

Obituary on Professor Dr. Dr.hc. mult. Elisabeth Goessmann

1926-2019

The academic community mourns the death of one of the doyennes of historical-theological research on women's issues: Elisabeth Goessmann died on May 1st.

From 1947–52 she studied Catholic Theology at Muenster University und obtained her doctorate in Munich in 1954 with her thesis on *Die Verkündigung an Maria im dogmatischen Verständnis des Mittelalters (The Annunciation in dogmatic approach of the Middle Ages)* under the supervision of Michael Schmaus, whose student she claimed to be all her life.



She was not allowed to write a postgraduate thesis (Habilitation) as graduation of lay people for professorship was not accepted at that time. She was finally able to graduate as a professor at Munich Philosophical Faculty in 1978. This denial of a career characterised her self-image. So we can read in her memoirs (*Geburtsfehler: Weiblich. Lebenserinnerungen einer katholischen Theologin, München 2003; 9 – Congenital Defect: Female. Memoirs of a Catholic Theologian*)

"As has often been emphasised, my professional career - one could also say non-career - in my own country, includes problems that are like stumbling blocks on a steeplechase. This is maybe typical for the situation of a woman who is eager to integrate into a new field of life and work. If it does not sound too exaggerated, my case, however, also mirrors a part of German university history."

Elisabeth Goessmann had to go to Japan for her professorship, where she taught from 1955 onwards, even partially in Japanese and where – after her efforts to return as a professor to Germany had failed – she did research work at the Department for Western Philosophy at Seishin University Tokyo until retirement.

The central work of her life is left in the *Archiv für philosophie- und theologiegeschichtliche Frauenforschung* (Archive for philosophical-historical and theological-historical research on women's issues) which she herself founded. This research work is a milestone in historical research on women's issues and shows how much material is left to be treated and what has been missing in traditional historiography. As a medievalist whose work resembles archeological excavations, she over and over again had to deal with misogynistic theological concepts which finally even influenced her fate. However, it was never the objective of the scholar Elisabeth Goessman to write compensation history. She was always concerned with the critical assessment and re-interpretation of the sources. This fact is clearly reflected in her work *Mulier Papa* which deals with the reception history of the female Pope Joan (Mulier Papa. Der Skandal eines weiblichen Papstes. Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte der Gestalt der Päpstin Johanna, Archiv für philosophie- und theologiegeschichtliche Frauenforschung 5, München 1994) and with traditions concerning Pope Joan. For this purpose, Elisabeth Goessmann did not stop at medieval documents, but she examined receptions of the topic up to present times. So she was 'startled' by the uncritical review of the widely published novel by Donna Cross on the figure of the female Pope by the German public (see: Geburtsfehler: weiblich 378).

Another project she was passionately attached to as a co-editor was the *Wörterbuch der feministischen Theologie* (Dictionary of Feminist Theology), edited by Gütersloher Verlag in 1991, providing what was then the first summary of theological women's research.

German university theology, which had deprived her of the fruits of her labour by rejecting the acceptance of an excellent, high quality post-doctoral thesis at theological faculties for extraneous reasons - the 'congenital defect: female', and by whom she was rejected more than thirty times in application procedures, however, belatedly granted her multiple honours for her scholarly merits. She was awarded five honorary doctorates (1985 at the 400th years anniversary of Graz University; 1994 Frankfurt University; 2003 Bamberg University and Lucerne University; 2017 at the university of her birthplace Osnabrück). German university theology thus did what, in her own words, her thesis for professorship at the philosophical faculty in late 1978 achieved: not only 'Habilitation', but re-habilitation (see Congenital Defect: Female, 351).

The festschrift presented to her for her 65th birthday holds the title 'Theology between ages and continents' (Schneider, Theodor – Schüngel-Straumann, Helen Hg., Theologie zwischen Zeiten und Kontinenten, Festschrift für Elisabeth Gössmann, Freiburg u.a. 1993), a title which characterises her life and work. It expresses very clearly the areas of tension in Goessmann's

life: between education in Western Europe and teaching activities in the very far east of Asia, from pre-conciliar theology via all the hopes kindled in her generation by the second Vatican Council to the post-conciliar disillusionment still continuing today in the Catholic Church for questions regarding women's issues.

Graz University has endowed an award for excellent achievements in Gender Studies named in her honour: the Elisabeth Goessmann Award. It is actually tendered as a jubilee award on the occasion of 25 years of the faculty's research focus area 'Theological Gender Studies'. Because of Elisabeth Goessmann's death, it will become a memorial award when it is awarded in autumn, an award which will keep alive the memory of this great theologian, to whom much is owed, and not only by feminist theology.

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