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Theologizing in her Name with Susan Rakoczy

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## 14 | Theologizing in her Name with Susan Rakoczy

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### Abstract

Susan Rakoczy is an emerita professor of systematic theology and spirituality at St. Joseph's Theological Institute and the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Although, she is American, she has lived many years in Africa, specifically in Ghana and South Africa. She has been an academic of high reputation, who has contributed great insight towards women doing theology, popularly reflected in the book she authored in 2004 titled: *In Her Name: Women Doing Theology*. The book among many other things provides in-depth discussion regarding origins and development of feminist theology and its interpretations in Africa and other continents. Therefore, this chapter reflects Professor Rakoczy's thematic analysis of women's trusting experience, which she presents as the core of feminist theology and spirituality. Accordingly, the engagement in this chapter features her analysis of how African women (including women across the globe) despite their experience of frustration in the face of patriarchy strive to flourish. In this context, the victory that African women achieve through trusting God and their experience to overcome the insidious links between patriarchy, violence and Christianity is made vivid, particularly in presenting the life story of Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa. Hence, the chapter relates women's trusting experience to African feminist liberation theology, emphasizing the essential role women play in affirming/defining 'who they are' and 'who they are becoming'. In summary, it can be affirmed that Professor Rakoczy presents African woman as one who surmounts any experience of limitations presented to her via Christianity and traditional religion.

**Keywords:** Feminist theology and spirituality, Trusting experience, African Feminist liberation theology, African women, Patriarchy, Violence and Christianity

## Introduction

Professor Rakoczy's contribution to feminist theology is much captured in her book: *In her name: Women doing theology* wherein among other subthemes; she critically presents the different waves of feminist movement, reflecting a historical analysis of feminist theology as spanning through various eras (Rakoczy 2004). Predominantly, the book signatures the reality that women despite all odds are now actively engaged in the work of theology and their contributions are re-shaping both the traditional and Christian theological framework. In this context, the mere fact that women now do theology include the reality; that women not only do theology but also contribute to theological knowledge creation, which on its own merit portrays an inclusiveness. Hence, women can now enjoy certain levels of equity with male theologians. This is a reality that emerged since the era of feminist consciousness reflecting how women, both individually and collectively sought to question and challenge their rights, roles, and status in pre-modern society (Kierana 2016). Appropriately, women can now contribute to defining 'who they are.'

It is in this perspective, that this chapter singles out Professor Rakoczy's premise on women's trusting experience, which she acclaims enable women to flourish despite all forms of set-backs, limitations and segregation based on gendered identity. This act of women's 'trusting experience' correlates with Oduyoye's (2001) African feminist liberation theology, reflecting women's tireless struggles to define 'who they are' and 'who they ought to be' including 'the demand to be recognized' despite cultural and religious obstacles that cripples their identity and development. Hence, Rakoczy's idea of women doing theology features women as voicing out their position and concern in the contextual background of patriarchy (Oduyoye 2001), which is a global reality that relegates women to the background, denying them the opportunity to pursue all-round development, including academics and otherwise.

Professor Rakoczy's overarching argument is that women across the globe (including African, Asia, Latin American, North America and European women) have embraced the feminist spirituality of trusting in God and in themselves as a strategy for survival. Again, this could be linked to Denis Ackermann's (1998) premise indicating that women's experiences unlike in the past have become relevant; worthy of recognition and study, and inclusion as part of intellectual pursuit. Ackermann's feminist theoretical analysis is associated with the awakening of feminist

consciousness, on which this chapter anchors Professor Rakoczy's dominant argument. In this perspective, women are engaging their own experiences as means of strategizing to define and voice their position of inclusiveness as part of the society they rightly belong to. The broad spectrum of Professor Rakoczy's argument is that Christianity as a patriarchal religion does violence to women through its preponderant presentation of women as inferior to men (Rakoczy 2011). Consequently, she maintains that part of the constraints women encounter is the continuous use of household codes of the New Testament to subordinate women as second to men, thereby set boundaries that women ought to fit in (Rakoczy 2011). Hence, Professor Rakoczy in alliance with African feminist liberation theology asserts that women have grown to overcome traditional and Christian limitations that often hold them (women) back from achieving the peak of any given endeavour through the spirituality of trusting in God and themselves. As such, women despite these limitations push themselves forward to be heard and seen. Professor Rakoczy's premise regarding women's trusting experience is presented within various domains such as: What is feminist spirituality? interpreting experience, diversity of experience and finally in the narrative of an African woman: Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa (20th century), a South African woman who has lived out her trusting experience in herself and in God; and as such never allowed herself to be subdued but rather persevered in surmounting the "fierce opposition and massive obstacles" she encountered (Rakoczy 2011). Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa's narrative is sampled as representing African women's disposition of seeking for deeper meaning within the Christian traditions despite their experiences of opposition (Rakoczy 2011). Rev. Victory's narrative stands as a proof of African woman's resilience and strength of character not to break under any magnitude of suffrage.

## **Feminist Spirituality**

Professor Rakoczy identifies feminist spirituality as an important theme within the framework of feminist theology. She emphasized that feminist spirituality is expressed through the interpretation women ascribe to their daily experiences and trust in God. She defines feminist spirituality as "an approach which seeks and finds God in all the circumstances of life, affirms life and growth in others, works with others to bring a greater fullness of life (wholeness and right relationships) into every situation

and structure of culture and society including the church” (Rakoczy 2004:374). In unpacking this quote, it means that feminist spirituality essentially dwells on perceiving God as part of every experience, which energizes, and infuses in women the strength to face unwinding experiences of life. Based on their trust and experience of God, women are able to liberate themselves. Part of the analysis is the reality that women’s experiences are diverse in nature, including the different experience of African woman, American woman, Asia women, European women among many others. Therefore, there is no one single lens through which women’s trusting experience will be perceived though this chapter focuses on presenting African women’s experience using the theological context of Africa.

Professor Rakoczy has anchored women’s agency of trusting in God and self as facilitating their unprecedented attitude of sustaining peace despite their encounter with gendered violence located within culture and Christianity (Rakoczy 2006:187-207). In her chapter contribution to African women, religion, and health: Essays in honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye, she articulated how women across the globe including African women have championed the challenge of a non-violent approach to solving life problems. In this perspective, she presented the life narratives of Evelyn Underhill and Dorothy Day as women who are both pacifists in upholding the spirituality of non-violence in a world dominated by male dominance and war, maleness and self-identification with war, lust and violence. For example, Professor Rakoczy cited Solle (1990), to express how men often take the lead in propagating, emphasizing that violence, war and rape are one. She presents the lives of Evelyn Underhill and Dorothy Day as striking witness for peace and non-violence. In presenting both women as ‘pacifists’, Rakoczy argues that both women did not only refuse to participate in war but lived a life style that gently oppose policies that violate gospel principles of peace. Hence, their life style challenges all people to reflect on why they support violence (direct/indirect), thus inspire others to daily conversion and change of heart. In exploring women’s engagement with spirituality of non-violence in Africa, she presented two examples of non-violence actions by South African women, which she describes as imitating the life style of Jesus as expressed in the gospel. Accordingly, Rakoczy presents African women as persons who understand, interpret and handle every human experience through God’s lens. An example of such dispositions was captured in the opposition narratives of how South African women (including other women) dealt

with the 'Pass Laws' of 1955, which was meant specifically to be issued to women.

The narrative says that in September 1955, the government announced that passes will soon to be issued to women in South Africa. A month later, the Federation of South African Women organized their first march on the Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest the new law. The protest was led by four women, representing the racial complexity of South Africa: Lilian Ngoyi (African), Helen Joseph (White), Rahima Moosa (Asian), and Sophie Williams (Colored). Although, this initial walk did not stop the government from issuing the pass warrant to women in 1956, but also women across different cities of South Africa did not stop their march until victory was won. The largest and famous march demonstration took place on 9 August 1956 at the Union Building in Pretoria, and the estimated number of women that participated were 20,000 (Rakoczy 2006). It was estimated that this large number of women came from all over the country reflecting active participation of African women as follows:

Many of the African women wore traditional dress, others wore Congress colors, green, black and gold; Indian women were clothed in white saris. Many women had babies on their backs, and some domestic workers brought their white employers' children along with them. Throughout the demonstration, the huge crowd displayed a discipline and a dignity that was deeply impressive (Rakoczy 1982:195).

Women's participation in such protests were indicative of their spirituality of trusting God and self, and to this effect, some of their leaders expressed that they are not afraid and either would they relent until victory is won. For example, Annie Silinga of the ANC Women's League declared that intimidation did not frighten them and that they (women) were prepared to fight the passes until victory was theirs (Walker 1982 in Rakoczy 2006). In this stance, Professor Rakoczy acclaims that African women's feminist spirituality extends to include spirituality of non-violence, portraying wholeness of life, aimed at wellness of life for self and others. She describes such motivation as exemplified in Jesus' mandate in the Gospel expressed in, John: 10:10, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full".

As such women are presented as seeking fullness of life for themselves and others through their spirituality of trusting and interpreting experience. In this perspective, feminist spirituality is linked to an attitude of nourishment that strengthens and boosts resilience, fortifying them with

energy to overcome obstacles and challenges. In other words, feminist spirituality provides safe spaces in which women own and interpret their experiences, which is very much captured in Mercy Oduyoye's African women liberation theology. In affirmation, Amoah (1994) acclaims that African women need such spirituality to sustain fullness of life. In this context, women's interpretation of experience is key to feminist spirituality; it begins with women's act of meaning making; anchored around how women understand, narrate and interpret their stories. Accordingly, Mercy Oduyoye in one of her interviews on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2007 exhibited a typical example of an African women's engagement with spirituality of trust, knowing and resistance as means of making sense of who she is. The incident happened in her first faculty departmental meeting held at the University of Ibadan, when the Dean asked her to make tea for the faculty during the meeting. Hence, she needed to assert herself in the face of such oppressive patrilineal African context, after she got married to her Nigerian husband. In her own expression she stated that, she was stunned by the request, so she got up from her seat, picked up the phone on the professor's table, called the administrative secretary of the department (a man) who is normally in charge of refreshments, and in front of all of the men she said "the professor says the staff is ready for their tea" (Oduyoye interview 2007). She soon realized the men thought it was her responsibility to make the tea. But by calling the person in charge of refreshments, she asserts, "I gave him his job back" (Oduyoye interview 2007). Smartly, she redefined herself, which could be understood as liberating herself otherwise, she could have allowed herself to accept the subservient position.

Mercy Oduyoye's experience forms part of women's experience that Professor Rakoczy describes as subordinating experiences that women encounter within culture and religion including academia, which often make them appear as less equal to men. If not for gender polity, there is no justification why she should be asked to go and make tea for the faculty staff; whilst the designated staff whose job description it is, sits back. In corroboration, Mercy Oduyoye's resilience is linked to Professor Rakoczy's account of African women's act of trusting God and self, which facilitate their act of self-identity. They are resilient in redefining 'who they are', 'who they are becoming', 'and who they ought to be', and in Professor Rakoczy's perspective women's ability to define themselves is an empowering stance as well as self-liberating. With this, we explore the next section, focusing on women's interpreting experience.

## **Women's Interpreting Experience**

Essentially, women's interpreting experience is located within the framework of feminist movement and resilience, which is linked to feminist spirituality of trusting God and self. The emphasis is that women's flourishing must begin by trusting 'who they are' and how they interpret their experience of God in their lives (Rakoczy 2011). It is a hermeneutical stance of expressing and understanding 'who they are' and 'who they are becoming' based on their lived experiences. Therefore, women are in the best position to tell (narrate) their own stories, as such express and interpret the meaning they make out of it and the world they live in.

This expression of being allowed to tell their own stories is linked closely to contemporary psychologists' proposal, which advocates that one of the best ways to study and understand human behaviour is to gain an insider perspective (Creswell 2013; Silverman 2005) by allowing persons to tell their own stories themselves (Babbie & Mouton 2005). Of course, Professor Rakoczy's argument is that women's disposition to telling their own stories also includes the ability to interpret these stories, through which they make sense of 'who they are' and 'who they are becoming'. Embedded in such understanding of 'who one is', including 'who one is becoming' is enrobed around the issues of self-awareness, which is part and parcel of emotional intelligence (EI), reflecting an everyday skill for effective life living. Some scholars such as Goleman (1995) describe this as ability to monitor one's own emotions/feelings and that of others whilst Bar-On 2006/2007 perceives EI as attributes of non-cognitive capacities. Correspondingly, interpreting experience forms part of the foundational spirituality (flourishing/energising) for women across the globe, of which the African women is no exception. In this perspective, women doing theology in today's new dispensation have exhibited ample strength of character in valuing 'who they are' as could be seen in the narratives of the South Africa Women's march to resist the pass law, and in the life story of Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa (much of her narrative will be told later) and in Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye's life and among many other African women. Hence, African women of the past, present and into the future will continue to need the trusting experience in God and self as fundamental spirituality that will enable them to flourish (energising) and surmount oppositions, particularly all forms of societal gendered (patriarch) oppositions that hold them back from achieving fullness of life. Partly, Professor Rakoczy's argument is that such search

for meaning in trusting experience is of value to the 21<sup>st</sup> century African women, facilitating their interpretation and trusting of personal/collective experiences of self and God. Hence, African women engage their experiences of trusting and interpretation as a tool to grapple with and navigate gendered antagonisms no matter how long it takes.

### **Life Story of Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa**

Additionally, Professor Rakoczy uses narratives to theologise. This is exemplified in the life of Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa. This narrative portrays how Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa struggled with long-term denial of admission to priestly ordination for 27 years. The denial was based on gender construct, which was culturally informed and sustained. Professor Rakoczy's analysis of women trusting experience in God and themselves serves as liberation theology upheld by Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa resilience until when she was finally admitted to ordination.

Professor Rakoczy in presenting women's spirituality of trusting in God and themselves engaged three women's life stories, of which one of them was Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa, who was born in Johannesburg in 1972, and was raised in a large family of 13. Her parents were devout Christians. She studied in a variety of educational institutions, and was a pioneer female student of Adams Geological School, near Durban in the 1954. However, her studies were meant to prepare her for ordination, but unfortunately, she was denied ordination on the grounds of gender in the United Congregation Church in Southern Africa. At that time women were not freely admitted to ordination, and Rev. Victory Nomvete herself remarked: "Because I was a woman, I was not allowed to be ordained or pastor a church. I was always put under another minister... I had to be strong emotionally to work under my classmates. I felt demeaned but at the same time I was fulfilling the call from God" (Rakoczy 2011:32-55). Obviously, she was trusting God and herself; her sense of belief in God and in herself enabled her to endure what seems frustrating. Interpreting her own experience, as has been stated above, she felt subordinated although she did not give up her internal resolve to serve God and his people in whatever capacity she was allowed (by the male Church) to do so. What gave meaning to her life was the fact that, she was able to fulfil God's will for her in serving God and God's people whether as an ordained minister or not.

This aspect of being denied ordination was and still continues to be the experience of many women across the globe in many Christian faith Churches, of which African women are no exception. Yet, women based on their spirituality of trusting God and self are not frightened or intimidated by any form of restriction until victory is won as stated by Annie Silinga of the ANC Women's League during the march resistance for the imposition of pass law against women in South Africa. Hence, it is clear that women of the past, present, and the future hold onto to their trust in God to surmount all limiting experiences that hold them back from achieving the peak of their desires. Consequently, Rev. Victory's perseverance to accept the assigned position of studying Christian Education in place of studying for ordination is admirable. Her perseverance was a source of liberty, which enabled her to survive the trying moment and demotion as not worthy to be ordained.

After her graduation she worked in the United Bantu Congregational Church, where she served as a field worker and a matron at Inanda Seminary near Durban, and a teacher in Groutville. However, Rev. Victory never gave up on her desire to be admitted to ordination, so in 1968, when the United Congregational Church was re-organised, Victory once again applied for ordination, but was refused. That notwithstanding, she continued to minister with the YWCA as a field worker, as a matron at Inanda Seminary near Durban, and as a teacher in Groutville. Yet, she still felt deeply called to ordination.

She got married to Reverend Andrew Mbanjwa in 1973 when she was 46 and became step-mother to his three children from a previous marriage, when they lived in Bisho. At this time when she got married in 1973, her husband heads a very big church with outstations, and she was given a congregation to look after as she worked with her husband but yet not admitted to ordination. Again, in 1979 she applied for ordination for the second time and still it was denied. In spite of the continual denial to be admitted to ordination, she gave sermons at church assembly and she was fondly affirmed for sermon she delivers. In this regard, she narrates that she preached very well; expressing that "I passed the test and my name was put on the list for any church willing to invite me to preach their sermon but unfortunately not even one church invited her" (Phiri 2002:119-138). This lack of invitation to preach sermon despite her capacity to deliver inspiring sermon speaks volumes regarding the relegation she encountered as a woman.

Eventually, when her husband was ready to retire, they moved to his birthplace in Ndaleni, Richmond, in KwaZulu-Natal. During the 1990s this area was the scene of constant violent faction fighting between the African National Congress (ANC), and the United Democratic Front (UDF). One of their sons took his father to Umlazi for a while since men were targeted in the violence. Her husband died of a heart attack in 1996 in the midst of the violence.

A year later after her husband's death, Rev Victory applied for ordination for the third time even though she was growing older but her confidence in her call to be a minister had not wavered. In her narrative as a woman trusting in God and herself as well as interpreting her own experience, she recalled that the main reason why she applied for ordination in 1997 was because no church buried her people when they died during the political turmoil. Secondly, no church minister gave the sacraments to her people and thirdly, no minister from my church came here to baptize children when they were born (Rakoczy 2011 citing Phiri 2002:131). For her, this was the only time the church officials took her request seriously, most probably because as she had said, "No minister wants to come here [in the mist of the on-going violence]" (Rakoczy 2011 citing Phiri 2002:131).

She was ordained on 12 February 2000 at St. Marys Anglican Church in Richmond. Sadly, few people attended because the regional office of the church did not publicise her ordination widely. She was the first black South African woman ordained to the ministry. She waited for 27 years to be admitted to ordination, what a strong spirit of endurance, which has arisen out of women's spirituality of trusting God and self. Probably, what kept hope alive in her was African women's liberation spirituality – trusting that it was never too late to do what God has asked her to do.

Unfortunately, her problems continued after ordination. Male ministers continued to undermine her as she continued to work under a male minister. In addition, she was never paid a just salary, which often times are women's constant experience in work places. This experience of women as being located in the subordinated position at work have been expressed by Hall (2016:69-88). In analysing her experience, Rakoczy likens her encounter to Klaus Fiedler's comment as quoted in Phiri, expressing that: "if a job is too hard for men, God will send a woman" (Rakoczy 2011 quoting Klaus Fiedler as cite in Phiri 2002:136). The implication of such an experience, as Rakoczy puts it, is indicative of Rev. Victory's persis-

tence in trusting God and herself, which led her to endure all the obstacles she encountered. She did not relent in her resolve to answer God's call no matter how long it took her, waiting for almost three decades before being admitted to ordination. Although, Phiri's analysed it to mean that: In her [Rev. Victory] generation, God chose to call a woman because times were hard!" (Phiri 2002 in Rakoczy 2011). But going beyond her generational location is the fact that Rev. Victory Mbanjwa exhibited an unflagged conviction as women always do in trusting God and themselves despite all form of obstacles they encounter in life. Her call was tested. Indeed, she was pushed around in a variety of ministries which were deemed appropriate for women by the male Church, such as in studying and teaching Christian Education yet she did not give up. In the face of so many years of opposition she persevered, full of confidence that God's will eventually manifest in her life. Ultimately, it could be summed up that her life was a true accountability of how an African woman has trusted in God and herself, and as well interpreted her own experience of limitation in the face of gendered restrictions in the Church and culture.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented Professor Rakoczy's thematic analysis of feminist spirituality reflecting women's trust in God and themselves, through which women anchor their resilience in overcoming gendered obstacles that hold them back. One of the enduring arguments that Professor Rakoczy showcases is based on the fact that women of today are doing theology, and in this new dispensation, women have exhibited ample strength of character in valuing 'who they are' and 'who they are becoming', therefore, they are able to challenge themselves to redefine 'who they are'. In the process of redefining 'who they are', it is obvious that women are energized to liberate themselves, therefore, voice their position of self-worthy and recognition.

The affirming stance for women's redefinition of self is manifested in their experience of trusting God and self, which facilitate their ability to be agentic such as in the case of South Africa Women's march to resist the pass law, and in the life story of Rev. Victory Nomvete Mbanjwa, who

waited for 27 years to gain access to ordination and in the life example of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye who have always stood out as life-giving for African women and women across the globe. Hence, African women of the past, present and into the future will continue to need the trusting and interpreting experience of self and in God as fundamental spirituality (flourishing/energising) to surmount oppositions, particularly all forms of societal gendered (patriarch) oppositions that hold them back from achieving fullness of life. Partly, Professor Rakoczy's argument is that such search for meaning in trusting experience is of value to the 21<sup>st</sup> century African women, facilitating their interpretation and trusting of personal/collective experiences of self and God. Hence, African women engage their experiences of trusting and interpretation as tool to grapple with and navigate gendered antagonisms no matter how long it takes.

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