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“The Personal is Political.” Approaches to an Intersectional Theology

CAROLIN HOHMANN

Abstract

„Das Private ist politisch.“ Dieser Satz prägte wie kaum ein anderer die zweite Welle der Frauenbewegung. Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht die Relevanz dieses Satzes für die Theologie aus einer intersektionalen Perspektive. Über die (begrifflichen) Ursprünge des Intersektionalitätsansatzes aus der Rechtsprechung und der feministischen Theorie wird vor dem Hintergrund der aktuellen akademischen Rezeption die Frage gestellt: Welche Bedeutung kommt dem Intersektionalitätsansatz für die Theologie zu?

Bereits in der feministischen Theologie, in der *Black theology* und in der Befreiungstheologie finden sich vielfältige Anknüpfungspunkte für eine *intersectional theology*. Der Beitrag zeigt auf, dass intersektionale Perspektiven dort in Ansätzen bereits diskutiert worden sind und skizziert darauf basierend Charakteristika einer *intersectional theology*. Theologie, die sich als intersektional versteht, erkennt die Verwobenheit sozialer Kategorien an und rückt die ungleiche wie machtvolle Verteilung von Diskriminierung und Privilegierung in den Fokus. Dabei ist es keine einzelne (Master-)Kategorie, die den Bezugspunkt bildet, vielmehr steht die Verwobenheit unterschiedlicher Kategorien im Zentrum einer intersektionalen Analyse. Erfahrene Ungerechtigkeiten, in denen die Verflechtung sozialer Kategorien besonders hervortritt, werden zum Ausgangspunkt des Theologietreibens. Erfahrungen sind als bestimmendes Charakteristikum theologischer Forschung mitzudenken, auch wenn sie in einer vermeintlich objektiven und universalen Theologie nur selten Berücksichtigung finden. Für eine *intersectional theology* ist die Reflexion auf den eigenen sozialen Standort jedoch wesentlich. Darüber hinaus zielt eine *intersectional theology* auf die Dekonstruktion von Prozessen der Marginalisierung und Unsichtbarmachung innerhalb theologischer Forschung. Dazu gehört auch ein Blick auf (gesellschafts-)politische Strukturen, die Diskriminierungen reproduzieren und perpetuieren. Eine besondere Herausforderung ergibt sich aus den politischen und aktivistischen Implikationen des Intersektionalitätsansatzes, die es auch für die Theologie stärker auszuloten gilt.

“The personal is political.” This sentence shaped the second wave of the women’s movement like no other. This chapter explains the relevance of this sentence for theology from an intersectional perspective. The (conceptual) origin of the intersectionality approach in jurisprudence and feminist theory is examined against the background of its current academic reception: What is the significance of the intersectionality approach for theology?

Feminist theology, Black theology, and liberation theology already provide a variety of linking points for an intersectional theology. The chapter shows that intersectional perspectives have already been discussed there to a certain extent and outlines characteristics of an intersectional theology on this basis. Theology that sees itself as intersectional recognizes the interconnectedness of social categories and focuses on the unequal and powerful distribution of discrimination and privilege. The point of reference is not a single (master) category, but rather the interweaving of different categories at the core of an intersectional analysis. Experienced injustices, in which the interweaving of social categories is particularly evident, become the starting point for theological work. Experience must be considered as a defining characteristic of theological research, even if it is rarely taken into account in a supposedly objective and universal theology. For an intersectional theology, however, reflection on one’s own social location is essential. Furthermore, an intersectional theology aims to deconstruct processes of marginalization and invisibilization within theological research. This includes looking at (socio)political structures that reproduce and perpetuate discrimination. One particular challenge arises from the political and activist implications of the intersectionality approach, which need to be explored more thoroughly in theology.

1. “The Personal is Political”: Origin and Implication

“The personal is political” – this phrase depicts the personal and the political as mutually. What is located in the personal, mostly domestic sphere is in fact political and must, therefore, find its way into public debates.¹ It is not surprising that, in the 1970s, this phrase became one of the most important slogans of second-wave feminism. Indeed, the separation of the personal and the public often shows up in a gender-specific manner: The personal refers to women, the public to men; housewife vs. working man. Accordingly, structural inequalities would cease outside the private sphere. Personal experiences of inequality would then become “personal matters” without political relevance. Following this line of ar-

- 1 Although it is often attributed to Carol Hanisch, the slogan’s origin is unclear. According to Hanisch (cf. 2006: 1) the phrase was the title of one of her works, it was brought in by the editors. Furthermore, according to Hanisch, “political” does not refer to the narrow concept of electoral politics, but to power relations in general. This chapter follows that definition and emphasizes the slogan’s relevance to different contexts. However, the slogan becomes problematic when it eliminates any boundaries between the personal, the public, and the political (cf. Klaus/Drücke 2010; Lee 2007; Benhabib 1993; Elshtain 1981).

gumentation, the women's movement was criticized because women's "demands that men share the housework and childcare were likewise deemed a personal problem between a woman and her individual man" (Hanisch 2006: 1).² As a result, "if women would just 'stand up for themselves' and take more responsibility for their own lives, they wouldn't need to have an independent movement for women's liberation" (Hanisch 2006: 1). Carol Hanisch (cf. 2000: 114), a leading figure of the women's movement, sharply countered this accusation. She characterized personal problems as political problems. Indeed, she argued that for these problems, there could be no personal solutions.

Consequently, the two seemingly separate spheres are inseparable as they reference one another. What appears to be personal is a result of the public sphere and has a major impact on it. For example, public perceptions of working women and policy decisions can encourage or discourage women's careers. In Iceland, a country that repeatedly ranks first for gender equality, each new parent receives six months of leave of which – unlike in Germany – only six weeks are transferable between the parents (cf. Maternity and Paternity Leave in Iceland). In this way, care work is shared more equally and both parents continue to have more equal opportunities in the labor market.³

2. Intersectionality is Political: Intersectional Perspectives on Inequality

Briefly speaking, the slogan "the personal is political" expresses a critique of the unequal distribution of power relations: Who has power? Who is given power – and who is not? These (political) questions, however, challenged the women's movement's slogan. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a law professor at UCLA and Columbia Law School and human rights activist, criticizes *white* women's public/private distinction as overgeneralized and often wrong. Referring to stereotypes such as the powerful working man and the dependent housewife, Crenshaw (1989: 155) notes that

"this 'observation' overlooks the anomalies created by crosscurrents of racism and sexism. Black men and women live in a society that creates sex-based norms and expectations

- 2 Even consciousness-raising groups in which women shared their experiences and exposed structural inequalities were dismissed as "personal" groups or "therapy" (Hanisch 2000: 113). Similarly, feminist theology was misunderstood as (experience-based) theology by women, for women (cf. Ruether 1993, see below).
- 3 Domestic abuse is another example that has been considered a "personal matter" for far too long (cf. Wanjiku Kihato 2013: 72). In Germany, "the personal" only became "political" in 1997 when the law criminalizing marital rape (§ 177 StGB) was finally passed.

which racism operates simultaneously to deny; Black men are not viewed as powerful, nor are Black women seen as passive.”

In this context, the class category puts the slogan in a different light. For example, who can financially afford to live as a housewife? In terms of the intersection of gender, race, and class, Aida Hurtado (1989: 849) states that “[w]omen of Color have not had the benefit of the economic conditions that underlie the public/private distinction.” However, it was claimed that the experience of *white* middle-class women was universal (cf. Crenshaw 1991: 1257).

In Crenshaw’s essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1989: 149), she analyzes social categories and conceptually⁴ introduces the intersectionality approach:

“Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.”

The intersectionality approach builds on this metaphor as a “single-axis framework” (Crenshaw 1989: 140) is often disconnected from the actual complexity of experiences. Personal experiences are shaped by the intersection not the sum of social categories. In anti-discrimination law, however, experiences of the race-gender-intersection (“the personal”) were legally and politically invisible. Based on her analysis of court cases, Crenshaw (1989: 149) revealed that Black women were denied their right to fight the intersectional discrimination they experienced: “[P]roviding legal relief only when Black women show that their claims are based on race or on sex is analogous to calling an ambulance for the victim only after the driver responsible for the injuries is identified.”⁵ Therefore, Crenshaw argues for a realignment based on an expanded understanding of discrimination as intersectional. Awareness of marginalized experiences needs to be

4 Although Crenshaw introduced the term “intersectionality”, these issues were discussed in Black feminism much earlier (cf. Davis 2013: 20).

5 In her essay, Crenshaw (1989: 141) refers to the Title VII case “*DeGraffenreid v General Motors*.” Here, the judge stated that “this lawsuit must be examined to see if it states a cause of action for race discrimination, sex discrimination, or alternatively either, but *not a combination of both*.” [emphasis C. H.] The women’s experiences – the result of the intersection of race and gender – were not taken seriously. Quite the contrary. The judge’s ignorance denied legal protection for Black women.

rethought politically, for both the personal and the public sphere. Otherwise, legal protection remains a special right for the privileged.⁶

At the same time, the subtitle of Crenshaw's essay (1989: 139) reveals that consideration of personal experiences in which the intersection of social categories distinctly emerges is relevant not only to "Antidiscrimination Doctrine" but equally to "Antiracist Politics" and "Feminist Theory". For feminist theory, Black feminist activist Audre Lorde (2007 [1984]: 110) criticizes "academic arrogance" on the grounds that social categories such as race, class, and sexuality were often excluded. Marginalized perspectives and markers of identity were ignored or erased: "The absence of these considerations weakens any feminist discussion of the personal and the political". Regarding the intersection of gender, race, and class, Lorde (2007 [1984]: 112) asks: "[H]ow do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color?" This inequality is further evident in the underrepresentation of Black women as researchers at universities and in the mainstream's ignorance of marginalized, activist-oriented Black feminism (cf. Bobo/Seiter 1991: 289–290).

To summarize: intersectionality is political. Personal experiences have a political dimension. In fact, the social and political movement of Black feminism made Black women's personal experiences of discrimination visible. Political activism brought the (experienced) significance of the intersection of social categories into focus. Ultimately, the political implications of personal experiences for jurisprudence and beyond became evident with Kimberlé Crenshaw's work (1989). Crenshaw uncovers legal loopholes through which Black women were not legally protected by referring to Black women's personal experiences of discrimination. This makes it all the more important that personal experiences are given greater political consideration:

"As to its scope, the political is much more than what is usually referred to as politics. It refers to a certain mode of organizing the human practices that structure social interaction and the dynamics of collective action in history, but also, by extension, the interests, beliefs, and ideologies of individual actors. The social practices of the political are not to be identified with governmental policies or state and party functions, typical understandings of 'politics,' but more importantly with our very ontological condition in all spheres of human living." (Taylor 2011: 5)

Critically addressing marginalized experiences ("the personal") from the perspective of those affected is a fundamental prerequisite for challenging and changing

6 In 2014, an Oxfam survey undertaken in six countries (Spain, Brazil, India, South Africa, the UK, and the US) showed that "the majority of people believe that laws are skewed in favor of the rich" (Collins/Bilge 2020: 140).

structures (“the political”). Without considering different contexts, significant perspectives will be overlooked. In this regard, the intersectionality approach offers an important tool. Consideration of social categories and experiences of discrimination is essential. By focusing on the intersection of categories, the intersectionality approach also points to the legal, political, or academic relevance of experiences. If research does not take (marginalized) experiences into account, it will remain limited in its so-called ivory tower, iteratively reproducing its own, supposedly universal perspective.

In order to give more validity to the slogan “the personal is political” structural changes are inevitable. Indeed, focusing on the perspectives of marginalized people does not mean talking *about* them, but giving them a voice, letting them speak for themselves – and listening to them, learning from them, personally and politically. This, however, happens far too rarely. Nevertheless, this is the highest priority for theology and its aspiration to side with the poor and marginalized: “The church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries” (Pope Francis 2013; cf. Parolin 2014).

3. Theology is Political: Intersectional Perspectives on Theology

Is the personal political in theology? Can or should it become political at all? What is the relevance of experiences and social categories? What relevance should they have?

First of all, categories of inequality are part of theological discourse. As theology explicitly addresses the subject of inequality, it also takes up experiences, and inequalities are *experienced*. In fact, inequality as a specific form of injustice has not only a structural, but also a personal dimension (cf. Buschmann 2018: 143). Questions of equality and justice are firmly rooted in the Christian faith in a saving and liberating God. Indeed, our hope for justice, even beyond death is especially anchored in the Christian message of resurrection (cf. Wacker 2012: 29). Theologians have addressed (in)equality in various ways, often focusing on one particular social category. This includes, among others⁷, feminist theology, Black

7 These include (without claim to completeness) Latin American, minjung, womanist, mujerista, and queer theologies (cf. Kim 2020: 605). Still, there is a variety of other theological approaches that are relevant to an intersectional theology. The significance of postcolonial theology is emphasized in particular: “The historical realities of colonialism are the seedbed of intersectional knowing” (Ramsay 2017: 85). Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw (2018: 47) describe, for example, the work of postcolonial theologian Kwok Pui-lan as “integral to an intersectional theology, as her work exemplifies the intersectional thinking that includes power, economics, women of color, sexuality, and empire building.”

theology, and liberation theology. They have all uncovered hidden experiences of inequality and privilege, as is shown in the following.

3.1 Critical Perspectives on Inequality: A Key Element of Theology

Feminist theology focuses primarily on gender-related experiences and that is the reason why the feminist credo “the personal is political” found its way into feminist theology. Theological gender studies aims to de-privatize gender. Thus, Rosemary Radford Ruether (1993: 189) criticized paternalism and androcentrism in theology, arguing that it can only be overcome when sexism is no longer seen as “just a female problem”. What makes Ruether interesting from an intersectional perspective is her political involvement in the civil rights movement which she herself considered seminal for her theological development (cf. Rehberger 1996: 23). Indeed, her theology combined essential aspects of feminist theology, Black theology, and liberation theology. Long before the reception of intersectionality in theology, Ruether (1975: 116) spoke of the “interstructuring of oppression by sex, race, and also class”. Unsurprisingly, some of her theological thinking can be found in an intersectional theology (see below).⁸

Similar to feminist theology, *Black theology* is situated in the context of political movements, namely the Black power, civil rights, and anti-apartheid movements (cf. Daughton 2021: 497). With the aim of “dismantling Eurocentric views about faith and ecclesiology” (Xhinti 2021: 1), Black theology focuses on racism and other constructs of oppression. To emphasize the struggle for liberation, the term *Black theology of liberation* is widely used (cf. Xhinti 2021: 1). In South Africa, the Black theology of liberation was a response to the experience of *white* supremacy and oppression. Experience, as a starting point, showed that “Black Theology is a situational theology” (Moore 1973: 5). However, again, Black women’s experiences were often overlooked: “Patriarchal oppression cannot be taken lightly as black women experience *intersectional oppression* in the church and society” [emphasis C. H.] (Xhinti 2021: 5).

In *liberation theology*, experiences of the marginalized also became the focus of theological reflection: “[T]heology should begin with, among and from the perspective of the poor” (Phillips 2012: 138). For theologians from Latin American countries, liberation theology was seen as a form of political resistance against oppressive systems. Class-related struggles such as poverty were central. In practice, this resulted in the education of poor people and informal theological education. Yet again, it was the experiences of (poor) women that drew attention to the in-

8 However, (early) feminist theology – as well as the women’s movement – has been criticized for its exclusive focus on *white*, heterosexual, Western women (cf. Daughton 2021: 498).

tertwinning of social categories. Women liberation theologians criticized the negligence of multiple forms of oppression in poor women's everyday lives (cf. Nogueira-Godsey 2013: 93). To avoid "a monolithic construction of 'the poor,'" Grace Ji-Sun Kim (2020: 599) calls for the critical unpacking the preferential option for the poor. Therefore, the theology of the Brazilian Catholic nun Ivone Gebara is based on people's real-life stories of sacrifice and their daily needs. According to her, social and religious change inevitably belong together (cf. Nogueira-Godsey 2013: 94; 103). In other words, "the personal is political" also applies to representatives of liberation theology.

Evidently, all the theologians I have mentioned here have critical perspectives on inequality as a key element of theological reflection. Drawing on political movements and/or experiences of marginalization, they shed light on desiderata in theology. In theology, too, "the personal is political". Marginalized experiences expand existing understandings of theology and provide new perspectives that have both political and theological implications. Perhaps it is precisely the (re)turning to an experience-based starting point that – in the sense of Vatican's II "signa temporum" (GS 4) – encourages rethinking and change in church and theology.

3.2 Critical Perspectives on Social Location and Socio-Political Structures: Key Elements of an Intersectional Theology

How can the intersectionality approach successfully capture the complexity of personal experiences? Why and how may this be relevant for theology? In specific terms, what are the implications of intersectionality – and likewise of an intersectional theology – as an analytical paradigm (cf. Walgenbach 2011)?

On one level, intersectional theology reflects personal experiences in their complexity by focusing on social location and the intersection of social categories. Accordingly, in an intersectional theology, there can be no "master category" (as, for example, "gender" in feminist theology) as a focal point of theological reflection. *On another level*, intersectional theology discusses the socio-political and theological dimension of (discriminatory) experiences and addresses (activist-oriented) socio-political changes. These two dimensions, which are outlined in the following, are central to an intersectional theology.

Firstly, one focal point of the intersectionality approach is awareness of social location. Social location deeply influences the way theology is done, including its limitations and possibilities. Shaped by different social locations, theological reflection – when it allows different voices to be heard – maintains a diversity

that corresponds more closely to the diversity of people in the world.⁹ However, theological reflection is limited insofar as we can only do theology from our own social location. For an intersectional theology, the inclusion of different social locations is, therefore, all the more decisive (cf. Kim/Shaw 2018: 41). Additionally, our social location is determined by the various experiences we have in different contexts, whether consciously or unconsciously. “Theology begins with experience”, as Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw (2018: 37) put it. Experience impacts our theological work, our theological work equally shapes our experience. Thus, it is impossible to do theology from a completely objective and universal perspective:

“What have been called the objective sources of theology; Scripture and tradition, are themselves codified collective human experience. Human experience is the starting point and the ending point of the hermeneutical circle. Codified tradition both reaches back to roots in experience and is constantly renewed or discarded through the test of experience” (Ruether 1993: 12).¹⁰

In an intersectional theology, social locations and personal experiences are essential methodological components (cf. Kim/Shaw 2018: 44). Therefore, in any intersectional analysis, the first stage relates to “the personal”. The perception of one’s own social position is characterized by *both* discrimination *and* privilege. Both are, however, unequally distributed. Intersectional theology requires a shift from “single-axis” thinking to a “both/and”-analysis (cf. Kim 2020: 604). Awareness of the complexity of *both* privilege *and* discrimination is essential. Yet, privilege tends to remain invisible, especially to those who benefit from it. It often only becomes recognizable when we allow ourselves to be confronted with the experiences of those who are affected by discrimination. For this reason, intersectional theology is not limited to our own experiences. Intersectional theology focuses on the experiences of all human beings in which the intersection of social categories is particularly evident.

In other words, intersectional theology aims to uncover inequality where it may not have been seen or expected. Intersectional theology challenges us to expose invisible and well-hidden attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices. Hence, intersectional theology is challenging, demanding, and complex. Predominantly, social categorizations are not only based on naturalization, but are understood

9 For example, a “poor immigrant Black African lesbian woman experiences the effects of intersectionality in ways that a white heterosexual male member of the wealthy class never will” (Donalson 2021: 48).

10 In this way, Ruether contradicted the accusation that the principle of experience is a specific criterion of feminist theology. The uniqueness of feminist theology would simply lie in its use of *women’s* experience (cf. Ruether 1993: 12–13).

as “common sense” and are, therefore, pushed aside without reflection – making it all the more important to question them again and again. Studies,¹¹ however, confirm an increase in stress as soon as we are confronted with other beliefs and opinions. Nevertheless, intersectional theology challenges us to withstand this kind of stress. When engaging with intersectional theology, we are challenged to constantly question beliefs, habits, and traditions that are otherwise tacitly reproduced. Accordingly, intersectional theology is not a separate form of theology, rather it sharpens the concerns of justice-oriented approaches in theology. In doing so, intersectional theology draws on key insights from feminist, Black, and liberation theologians. Theology that seeks to respond in a justice-oriented way to categories of discrimination and their intersections must address complexities that go beyond *white*, male, heterosexual, and European experience. As such, the hegemonic perspective is often mistakenly understood as an authoritative universality that masks non-racial, non-gendered objectivity (cf. Crenshaw 1989: 154). In this way, theology remains meaningless to many (cf. Kim 2020: 598). Similar to the critique of the women’s movement which marginalized issues beyond *white* middle-class feminism, the question of a “mainstream” in theology can be raised here. The “mainstream” would refer not only to a certain group of people but also to seemingly universal “core issues”: Who is represented in theological research? Who can make their voice heard? Who remains silent so as not to jeopardize their career? What is the significance of theologies that deconstruct the interplay of power and knowledge (e. g. feminist and postcolonial theology)? Why are they often marginalized? Why do they have limited reach or little visibility in the mainstream of theology (cf. Gruber 2018: 24)?

Intersectional theology ties in with the challenges raised by these questions. In fact, some theologians have already criticized the marginalization of current political and social issues. They argued that (existential) topics such as the current situation of migrants would not be considered “core issues” in academic theology. Instead, initial core issues of a justice-oriented theology would be pushed to the periphery in order to be recognized at all (cf. Lassak 2012: 134–135). For Kim and Shaw (2018: 42–43) intersectional theology “destabilizes fixed notions of theological truth by offering multiple and competing statements of experiences”. Hence, it embraces co-existing centers that empower each other (cf. Kim/Shaw 2018: 59). However, this multidimensional approach does not mean falling back on narra-

11 For example, when we are confronted with beliefs that contradict our own, this triggers brain activity that regulates our emotions (cf. Kaplan et al. 2016). Information that contradicts our own beliefs is rejected in order to avoid cognitive dissonance and feelings of personal discomfort (confirmation bias, cf. Frimer et al. 2017; Kappes et al. 2020). For an intersectional theology, the difficulty of changing beliefs that are central to our identity is particularly challenging (cf. Kaplan et al. 2016: 1).

tives of "sameness" (Kim/Shaw 2018: 43). On the contrary, theology should not aim at a "single story" (Adichie 2009) but should look for various people in their concrete vulnerable lives.

Yet, *secondly*, intersectional theology is not characterized by the consideration of experiences alone, even though the theologies already mentioned have rightly drawn attention to the theological significance of personal experiences. An intersectional theology must also interrogate personal experiences for their socio-political significance – as Crenshaw (1989) made clear in her essay critiquing antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics on the basis of Black women's experiences in court. In an intersectional theology, experiences ("the personal") are linked to socio-political structures ("the political"). Experiences of poverty and exclusion, for example, are almost exclusively the result of unjust socio-political structures. Thus, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis sharply criticizes the current economic order, in which the gap between the rich and poor is widening and social equality is diminishing. Structurally anchored inequality is becoming visible in personal experiences: "As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape." (EG 53). Another example is found in the social and political protests in which the participation of individuals ("the personal") can contribute to socio-political awareness and change ("the political"), such as the Black Lives Matter movement or, more recently, the numerous demonstrations against right-wing populism and extremism in Germany. In an intersectional theology, neither "the personal" nor "the political" should be neglected. If personal experiences are ignored and their socio-political significance is misjudged, experiences of discrimination remain individualized and reproduce discourses in which the power of perpetrators is protected and only victims are held responsible for their experiences of discrimination and oppression.

The task of an intersectional theology is not to dismiss personal experiences as singular and insignificant but to recognize their political and theological significance. Experiences of discrimination based on stereotypes and prejudices (e. g. "Poor people are lazy.") are inextricably linked to political decisions (e. g. social security benefits). For theology and the Church, Gunda Werner (cf. 2019: 307) cites examples in which discrimination against individuals is structurally inscribed, for example, masculinity, sexuality and exclusive power in leadership. Without thinking "the personal" and "the political" together, there can be no social change. Crenshaw (1989) clearly points out that social change must be thought of from an intersectional perspective. Complex experiences of discrimination can only be made visible and structurally prevented if the underlying intersection of social categories is considered. Such social change and struggle for a more just world is the goal of any justice-oriented theology, including intersectional theology. With this goal, intersectional theology is in good company with liberation theology,

Black theology and feminist theology. Intersectional theology is not a delimiting concept, rather it links important insights from various theological works.

3.3 Critical Perspectives on Intersectional Action and Academia: Theological Consequences

Following the slogan “the personal is political”, marginalized experiences in theology should become political: “Intersectional thinking is a praxis for theology. Intersectionality is not simply a way of theorizing but is also a means for coalition-building to work toward social justice” (Kim 2020: 607).¹² Coalitions as well as sensitivity to intersectional discrimination and privilege impact not only research but also scholars’ teaching. What N. J. Ramsay (2017: 87) refers to as “intersectional action” can ultimately affect institutions such as schools and churches because universities also educate future leaders in positions of power: “*Coalitions* rather groups comprising one perspective on a situation are a hallmark of intersectional action” [emphasis original]. Within such coalitions, complex experiences of discrimination and privilege are acknowledged in relation to socio-political structures. Intersectional action means making the personal political.

An apolitical theology cannot exist, as Johann Baptist Metz (cf. 1997: 79) already noted.¹³ Theology aims to be political. In the words of Dorothee Sölle (cf. 2010: 64), theology without political consequences is hypocritical. In fact, every theological sentence should be political. Here, too, the women’s rights activist Carol Hanisch (2000: 115–116) links in. She calls on the women’s movement to listen to the voices of so-called “apolitical” women (I find them very political). Dissenting voices, too, would have their place and help to avoid narrowing the discussion. Similarly, intersectional theology is messy because it encompasses diverse, contradictory, and difficult experiences (cf. Kim 2020: 607). Personal experiences are political – and theologically relevant. Metz, therefore, rightly calls for a de-privatization of theology and a disclosure of its socio-critical potential (cf. Kreutzer 2017: 13). This objective points to parallels with an intersectional theology, namely the intertwining of “the personal” and “the political”. Theological reflection is not “politically innocent” but intertwined with complex relations of power (cf. Gmainer-Pranzl 2014: 371). Thus, for a justice-oriented theology, it is

12 Methodologically, the intersectionality approach still faces challenges and open questions. Further research is required here, particularly for pastoral and practical theologians (cf. Ramsay 2014: 467).

13 Gustavo Gutiérrez, however, criticizes Johann B. Metz for the absence of experience-based elements which leaves the concept of the political more or less abstract (cf. Halbmayr 2017: 132).

crucial to reflect on subjects of the "center" and the "periphery" and to turn marginalized subjects into co-existing centers: "Who should do theology and where, in whose interest and for whom?" (Metz 1980: 58)

Intersectional thinking that advocates for social change can restore an activist center to theology (cf. Kim 2020: 596). Indeed, taking the origin of intersectionality seriously, the telos of an intersectional theology is social justice (cf. Ramsay 2017: 87). Thus, intersectional theology aims to analyze discrimination and privilege. This level of analysis, however, differs from a practice-related level. Practice-related demands like action-oriented coalitions, perhaps (and this requires further discussion) even activist-oriented, follow from an intersectional analysis. To this end, it is necessary to clarify what exactly is meant (theologically) by an activist center or activist-oriented coalitions and to what extent these demands go beyond theological research. In any case, it is important to reflect upon the consequences of intersectional theological work.

Suffering from discrimination and benefiting from privilege are both part of our daily lives – individually and structurally. For both dimensions, we may ask: Can we understand *white*, male privilege without engaging in the story of racism and sexism?¹⁴ In this regard, Sirma Bilge (2013: 412) problematizes the reception of the intersectionality approach in academia, exemplified by the term "whitening of intersectionality". This may point to the challenges and limitations of an intersectional theology: Can we work with the intersectionality approach without considering its political origin? If so, would that undermine the initial intent of intersectionality – empowering Black women and supporting their political struggles? Should any intersectional analysis include the category of race, just as the category of gender is fundamental in feminist theory? What is the significance of the context in which the intersectionality approach is applied? These challenging questions have not yet been addressed extensively in theology.¹⁵ However, they may become more urgent in future discussions on intersectional theology, especially in a dominantly *white*, European context. This applies, in particular, to the category of race, which has tended to be neglected but which – in its intersection with gender – is central to both Black feminism and the conceptual origin of intersectionality in Crenshaw's work. For *white* male scholars, for example, the categories of race and gender come with privilege that is rarely perceived as such.¹⁶

14 See Adriaan van Klinken (2024) in this volume.

15 In theology, religious studies and social sciences, the intersectionality approach is often disconnected from both its legal perspective and the experiences of Black women (cf. Werner 2019: 305).

16 Robin DiAngelo (2011: 54) uses the term "white fragility" to describe behavioral patterns among *white* people when confronted with racism. This includes defensive behavior, emotions ranging from anger and fear to guilt, as well as silence and leaving the situation. These behaviors, in turn, would "function to reinstate white racial equilibrium."

For if the personal is political and the personal is intertwined with the professional, then the professional is also political. Intersectional theology seeks to expose blind spots and exclusions. It is – in its very origin – “biased toward justice” (Kim/Shaw 2018: 44).

These questions further emphasize sensitivity to constructions of Othering that create or even reinforce exclusion. Intersectional theology does not take an exclusive or exclusionary standpoint. Rather, it emphasizes the intersection of the personal, the theological, and the political. Hence, implications of “the personal is political” still seem theologically relevant: “What counts, and who decides what counts, as theological thought?” (Donalson 2021: 6) In an intersectional theology, new questions and challenges can be revealed, including the role of religion in different contexts: How does religion, when intersecting with other categories, lead to discrimination or privilege?¹⁷

4. Conclusion

Both the personal and the theological are political. For theology, many examples were given that revealed critical perspectives on inequality as a key element in theology. However, blind spots became apparent when intersectional experiences of discrimination were rendered invisible. In keeping with its origin, the intersectionality approach implies a political-activist dimension. Therefore, experience and social location (“the personal”) must be considered alongside socio-political contexts (“the political”). In this regard, it calls theology to action. Yet, what can scholars learn from activists and vice versa? In what ways can theology offer further action-oriented perspectives? As has been shown, intersectional theology does not obscure different social locations and experiences but recognizes them as significant for theological research. Different voices that challenge one’s position and offer new perspectives should be heard more loudly in academia. The relationship between knowledge production and power needs to be critically challenged especially by dominant groups. This requires both individual and structural changes. A critical analysis of discrimination and privilege can lead to a greater awareness of our role in the (re)production of inequality and can guide action.

All of the claims made here certainly go far beyond theology. However, the intersectionality approach can be a helpful resource for giving voice to the “least of these”. Debates aiming to foster transformative change are needed, including in

17 The category of religion hardly plays a role in intersectional analyses. Religion is usually equated with an institution related to power and is not be seen as a resource for social change (cf. Ramsay 2014: 468).

theology in particular. The Gospel reminds us of our social responsibility through faith in God. As the new political theology has emphasized, faith is not separate from the turmoil of history and the political issues of our time (cf. Hartlieb 2012: 116). Consequently, intersectional theology is not exclusively relevant in academia. Indeed, we should always be asking ourselves: Who will benefit from our debates? To be authentic, resistance to oppression and inequality is needed on multiple levels. The unequal distribution of power needs to be challenged and changed in order to empower people. Theology needs to become aware of its power, both positively and negatively. When theology makes marginalized voices heard, people can recognize their individual experiences in others and become even more aware of the connection between personal experiences and (political) structures that produce the experiences made.¹⁸ Thereby, structural inequality could be exposed more clearly – with the aim of turning the power of some into the empowerment of many. Thus, speaking from the lens of an intersectional theology: The personal is both political and theological.

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18 Yet, it remains problematic that structural inequality is often located solely at the individual level. For example, Carol Hanisch (2000: 114) criticizes society for equating experienced "sad situations" with self-blame: "Can you imagine what would happen if women, blacks, and workers [...] would stop blaming ourselves for our sad situations?"

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