

Obituary for Elisabeth Goessmann



Elisabeth Goessmann, born on 21 June 1928 in Osnabrueck was one of the first female theologians in Germany and one of the oldest pioneers of feminist theology. Her childhood and youth were highly affected by the Nazi era and World War II and their consequences. Being a bright child who searched intensively for meaning, she expressed her desire to study theology at an early age. Asked about her reasons, she would answer – as she did later on as well – with the motto: *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Despite many problems she was able to fulfil her wish.

First she studied Catholic Theology at Muenster University, then in Munich and she was among the first three women to do her doctorate in 1954 in

Munich. Her *summa cum laude* thesis with Michael Schmaus was on *‘Die Verkündigung an Maria im dogmatischen Verständnis des Mittelalters’* (*The Annunciation in the dogmatic approach of the Middle Ages*). Even as a young child she was deeply impressed by the pictures and statues of Mary in the cathedral of Osnabrueck.

Then Elisabeth Goessmann worked together with Joseph Ratzinger at the Grabmann-Institute of Munich University for many years. They were thus colleagues and Elisabeth’s scholarly gift was certainly not outnumbered by his. However: What a different career was ahead of the two! Elisabeth Goessmann was victim of *“Geburtsfehler: weiblich“* (*Congenital Defect: Female*), as she called her biography which was published in Munich in 2003. In spite of dealing with a theological topic of the Middle Ages (*Summa theologica Halensis*) she could not submit her post-doctoral thesis (habilitation) at the faculty of theology, but she had to choose the faculty of philosophy in Munich as an alternative. Habilitation of women (lay people) was not yet permitted by Catholic theology.

From 1972 onwards, Elisabeth Goessmann applied for a lectureship or professorship in Germany 37 times. She was regularly rejected, finally even with the argument that she was ‘over-qualified’. Her suffering from this rejection in her home country was lifelong and she would mention it frequently.

From 1954 she was in contact with Jesuits at Sophia University in Japan. First, she only went there for shorter periods; later she became active in Japan for more than 30 years after the rejections in Germany. However, she had to renounce her mother tongue and could only work in a theologically rather reduced field. First, she taught German medieval literature at Sophia University Tokyo in English; later she taught as a professor for ‘Christian Philosophy’

at Seishin Women's University in Japanese. Her two daughters who mainly grew up in Japan had an excellent command of both languages; Elisabeth Goessmann never found the time to learn to write Japanese during this long period, although her oral command of the language was fluent.

From 1955 Elisabeth Goessmann regularly travelled between Germany and Japan: she mostly spent her summers in her Munich apartment and held lectures and conferences all over the German speaking area, and at the beginning of the academic year she would return to Japan. She wrote many books and essays on medieval topics, but also on modern women's issues. When I got to know her in 1980 at a conference on medieval mysticism, we embarked on a cooperation that lasted decades, as I was very interested in medieval questions and Elisabeth Goessmann often consulted me for biblical matters. The first three chapters of the Bible (Gen 1-3) especially, were a topic of common interest for us and we could establish a fruitful cooperation.

The most extensive project began in 1982 the "*querelle des femmes*" a series named "*Archiv für philosophie- und theologiegeschichtliche Frauenforschung*" (*Archive for philosophical-historical and theological-historical research on women's issues*) planned to consist of 10 volumes. The first volume entitled '*Das wohlgelehrte Frauenzimmer*' (*The learned wench*) appeared in 1984. The second volume was expressly dedicated to Eve, '*Eva - Gottes Meisterwerk*' (*Eve - masterpiece of God*) and appeared in 1985. Overall nine volumes were printed, with special volume 9 (1995) on Hildegard of Bingen, surely her favourite medieval figure, standing out especially. Elisabeth Goessmann described the breakthrough of her work not only with her many humiliating experiences, but already – as she said herself – with a shock in 1947 in when she found a volume on '*Hildegardis Abatissa*' among the series '*Patres Latini*'. Another important topic for her was '*Päpstin Johanna*' (*Pope Joan*) on whom she held many lectures and also wrote an extensive volume.

In 1986 Elisabeth Goessmann became significantly active in two important areas.

First an ecumenical network of and for women in theological research was established together with the World Council of Churches, Geneva. Elisabeth Goessmann came from Japan to Zurich for its very inaugural meeting, and held an academic lecture on women's image and likeness of God in the theology of Hildegard of Bingen. Not feminist theology, but this medieval wonder woman taught that women and men are on the same level regarding the image and likeness of God – going against hundreds of years of disregard for Gen 1! This network ESWTR (European Society of Women in Theological Research), has been and certainly continues to be an important forum and network for theological research on women's issues. Elisabeth Goessmann participated in the celebration of the 20th anniversary of ESWTR in Graz in 2006. Shortly after she fell seriously ill.

Her second project, the edition of a "*Wörterbuch der feministischen Theologie*" (*Dictionary of Feminist Theology*) also started in 1986. The idea came, among others, from Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Tübingen. For roughly four years, three protestant and three catholic theologians worked on a concept together, until in 1991, the first feminist theological dictionary worldwide could appear with Gütersloher Verlag. Elisabeth Goessmann, Herlinde Pissarek-Hudelist and Helen Schüngel-Straumann were the catholic co-editors of this extensive work. There were no models yet and the key words had first to be found in numerous working discussions. Elisabeth Goessmann was also significantly active with the

extensively revised second edition in 2002. It has to be mentioned here that she took great pains to meticulously supervise and correct a translation of WFTh into Japanese language. As there were no equivalents for many terms and expressions in Japanese, this again shows her almost super-human effort and her perseverance.

In 1991 I was in Japan for a couple of weeks as I intended to edit a festschrift for Elisabeth Goessmann at the occasion of her 65th birthday. I also wanted to consider Japanese colleagues in this volume. I called the festschrift '*Zwischen Zeiten und Kontinenten*' (*Between eras and continents*), as I considered this wording to best mirror the long and difficult path of Elisabeth's career. The book was published in 1993 with Verlag Herder. I was lucky enough to work with Theodor Schneider, as a co-editor. The volume holds nine essays from Japan, many of them in English, a detailed curriculum vitae of Elisabeth Goessmann and a bibliography ranging from 1957 to 1992, thereof two pages for Japanese contributions.

Herlinde Pissarek-Hudelist delivered the keynote address on the occasion of the celebrations at Katholische Akademie in Munich. She was the first female professor of theology in Austria and the dean of the Jesuit faculty in Innsbruck. She concluded her lecture saying: 'On the occasion of your 65th birthday, my wish for you is that a certain growth in spirit may come about for German bishops and universities as well.'

To this day, this remains a wish! Never again the triad 'Germany, Austria, Switzerland' would meet in this constellation again, because Herlinde died shortly after, aged only 62.

In the winter term 1991/92 I managed to organise a guest professorship for Elisabeth Goessmann. For this purpose, she came regularly to Kassel and she was a great asset for the little department, giving lectures on Asian and Christian religions in Japan and holding several feminist colloquia where, among others, historians also took part. I still remember a statement of Elisabeth: 'This is the first time that I am earning real money in Germany!'

In the years after Elisabeth Goessmann had passed the age limit for an appointment in Germany, she received several honorary doctorates, e.g. in Graz in 1985, in Frankfurt in 1994, in Bamberg and in Lucerne. There she was also awarded the *Herbert Haag-Preis für Freiheit in der Kirche* (*Herbert Haag-Prize for Liberty in Church*) (together with Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel) in 1997 as the first woman. Most recently her home town of Osnabrueck also awarded her an honorary doctorate in 2017. She felt at least partially consoled by these honours. However, a certain bitterness about decades of set-backs never entirely left her.

Theological research owes a lot to Elisabeth Goessmann. With her theological-historical research on women's issues she left an enormous and rich heritage which cannot be overestimated in its importance for theological research.

Basel, 10 May 2019

Prof. Dr. Helen Schüngel-Straumann

PS.: Numerous books from the estate of Elisabeth Goessmann are in Basel in the Centre for Gender Studies at Basel University.

Personal files – as is the case for the ESWTR files – are available for reading in the manuscript department of UB Basel.