context of a feminist theological ethics is that, with Sophia, gender identities blur while the impact of Sophia remains in stressing the relevance of wisdom, justice and love for all.

4. What wisdom? Spinning out the threads of wisdom

How, then, can we further develop Sophia, and Sophia as a "social imaginary", for a feminist theological ethics today – an ethics that connects with intersectional, queer and postcolonial thought? For me, it is necessary to proceed on two levels. First, we should consider the method of knowing and of understanding that is inspired by feminist hermeneutics and epistemology. Second, we should take up Sophia as a "social imaginary" and

the figure of Sophia in relation to the issue of equality; and, to provide ethical analyses with a broader basis, we need to begin with reflections on absorbing sapiential ways of thinking in their entirety.

First, it was Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, with her "feminist-critical hermeneutics" (encompassing the hermeneutics of suspicion, memory, proclamation, and creative appropriation, e.g Schüssler Fiorenza 1988), who made hermeneutic perspectives visible for feminist analyses. In doing so, she was also able to make clear that the link between Christ and wisdom points to the fact that "the first christological reflection theology was sophialogy" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1995, 141). This also led to the opening up of Christology and the image of God – for "the Son of God is placed in a powerful symbolic context that is implicitly female" (Wacker et al. 2003, 158). I want to take up the importance of hermeneutic and epistemic questions for feminist thought here, and analyze not only texts, but also situations, actions, and spaces for action for the purposes of intersectional thinking. My aim is to develop a hermeneutic perspective that investigates what is *not* told or what does *not* appear, a perspective that investigates so to speak the "counter-images". Behind my reflections are both the hermeneutics of suspicion and the approach of the contemporary philosopher Miranda Fricker, who has drawn attention to the significance of "epistemic injustice" (Fricker 2009). She points out that mechanisms of exclusion occur in the very perception of people and their opinions, i.e., that people do not have their say because they are "black" or because they are "women" and therefore excluded. Taking up these ideas opens up an intersectional perspective, i.e. a perspective beyond gender equality: introduced by the lawyer Kimberly Crenshaw, such a perspective makes visible "the 'intersections' and interactions of categories such as gender, ethnicity, nation, and class" (Janssen 2018, 191). The hermeneutics of suspicion must therefore – as Schüssler Fiorenza herself notes with her understanding of kyriarchy – take into account more unequal structures than "just" gender.

Second, we can draw on the Sophia tradition from an ethical perspective, because wisdom – whether as a woman's wisdom or in other manifestations – is closely linked to the theme of equality and justice. Biblically, this wisdom, which is the first creation of God, can be used to show that wisdom is also characterized by justice and by "everything that makes human life worth living and successful" (Schäfer 2008, 41; translation GU). This message is central to Biblical thinking and can thus also characterize a feminist ethics of the digital age. Justice correlated with wisdom is fruitful for a feminist ethics in that, through Sophia, it is implicitly female but, as the case may be, gendered and has a trans*dimension.

At the same time, and precisely from an ethical perspective, we should understand Sophia not only as a figure and in her dimension of justice; rather, wisdom can also be understood in the context of the entire Biblical texts of wisdom literature (Hailer 1996). Klaas Huizing has drawn attention to the fruitfulness of this perspective in his book *Scham und Ehre*, where he develops an ethics of wisdom and highlights the narrative power of the sapiential Biblical texts, thereby allowing him to speak of how "wisdom teaching in the Bible" can become a "school of perception and orchestration (Inszenierung)" (Huizing 2016, 17, translation GU). He links this perspective to a sapiential anthropology, which he characterizes as "optimistic in its disposition".

By taking up the positive anthropology and ethics proposed here, we also have to keep in mind the power of narrative and the questioning of performance. Making the figure and idea of Sophia with the help of feminist theology and with regard to sapiential thinking fruitful also for ethical questions in a digital age will be the aim of the next chapter.

5. Ethical perspectives from feminist theology on a digital-technological device: Sophia as a "social robot"

Sophia represents in the field of artificial intelligence, or rather in public discussions about artificial intelligence, a prototype of a robot or "roboid" (Fortunati et al. 2021) with a female face, with Sophia thereby becoming known as the name for this robot (see, for example, the manufacturer's website: https://www.hansonrobotics.com/sophia/; accessed on 19 March 2021). Sophia is a social robot, i. e. a "humanoid robot", or is it better to say a "female robot"? Sophia was introduced to the public by her inventor, David Hanson of Hanson Robotics, a company in Hong Kong, in 2016, when she appeared at conferences and even at the United Nations. She has communication skills in that she is able to speak and respond to what her counterpart says. Although Sophia often looks like a doll in photos, the impression that she creates when she is in action in film is amazing: Sophia can hold a conversation; there are cameras in her eyes that she can use to look at and take into account her counterpart; and her face shows human-like facial expressions. The robot actually functions like a computer platform that includes programmes and is also an open system that can be used online, for example. Interest in the robot was very great, a global media spectacle, and was thus, from a marketing point of view, successfully

staged as an advertisement for humanoid robots – and Saudi Arabia even granted Sophia citizenship in October 2017.

In this way it is easy to identify Sophia's gender because Hanson gave her a female face with white skin, as well as a female name: Sophia. The appearances of the robot are highly staged events and do not correspond to our everyday experiences with digital devices, but the phenomenon of the social robot Sophia is still interesting from an ethical perspective, for the ambivalences of our digital age become apparent here, too – as does the need for a gender-critical analysis in order to avoid using technology unreflectively and also to become aware of or prevent its direct and indirect effects. But first to the ambivalence, which shows itself at various points: Should we not celebrate the fact that robotics, which otherwise has rather male connotations, now has with Sophia a "female" face at last – or does this not simply perpetuate a certain image of women? Should we be happy about what artificial intelligence can already do, or should we be afraid of so many human-like machines and their intelligence?

Looking at the phenomenon from the hermeneutic-epistemic and ethical perspectives just developed, we can identify various questions that stimulate further analysis – and that we can use to assess the ambivalences more sharply. In doing so, I would like to concentrate first and foremost on the issue of gender.

Beginning with the analyses of the Sophia tradition in theology, we notice in particular the name *Sophia*. First, the name serves Hanson in his staging of femaleness; and, combined with the female face (smooth, beautiful, white), helps blur the boundary between human and machine. Second, the name can also be understood as an allusion to the importance of the device's artificial intelligence. The aim here is to make the robot as human-like as possible, so that artificial intelligence can be equated with human intelligence.

How problematic this is arises from three perspectives. First, from a theological perspective, this is shown by the contrast between the holistic wisdom linked to Biblical Sophia traditions and robot Sophia's so-called intelligence, which is limited to a technological, computer-animated intelligence. This blurring of the boundary is problematic because it could suggest that artificial intelligence might correspond to human judgment, e.g., in its decision-making competence – and, in doing so, hide the fact that artificial intelligence is still a relatively limited intelligence. This criticism can be generally extended to social discussions about artificial intelligence and the possibilities that can arise from digitalized processes. We should critically examine here whether and how these processes can actually replace

human decisions or perhaps only support them, or how they are affected, especially from a gender perspective.

This is reinforced by a second aspect: namely, the female and white-skinned face of the robot. Feminist studies of technology have shown that, that gender biases are applied to gendered robots (Eyssel and Hegel 2012). At the same time, the robot can be assigned to a biological sex, which also has the effect of fitting the robot into social structures of gender binarity (Collett and Dillon 2019, 9). A binary gender system is thus passed on, with the young, flawless, female face also activating "traditional social imaginaries" and thus leading to acts of normatization since the robot can then also be seen as an ideal woman in her features. Staging gender in this way can have the effect of preserving structures (Parviainen and Coeckelbergh 2020). Put bluntly, the robot and its staging as a woman can lead to "neo-essentialization". This becomes a problem when we think of the further development of robots and the relationship between humans and robots – since: "gender as a social code seems to resist its biological legacies. Even if sex will have no biological or physiological relevance for robots, in the future gender will be reaffirmed in its hermeneutical role, and precisely: for machines, in their process of identity formation; for humans, to better interact with machines." (Ferrando 2014, 41).

Similar reflections then arise when looking at the whiteness of the robot from the perspective of postcolonial and sociological theory. Sociologist Robin DiAngelo draws attention in her book *We Need to Talk About Racism* to the fact that white skin colour or whiteness can also be read as a social construct that is not neutral. Rather it can be seen as an instrument as well as goal of domination that never ends (DiAngelo 2020, 10). In this sense, the robot symbolizes a "social imaginary" that contributes to its legitimization and at the same time perpetuates social constructs in the given trajectories, and has – if we accept DiAngelo's interpretation – insinuated a claim to domination with whiteness. Echoing the feminist sociologist of technology Judy Wajcman, who takes postmodern theories such as Judith Butler's as her starting point, we can thus argue that "gender relations" (and, in this case, we could also add "race") materialize or are inscribed in technology, in the technological device. These inscriptions then have an effect on individual and social understandings of masculinity and femininity (Wajcman 2010, 149).

Third, the transformational character of Sophia and her blurring of gender boundaries which can be seen especially in the theological tradition, leads to a critique of how the social robot Sophia is presented in her female form: thus, it is not only her whiteness but also the way that she

is dressed and her stereotyped answers, that greatly limit the potential for transformational changes.

Even though I present here a feminist *critique* of the social robot Sophia, my analyses are intended to be not only deconstructive. Rather, it is also important for an ethics rooted in feminist theology to accompany digital-technological developments constructively. We have to ask in Hanson's case, for example, whether this robot really has to have a human face; and, if so, how far it would be possible to achieve more plurality beyond gender norms. It is also about going beyond the figure of Sophia and using sapiential ideas to develop new utopias and images that contribute to change and encourage gender equality – and this in transdisciplinary dialogue, as the communication scientist Ricarda Drüeke writes: "It is and remains important, then, to hold on to feminist theories and to continue to design utopias. … What is essential is continuously appropriating technology and constantly intervening in existing relations in order to expand the possibilities of participation" (Drüeke 2020, 324, translation GU). In this sense Hanson's Sophia and social robots in this form can be criticized and questioned due to the power that evolves and is developed by the social imaginary related to them. Seen from a theological point of view with Sophia as Wisdom, Christological aspects and open to trans*dimensions, a feminist ethical perspective on the social robot with the name Sophia shows how important it is to analyse these phenomena from a feminist perspective because they transport also gender issues.

6. With Sophia, beyond Sophia – further developments of feminist theological ethics in a digital age

Drawing on these reflections, I now want to summarize future perspectives for feminist theological ethics, and I will do so by enumerating five points in thetic form: First, feminist theological ethics should be further developed as an interdisciplinary project: it requires exegesis, just as much as it does church history, as well as intercultural, practical-theological, and philosophical insights in order to relate to the epistemic, heuristic and normative issues that revolve around digitalization as we have seen with the topic of Sophia, the social robot.

Second, feminist theological ethics is a transdisciplinary project because it requires dialogue and joint thinking with other sciences when it comes, for example, to questions of applied ethics.

Third, as we have seen, feminist theological ethics is faced with at least a dual task. On the one hand, it is a matter of continuing to do feminist research with its focus on women. On the other, it is also important if we wish to be able to act for the purposes of "theological gender research" to relate feminist theological ethics to gender studies, postcolonial theories, and critical theologies of men, and to transgender, queer studies, and inter-sectional thinking. We can then understand the mix of theories that this entails not as causing contradictions, but as interruptions and productive uncertainty (Vinayaraj 2014, 146f. who relates Spivak's methodology to theology). This means that, in relation to the case of Sophia, with the help of the "figure" of Sophia in its trans*dimension criticism can be uttered versus the traditional representation of the female in Sophia as a social robot.

Fourth, as an academic discipline, feminist theological ethics is based on theoretical, academic standards – and at the same time is to be understood as a project that seeks to provide church and society with impulses, and also in this respect is related to church practice, political debate, and society. In the digital age, this means on the one hand exploring the opportunities and problems of digitalization, and accompanying social transformations critically and constructively; and on the other opening ourselves up metho-dologically to digital opportunities. We should, for example, also consider how best to implement "citizen theology", which implies among other things the use of digital media to increase the participation of non-experts in theological research (Friedrich et al. 2019).

Fifth, a feminist ethics oriented towards wisdom points to the power of narratives and imaginaries. It is important for feminist theology to continue to work on this, and to look, for example, at Sophia in a new way in terms of the whole of the Bible. This could give her various manifestations more weighting, and imagine these manifestations as a trans-happening that expresses her mutability. Utopias and positive imaginaries, including new "social imaginaries", also need to be developed in order to open the horizon for a future that creates equality and promotes justice. Graham Ward writes: "The power of the imagination can destroy us, but it can also save us – or, at least create both spaces in which hope does not die and futures in which friendship can flourish on more than consolation." (Ward 2018, 238).

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