

### 1. Introduction

Since the EKD (Evangelical Church in Germany) has proclaimed a Luther or reformation decade in 2008 in order to celebrate the beginning of the reformation 500 years ago, the interest in what and how women contributed to the spreading of the new reformatory ideas and live style has been increasing in Germany.

The situation has been completely different when I was studying evangelical theology in Marburg and Heidelberg in the beginning of the 1980<sup>th</sup>. In that time German scholars, or rather female scholars, only started to research the bible and church history about women's contribution, although in other countries, like in the USA, Roland H. Bainton (1894-1984) had already published his book "Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy" in 1971. It is very significant that it took 24 years to translate this book into German. In 1995 it had become available as paperback issue with the title "Frauen der Reformation. Von Katharina von Bora bis Anna Zwingli". It contains seven biographies and a summarized description of women of the Anabaptist movement. It quickly became very popular and in 1996 already the third edition was published.

In our lectures and seminars we only heard about Martin Luther, his life as monk and his conversion, about Luther's posting of theses in 1517 in Wittenberg, about his central reformatory scriptures in the 1520<sup>th</sup> and the bible translation. We had to learn the important milestones of the reformation like the Imperial Diets / Reichstage in Worms 1521 and Augsburg 1530, the Marburg Colloquy / Marburger Religionsgespräch in 1529 where the important reformers except for Calvin (Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, Philipp Melancthon, Johannes Brenz, Justus Jonas the elder, Johannes Oekolampad and Stephan Agricola) met to discuss the understanding of the Holy communion, and about the wars and violent conflicts in the context of the reformation and the beginning of the confessionalization like the Peasants' War / Bauernkrieg 1525, the Schmalkaldic War or the 30 year lasting war 1618-48.

But always the reformation, the church-state relations and conflicts occurred as concerted actions of men only: reformers, counterparts, humanist scholars, territorial rulers, councilmen in the cities, book printers or artists, although in the reformation time - like today - half of mankind were women.

## **2. The ambivalence of the reformation movement's impulses in the life and work of women**

The reformation movement of the 16<sup>th</sup> century had influences on every part of the population and found a lot of supporters especially in the so called free cities, among the local nobility but also among the peasants. The time was ripe for reforms in church and society. Humanism had prepared the way for this development, the printing craft and Martin Luther's activities helped to spread the new ideas quickly. As early as 1520 Martin Luther published his so-called reformatory main writings: „To the German Christian Nobility“, *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae* („About the church's Babylonian captivity“), „About the freedom of a Christian“. Especially Luther's writings about the freedom inspired men as well as women to make use of their Christian freedom and to put it into action – in the end they acted more than was desired by Luther.

The people emancipated themselves of a church who understood itself as redeemer. Everybody was directly confronted with God with his or her own conscience, just as Luther had existentially experienced and as he had taught. Therefore, everybody should be enabled to read in the Holy Scriptures by themselves, which again required the translation of the biblical scriptures into the prevailing national language and sufficient school education. Reformators and the governing who introduced reformation in their territories endeavoured to provide both during the following years. Following central reformatory convictions like the priesthood of all believers, which is founded on baptism, and the reformatory *Sola scriptura* ("by Scripture alone") women, too, began to preach publicly and to interfere into theological and ecclesio-political discussions. As Luther said, baptism made all Christians to priests and enabled them to understand the Holy Scriptures. However, Luther wanted to allow women to preach and to baptise only in a case of need, although especially the insight of the priesthood of all believers contained the potential of priesthood for women. But this reformatory insight was to become reality only 400 years later. With women's ordination in the protestant church and with the equal ranking in ministry in some churches this insight still has some way ahead to achieve the goal.

Reformation has also enhanced the status of matrimony, of sexuality within matrimony, and it has legalized matrimony of priests. The protestant model of the vicarage, which has been formative for centuries, is based on the new estimation of priests' marriage and of the then favoured role model for women as wives and

mothers. For the women, this new ideal and concept turned out to be very ambivalent, since the reformatory understanding of marriage as well stipulated women's subordination in respect to man and since their sphere of action was limited to the area of the family. For centuries this relationship of subordination has been propagated and cemented e.g. by wedding forms, in which the New Testaments ethics of the *Haustafeln* (domestic codes) as in Colossians and Ephesians was quoted (Kol 3,18-4,1, Eph 5,22-6,9) rather than texts of equalisation like e.g. in Galatians (Gal 3,27f).

Along with the new ideal and concept of priests' marriage went the degradation of monastic life in cloisters and convents. There were voluntary renunciations of the life as nun as well as sudden escapes from cloisters, but also – and not seldom – compulsory liquidations of convents against the womens' wishes, who wanted to continue their life there. Often, the closed or expropriated cloisters were turned into protestant schools or hospitals. The women, however, were thereby bereaved of further possibilities to conduct their lives, since especially the womens' convents offered secure living and broad possibilities of education and ways to conduct their life up to parochial administrative functions like prioress or abbess to unmarried women who came for the most part from noble or civic families. The most famous case of a cloister's liquidation happened in Nuernberg and affected the cloister St. Clara with its classically educated abbess Caritas Pirckheimer, who disputed seriously with the Nuernberg councilmen, the reformator Andreas Osiander and Philipp Melanchthon about the preservation of the cloister.

It was only in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century that other life models developed for unmarried protestant women, who rather wanted to work than to stay in the household of their relatives. In the then developing deaconesses' homes women could carry out custodial, social and educational activities, they shared life in the deaconesses' homes, however, until long into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, under the direction of a male cleric.

### **3. Reformators' wives**

The probably most famous reformator's wife is Katharina of Bora, the former nun, whose 500st birthday was celebrated in 1999 and who had married Luther in 1525. At the beginning of their marriage in 1525 the peasants' uprising and their violent crushing rocked the country. Furthermore, Luther had not only gained good friends with his reformatory writings, but also grim enemies. Katharina allowed herself to be

involved in this reformator's being with all its highs and lows. She gave birth to six children; two daughters died young. Often Katharina of Bora is shown only as the projection of the ideal protestant clergyman's wife of the 19<sup>th</sup> century taking care of children and household in the clearly arranged areas of family and borough. This view does not consider that she took care of a household, which was a small enterprise according to its size with up to 40 people. As chief of finance she supervised the printing of Luther's writings and also shared in the famous dinner speeches. Luther expressed in several letters and speeches, how dearly he esteemed his „dearest Käthe“ or „my Mr. Käthe“. „Wittenberg's morning star“ Katharina was later called by Martin Luther and the Wittenberg (male and female) friends, when she took care of the large household with many guests and several students who also lived in the black Cloister of Wittenberg from early morning to late at night.

After Luther's death Katharina lived 6 further years and died on December 20, 1552 in Torgau. She had lived for 54 busy, intensive and changeful years.

Basel, Zurich and Strassburg were the centres of the reformation at the upper-rhine. Johannes Oekolampad was active in Basel, Ulrich Zwingli in Zürich and Martin Bucer, Wolfgang Capito und Matthäus Zell in Straßburg. At the beginning of the 1520<sup>th</sup> a downright wedding wave began among the reformators. In 1520, Luther had recommended the 23-years-old Philipp Melanchthon, scientific head and later author of the Confessio Augustana, to get married. Melanchthon followed this advice and married Katharina Krapp, daughter of the Wittenberg councilman and mayor. Even before Martin Luther, Martin Bucer married in 1522 in Strassburg the former nun Elisabeth Silbereisen, who made history as the first female poet of Protestantism. One year later, in 1523, Matthäus Zell and Katharina Schütz also married in Strassburg (there will be more about Katharina Zell later on). In 1523 Wolfgang Capito married Agnes Roettel and Ulrich Zwingli, who had secretly wedded Anna Reinhart in 1522, publicly admitted to being married to his wife in 1524.

In 1528, three years after Luther's marriage, the 46-years-old Johannes Oecolampad, the most important reformator in Basel, married the 22 years younger widow Wibrandis Rosenblatt, widowed Keller. Oecolampad was a professor at the university and preached at the Basel cathedral. Like Katharina of Bora, Wibrandis directed a large household, educated children, hosted guests and looked after

students, who took lodgings with them. Again and again their house sheltered protestant refugees and especially deposed clergymen for shorter or longer periods of time. After three years of marriage, in which she had given birth to three children, Wibrandis became a widow in the age of 27 for the second time. Since she was considered as an energetic and strong woman and since in the meantime also Wolfgang Capito's wife Agnes Roettel had died, Capito's friends arranged a new wedding. In 1532, Wibrandis Rosenblatt married the 26 years older Wolfgang Capito, left her hometown Basel and moved with Capito to Strassburg. After Capito's death in 1542 she married the widowed Martin Bucer in 1542. Wibrandis Rosenblatt had been married to three important reformators, had given birth to 11 children and followed Bucer into exile to Cambridge/England. She had survived two plague epidemics and finally died in 1564 in Basel from the plague.

#### **4. Female reformators and reformatory acting women**

Outstanding among the female reformators is Katharina Zell, née Schütz, who as layperson preached, publicly defended reformatory ideas and who authored about a dozen of writings. In a recent publication, Katharina Zell is called female reformator. She was the daughter of a craftsman in Strassburg and had attended school. In 1523, she married the parish priest Matthäus Zell in Strassburg and still in 1524 her first writings were printed. In one of the writings she defends her husband's break with celibacy, the other is a letter of comfort to evangelically minded women in Kenzingen, whose husbands had to go to exile to Strassburg. Katharina Zell published a hymn-book with hymns by the Bohemian Brothers, her own psalm commentaries and she interpreted the Lord's prayer various times. She says that the coming of God's kingdom will take place in one's heart and that God's will shall happen, when mankind will be even to the suffering of Christ. No surprise, that she pledged for more tolerance in respect to all not-lutheran minded people, like baptists, Zwingli-devotees, spiritualists as Kaspar Schwenkfeld in her theological pamphlet of 1557. In questions of baptism, she nearly held a baptist's view. Baptism should be „free“ in respect of time and age. In general, Katharina Zell shows ideas which are fairly close to today's feminist theology. She read the bible from a female perspective and justified her own behaviour with biblical women's behaviours and roles. In her interpretation of the Lord's prayer she ventured to compare God with a mother, who knows about the pains of giving birth and the delights of breast feeding. She dealt

with the biblical rule of silence for women and argued - as we do today - with Galatians (Gal. 3,27f) and Joel 2 or she defends her public appearance under reference to the story of Zacharias and Elisabeth. Katharina Zell has preached three times: at her husband's burial in 1548 and twice 1562, when baptist women were buried, to whom protestant clergymen had denied a Christian burial.

Additionally to her publishing activities, Katharina Zell developed broad social activities by getting involved with educational institutions, a poor house, prison ministry and the lodging of refugees. In her works she also addresses the office of a deacon for women. Katharina was in personal contact to Luther, Zwingli, Oecolampad and Melanchthon and she had an active exchange of letters with reformators like Ambrosius Blarer, Martin Bucer, Ulrich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger and Kaspar Schwenckfeld.

The Zell's marriage remained without biological children. Prior to her death, Katharina Zell had called herself several times „a church mother“. She has abundantly complied with this title during the course of her 65 years with all her talents and tasks.

Further women, who supported the reformatory movements at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century with pamphlets, hymns, poems and prose are e.g. Argula of Grumbach, Ursula of Münsterberg, Florentina of Oberweimar, Ursula Weyda, Marie Dentière, Elisabeth of Calenberg-Göttingen, Elisabeth Silbereisen, Elisabeth Cruciger and Anna Ovens Hoyers. I can imagine that women's studies will prize more names out of oblivion.

Argula of Grumbach, née of Stauff, was a descendent of old-bavarian nobility and had reached high circulations with her totally seven pamphlets/leaflets. She exchanged letters with Luther and Osiander. In 1523 she wrote a letter to the rector of the university of Ingolstadt and spoke up for a teacher who had campaigned for the lutheran teachings and who had been forced to call off by threat of violence. She suffered herself a lot of restrictions by her fearless defense of the reformatory ideas. Her catholic husband lost his job, the family turned against them. In 1524 she was invited to talk with the count palatine at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reichstag in Nuermberg. Fearlessly she stood up for the free proclamation of the Gospel and issued reformatory writings and letters.

Protestant women in Bavaria have founded the Argula-of-Grumbach-trust. The trust supports equal treatment of men and women in the Bavarian protestant church and encourages the discussion about gender questions in church and society. The trust also awards the Argula-of-Grumbach-Prize for projects which promote equal treatment of women and men.

**Ursula of Münsterberg** fled from the cloister St. Magdalen in Freiberg/Saxonia with two other nuns in October 1528. Due to her descension from high nobility (she was King Georg Podiebrad of Bohemia's granddaughter) and due to her relationships to the Saxonian and Electoral Saxonian dukes her decision of conscience soon reached a high political dimension and arose public interest. This was strengthened by the 69 articles issued by her, which defended the decision to break her vow from reasons of conscience. Luther added an afterword to the justification.

**Florentina of Oberweimar** as well was of noble descension from Oberweimar and fled from the abbey of Cistercian nuns in Neu-Helfta close to Eisleben in 1524. She had suffered seriously under the strict observation in the cloister and justified her step with a pamphlet, which Luther had printed with a preface.

**Ursula Weyda**, a county clerk's wife, published a pamphlet in 1524 at the age of about twenty, in which she took a stand against the abbot of Pegau and his monks. The abbot had accused Luther and his followers in a writing of being responsible for the general decline in the country, for the decay of cloisters and churches and he maintained they provoked revolutions and the contempt of right and order. Ursula answered this writing with a theological-ethical pamphlet, in which she dealt with the nature of the godly word and of the church and in which she took a stand to celibacy and matrimony.

**Duchess Elisabeth of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, Princess of Calenberg-Göttingen**, countess since 1546 and Lady Henneberg is held as „reformation countess“ who put through reformation in southern lower Saxonia together with the Hessian reformator Antonius Corvinus.(1501-1553). She is considered as one of the women who took an active part in reformation by her publications and who had at the same time as sovereign princess the political power to bring forward reformation on her territory.

After her husband Erich I. had died, she reigned the principality Calenberg-Göttingen until her son reached full age. In 1538 she converted to the protestant belief, brought forward reformation in her principality and prevented that her son, who tended

towards catholicism, reversed reformation again. She has been one of the most productive authors, wrote clerical songs, lyrical and didactic writings, a government handbook with religious and political admonishments for her son Erich (1545), a matrimony handbook for her daughter Anna-Maria (1550), a book of comfort for widows (1556), ordinances, instructions and a mandate for the preservation of the reformation after her son's take-over of power in the principality.

There are more female sovereigns to name who were actively involved in the theological and political debates during the period of reformation: Elisabeth of Hessa, Duchess of Saxonia and Landgrave Philipp of Hessa's sister, Anna of Denmark, Duchess and Electress of Saxonia or Magdalena Sibylla of Prussia, Electress of Saxonia. As female sovereigns, they did not only representative jobs, but also had a vital interest in religious, economic and political matters.

Towards the end of my speech, I would like to briefly draw your attention to a woman, who was born in the Italian city of Ferrara in 1526 und who could have become the first female university professor in Heidelberg. Olympia Fulvia Morata was the daughter of the humanist Peregrinus Fulvius Moratus and his wife Lucrezia Gozi. She was very interested in sciences, the classical languages Latin and Greece and the antique poets from early age on. Coelio Secundo Curione, a friend of the family and one of the first Italians with contacts to the German reformators, enthused Olympia's father for the protestant belief. Since 1540 Olympia had lived at the the court of Duchess Renata d'Este in Ferrara, who - as well educated woman - attached great importance to her children's education. In her French home country - she was King Louis XII.'s daughter – Renata had been in contact with reformatory ideas. In Ferrara she offered hidden lodgings to French refugees, who had to flee for religious reasons, and together with Olympia Fulvia Morata she supported Faventino Fanino, who had been accused of herecy because of his reformatory belief. After Olympia's father, who had been tended by his daughter, had died in 1548, a return to the court was no longer possible for Olympia. In 1549 she married the German doctor Andreas Grundler, left Italy and went to Schweinfurth. During the capture of Schweinfurth in 1554 by the imperial armee, she lost her precious library and her manuscripts. When her husband was called to the Heidelberg university, Olympia, too, accepted a lectureship in Greece language, however, she died from tuberculosis in 1555, when

finally peace was possible between the imperial army and the protestant alliance. In 1558, the first edition of 50 letters and several smaller writings was published posthumously, issued by her fatherly friend Curione. The clergy training center of the Baden Protestant Church bears her name: the Morata-House in Heidelberg.

### **5. How can we increase the visibility of women active in reformation?**

The reformation decade challenges us to increase public knowledge about women, who were active during the reformation period and to keep their publicity present.

Two possibilities to do this have been mentioned already: 1. to give church buildings and institutions the names of important and regionally active women and 2. to found trusts which bear the names of important female personalities and to offer prizes for projects encouraging the equal treatment of men and women.

The Protestant church of Central Germany (EKM) has established a project in its women's work for the field „Women during reformation“, which is supposed to support and concentrate especially the regional activities. Now they have installed a website which invites people to share ideas and events.

A „Marburg women's meal“ will be held on 30.10.2011 in the Landgrave's castle in Marburg, where in 1529 the Colloquy with nearly all important reformers had taken place. Speeches about the future of church and religion will be held. This event refers to the tradition of Luther's dinner speeches and 12 female personalities from church, science and society are invited to hold a 7 minutes dinner speech with the topic „How shall churches and religions react to the challenges of our present times, which are shattered by revolutions, social tensions and catastrophes?“ About 100 women will eat and talk together.

The organisers are two female professors from the theological faculty of protestant theology in Marburg, the women's work of the protestant church in Kurhessen-Waldeck, the women's study center of the protestant church in Germany and a female artist. The organisers also encourage other regions in Germany to organise similar events.

Since 2009 the convent of protestant female theologians in Germany has on its agenda the topic „Women during the reformation“. On the one hand, we have started to publish names and dates of theologically active women in our regular publications and on our website, we invite colleagues to do more research work in their home areas and to publish their results or their own events concerning this topic on our

website. On the other side, since 2009 we have been trying to push the funding of a research assignment with the topic „Women's history in public preaching from reformation until the implementation of women's ordination as paradigm of the reformatory self-concept“ by the EKD. This plan has finally led to an application for financing of a temporary job with the project name „Women and the reformation decade“ by the EKD, undersigned jointly by the Protestant women in Germany and the Women's study and education centre of the Protestant church in Germany in the Comenius-Institute.

In order to inquire the current status of research work and of the prevailing research desiderata and in order to discuss the next steps and measures commonly, we have invited 10 female scientists together with our cooperation partners for an EKD consultation day in May 2012. The scientists have been asked to give input from their own research perspective concerning the project „Women's history in public preaching from reformation until the implementation of women's ordination as paradigm of the reformatory self-concept“.

The bundling of these results, the networking and the rework of regional and possibly international activities as well as the initializing of gender sensitive projects about the reformation decade will then be part of the field of work of the applied project job.

The conference of the working group of the women's representatives' / equal opportunities officers within the EKD is currently preparing a 10-pages leaflet, in which the annual topic, a reformator's (male or female) quotation and different aspects concerning the equal treatment of men and women in their historical reference and at the same time - as seed for equalisation in the history of reformation - are included for each year of the decade. Furthermore, the challenges for today are shown and hints for further reading are added.

During the reformation decade we have the chance to increase the public awareness about women of the reformation on a European and worldwide scale. We can think about whether and what we would like to contribute to the topics of the remaining seven years and whether the joined actions by the LWB liaison persons will be carried through. These are the topics of the following years:

2011 - reformation and baptism (sacraments)

2012 - reformation and music

2013 - reformation and the multitude of denominations

2014 - reformation, politics and economics

2015 - reformation and language (media)

2016 - reformation and the one world

2017 - reformation jubilee.

**Literature:**

Roland H. Bainton: Frauen der Reformation. Von Katharina von Bora bis Anna Zwingli, Gütersloh 1996<sup>3</sup>.

Martin H. Jung: Die Reformation. Theologen, Politiker, Künstler, Göttingen 2008.

Sonja Domröse: Frauen der Reformationszeit. Gelehrt, mutig und glaubensfest, Göttingen 2010.