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## **Those who respect borders enjoy genuine encounters. Reflections on acknowledging our boundaries.**

**Veronika Prüller-Jagenteufel**

### **Introduction**

I have wrestled for a long time with the task of developing a vision based on the concept of overcoming boundaries but respecting differences. Too much has already

been said about the new Europe and about the challenges and tasks which we European women face - not least at the last two meetings of the national coordinators of our society. The penny only dropped when I began to travel this summer and I started to ponder again on the metaphor of the boundary. The following thoughts are dedicated to this and are more a meditation than a lecture - reflections on my spiritual journey as a Christian woman.

The task was also difficult because, although I was to give the final lecture, I had to formulate my thoughts weeks in advance. So I hope that I won't be repeating too much or, if I do, that my reflections can be seen as a summing up of what has already been said and as a charge.

I should first like to thank two women whose work in part inspired what I have to say: my friend Ilse Müllner, Professor of Biblical Theology of the Old Testament in Kassel and the theologian Gunda Werner from Berlin, to whom I owe a better understanding of the theology of Henning Luthers, who championed spiritual guidance on the boundaries.<sup>1</sup>

Two years ago I was walking in the Bohemian Forest (or Bavarian Forest as it is known on the German side), an extensive area of woodland in the border zone between Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic. (This beautiful area is called 'Sumava' - the rustling one - in a female Czech term.)

For four decades the border, which went through the wood, was delineated by barbed wire, the Iron Curtain, and included a 40 km wide no-go area, in which almost all the villages were destroyed after the German-speaking inhabitants had been removed. Many hidden traces of these villages can still be found today.

I was deeply moved when, on our way from Bavaria, we came to a crossing point intended only for cyclists and hikers. There was no longer any barbed wire and no barrier, only a little empty guard hut; nothing but a board with 'Federal Republic of Germany' on one side and 'Czech Republic' on the other.

A wonderful border experience - a moving crossing.

Can we change the scene to the news of the last few weeks - rockets and soldiers crossing the border between Lebanon and Israel - in both directions. Both sides have reason to believe that the others want not only to force them back over their borders, but also to destroy them. Israel's existence seems to be an insurmountable outrage to many of her neighbours and the way in which Israel tries to secure her borders causes anger and incomprehension among her friends.

Every day the portrayal of the conflict in the media shows us terrible pictures of experiences on the border and horrifying incursions into the other's territory.

### **Part I**

For most of us the word 'border' means the border of a country, but we also use the concept of 'border' as a metaphor: there are not only borders between countries but also boundaries of knowledge, of good taste and so on. And not every crossing of a boundary has positive connotations. Border attacks are not only made by armies but also take place in the realm of human relationships.

<sup>1</sup> See: Ilse Müllner, *Das hörende Herz. Weisheit in der hebräischen Bibel*, Stuttgart 2006; Gunda Werner, *Die Grenze als Ort von Seelsorge. Impulse aus der Theologie Henning Luthers*, in: *Diakonia* 37 (2006) 290-295.

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We want our personal boundaries to be respected, but at the same time can suffer because of the limits of our power.

The limit of human life is one of its essential qualities - death limits all earthly life.

Even the picture of someone who regularly crosses the border, who can provide a link, who knows both sides, who can provide information and allow for exchange is not necessarily positive. There are also people who suffer from the mental illness 'Borderline syndrome', which stops them feeling at ease with the world.

People's desire to discover what is beyond the next mountain or river, to extend the boundaries and the limits of what is known, is one of the most significant factors in the development of humankind. At the same time we are frightened by the extension of the boundaries of what is possible in technology, for example the blurring of the boundary between humans and animals through the use of genetic technology.

The boundary as a metaphor is therefore not only ambivalent but also polyvalent - the motto of our general meeting makes this clear: we want to cross the border, but we must respect differences. So our vision is not that we should be totally without boundaries. There will always be differences and that gives us a challenge.

I should like to draw these two ideas together: boundaries must be respected, because only then can we see where we are justified in removing them and where we must acknowledge legitimate boundaries for a meaningful meeting to take place. My vision too is not that there should be no boundaries, but that we should show recognition, respect and understanding.

I should like to emphasize this because I think that we not only live in a time, as in the unification of Europe, in which borders have been crossed in a positive manner but also, in my opinion, in a time of false concepts of being without boundaries and in a time of dangerous disregard for boundaries.

A friend said to me recently that he found the way some people (both women and men) dress in hot weather crosses the boundaries. He said he didn't want to see so much naked flesh of people he didn't know. The naked flesh of women is seen on every other advertising hoarding. What some people feel is crossing a boundary, others accept or see as a useful advertising technique. Eroticism has few boundaries today.

How much human flesh should be shown, by whom and where is only one of the many areas in which boundaries which had set by accepted convention have now been disregarded. As is countless other areas, boundaries which had been set up by custom, convention and tradition have been lost. Cultural boundaries are no longer simply accepted but have to be decided or negotiated. What shall I wear and what not? How much independence is there between partners and where are the boundaries? How much space do we give our children and where do we draw the line? Culturally accepted boundaries in interpersonal relationships are abandoned. We now have to see where we want boundaries and must develop a way to respect these boundaries. The growing need for individual decisions shows an increase in freedom, but that can also be seen as a burden. We have to shape our individual lives and create an identity of our own - it is no longer acceptable to rely on support from a previous social culture.

To develop an identity, we must recognize set boundaries. To recognize and accept the boundaries between 'I' and 'you' is one of the first decisive steps in a baby's development. Without I-boundaries there can be no identity, no personality. Even if there has been much abuse of it in the past, shame is an important emotion, because it is one of our ways of reacting to an overstepping of the line. If we are ashamed, it is almost always because a boundary has been crossed: either by ourselves (and then the shame can be overcome if the crossing was justified and important - here too is ambivalence) or else someone overstepped our boundary. The fact that many women who are raped feel ashamed is connected with the fact that our feeling of shame is our own personal border guard. We use the word 'shameless' to describe behaviour which disregards boundaries.

So lack of boundaries can only be achieved by a loss of shamelessness and of personal identity.

Our age is often described as a time without values. We live in an age in which the rejection of old values has brought much freedom and opportunities for a new lifestyle, which has been welcomed by most people, but regarded suspiciously or even opposed by others. From the point of view of the women's movement there has been much that is positive, but not everything of importance has yet been achieved.

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At the same time I think that the other side of this development is becoming clearer and it will certainly be one of our future tasks to distinguish between the positive and negative aspects. One disadvantage (and I am just mentioning the one which seems most obvious at the moment) is the increasing intrusion without restraint and so without boundaries of the neo-liberal form of business in all areas of life. Modern distinctions in social spheres, which interact to form society and let it function for the good of all, now incline increasingly towards market forces with a view to profit. Following the decline of humanism, neo-liberal economics and commercialism rose to power and now direct life and thought without regard for boundaries. We now market everything from health to culture to the human genome. It is becoming increasingly clear that more societies are needed (and Christian men and women should be among the first of these) which set limits to the philosophies of markets and finance, don't judge people according to their market value and which respect values other than financial ones.

So we must speak of borders which need to be preserved to allow us to live together as human beings.

### Part II

In the Hebrew Bible there is a word which according to the context is translated as 'border' or 'area'. This seems to me to uphold the concept that borders can create space. Psalm 104 praises God among other things for the fact that he has 'set a bound' to the waters which they cannot cross and therefore cannot again flood the earth. In this way God created a habitat for mankind. The psalm of creation sings of God's creative work, the area he created for human life by setting limits to the powers of chaos.

In the same way ethical rules and norms set limits to similar chaotic powers which threaten the benefits of peaceful co-existence. Even in the field of ethics an accepted norm, which set exact limits for almost everything, has been surpassed in recent years and given way to situational ethics. As with social conventions that is right - but at the same time ethics is discovering again the value of set limits, for example the right of freedom from bodily harm as a boundary for cultural attacks on a woman's body or when it is a question of setting the limits for medical intrusions on people or when respect for human dignity is recognized as a boundary for state and social treatment of people.

The function of ethical rules in establishing limits allows us to coexist because it tells us, loosely expressed, what is acceptable and what is not. Recognized ethical rules have the same exonerating function as cultural agreements - we don't need to negotiate every time as to how we are going to behave.

Hebrew teaches us that 'boundary' and 'area' are basically the same phenomenon, perhaps not only in the sense of limiting chaos through God's creative action and mankind's ethical deeds. It is also true that it is only by means of boundaries, beyond which begins what is other and strange, that there is what we can call our own and that the concept of 'we' exists. The identity of groups and societies is the same as with the identity of individuals: it exists because it is possible to distinguish between 'us' and 'the others', because there is a boundary which creates space for 'us', for our own existence as opposed to a stranger's, a boundary which makes identification possible. Because my homeland has borders, I can say, 'I am Austrian'; because there are differences between Christianity and other religions, including definitions, I can say, 'I am a Christian'.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps we can also say, 'Because I have limits, I exist, I can be differentiated from the others, at least by my physical boundaries. Because I have boundaries, there is an area of possibilities - bounded by my limited capabilities and gifts.' Being bounded is one of the constants in human life and helps us not to get lost in the boundless and the infinite. And even special ecstatic moments, when all boundaries seem to be removed, are only possible because one is aware of the boundary and anchored in one's own experience - otherwise the intensely moving crossing of such a border and subsequent ecstatic experience could not take place.

To be human is often described as being limited as opposed to a divine being, which is not subject to the human limitations of time and space, of limited power and a life limited by death. And yet I don't imagine God to be entirely without boundaries or to disregard boundaries and Christian theology hasn't done that either. God has not only limited the destructive powers of chaos. She/He has also bound him/herself to a rule, the boundary, which makes being human possible - namely Her/His love of humans. This forms a border at which God so to speak 'can do no other'. God cannot hate.

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<sup>2</sup> At the same time there is ambivalence: each „we“ envelopes the differences within the group, each „we“ is also excluding others. Therefore it is important to strongly hold: From the „we“ of humankind no-one can be excluded!

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God's love limits Her/His omnipotence. God can be sad about us, disappointed and deeply hurt, but She/He won't hate us, She/He remains Love and perhaps this love is the only unlimited space, because no-one can fall out of this love. To this love there is no beyond.

People have often felt offended by the limitations of earthly existence and refused to recognize the limits of what is humanly possible and it sometimes seems these days that they do so with growing 'success'. And the unlimited nature of God's love seemed to many in the past and seems now to be a threatening concept which robs them of their freedom, a power which they cannot escape. Probably only those who dare at least to start trusting God manage to accept our human limitations and to experience divine love in an open environment which is full of potential. I consider this trust to be the fundamental criterion which decides whether someone sees boundaries as an obstruction or as a means of enhancing life.

In a discussion about what distinguished feminist spirituality from other forms of spiritual life, one of my friends once argued that we shouldn't ask about the boundaries but about the nucleus, the centre. By that she meant that we shouldn't define ourselves by our outer limits but, as it were, from within, by saying what is really important to us. Then everyone could determine the proximity or distance according to this centre and there would be no more need for a clear boundary which would show whether someone belonged or not. A fascinating thought and yet at the same time we see that there is still a breadth of detachment which makes it impossible to find common ground.

If we stop focusing on boundaries in this way and look instead at centres, which have a periphery leading into a border area, which then extends to the periphery of another centre, we shall have a picture which corresponds to an ancient way of dealing with borders. Before people began to live in clearly delineated national territories, there were centres of power and their surroundings and in the border area was another centre of power. Often the people in this border area mixed and formed a race of their own which could be distinguished from those of the other two areas. In the border area itself language, dress, habits and customs from both sides mixed and created new forms. In the border area it is not easy to determine who, as it were, belongs where and which type of behaviour corresponds to which central culture, because they are mixed. Before the ethnic cleansings of the twentieth century, Europe, which had already been organised into national states, was aware of many such border areas which didn't belong to any centre. Their destruction not only makes Europe poorer in cultural forms, but also poorer in knowledge about the nature of borders, in the extended metaphorical sense too.

Borders not only create space, to a certain extent they form a space in themselves, at least they do in many cases. In the field of ethics we like to speak of a grey area, which is between a clear 'yes' and a clear 'no', an area in which it is not easy to say what is good and what bad, what right and what wrong. In most questions of human coexistence there is such a grey area, a border area between what is welcomed and what is rejected.

Anyone who wants to find their way around a border area needs to know where the centres are and what gives them their character. She should if possible speak both languages and be at home with the cultural mix. Then she will understand the people in the border area better and learn from their experience and so achieve a good border crossing. Anyone who treats a border area as a centre will not only make herself unpopular, but might also read the signs wrongly and get lost.

From an ethical point of view this means that we can only move responsibly in the grey areas if we understand the situation on both sides and at the same time are aware that it is only applicable if it is changed into new combinations, a dialect of its own as it were, if we are not to rob the centre of its necessary character. Border areas are not centres. Their identity is the border. They are an area *sui generis*.

In that discussion with my friends about spirituality we did not touch on this understanding of the concept 'border' and our relationship with it in vain. Many people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially women, have become 'border people' in spiritual matters. Many of us have had to learn, apart from the language of the confession we were born into, that of other confessions and religions and a secular decay, and many that of a revision of their religion so that women were recognized. From this arose the field of feminist Christian spirituality. And for a large number this border area became their home, their new centre and their previous loyalties decreased. Has a new country come into being, with its own periphery and border areas? I think so - Europe's religious map is changing fast and I think it will be a while before we know where there is a centre and what can be called the border area. Perhaps as far as religion is concerned we are experiencing a sort of mass migration, when many are on the move and a new order is not yet in sight. 1500 years ago it was Benedict of Nursia and the

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order he founded which led to the renewal of the church after the confusion of the migration of the people. Perhaps it will again be communities which from the present turbulence decide to lead a life which makes a virtue out of recognizing human boundaries - following the example of God, who took on human form in the incarnation and completed it in love.

To sum up my thoughts so far, I should like to say : we have and we need boundaries and can look on them not only as obstructions but also as enhancers of life. Borders can be a clearly defined division, but can also be a place to live in, a border area, which we can inhabit or wander through from time to time. But borders presuppose a centre, both exist only in relation to each other. Our life exists because of their interplay.

So how do we deal with these borders? What do I mean by my claim that borders should be respected? Treating borders with respect does not mean that we have to turn round every time we reach one. My concern is not that we should not cross borders at all, but should view each border with respect.

In this way we can perhaps better answer the question as to whether, when and how a border should be crossed.

The first thing borders demand of us is attention. This can be seen more clearly in interpersonal relationships. We are sensitive to the fact that someone has crossed our boundaries, come too near to us - either physically or in a figurative sense. We expect others to respect our boundaries, to be sensitive to whether or not we want to be touched, whether or not what they say goes too far, whether proximity and distance are right. We don't like it if someone 'falls into the house with the door' - a German expression meaning that someone doesn't recognize the threshold as a border area and introduces her own concerns too quickly and bluntly.

Because there are boundaries between people, and because everyone has and needs her own space, we must be sensitive to these borders and learn to recognize where each person with whom we come into contact has his or her boundaries. And as before a door we knock and have to wait to see if an invitation to cross the boundary or a rejection follows. So boundaries need sensitivity.

I have observed that the very fact that one is aware of a border increases one's sensitivity to it. When on my travels I leave Austria, I am often quite automatically more attentive on the other side of the border as I look more closely to see how things function there, what the houses and the people look like, how they behave, what sort of clothes they wear. In many places much has become the same or similar as a result of globalisation, but there are differences and I delight in finding them. I am curious about what is strange, about the differences. They enrich my view of life; they show me that there are innumerable possible ways of living one's life - to a certain extent every time I cross a border my own borders are extended.

What is necessary in these two examples, that of sensitivity towards upholding boundaries between people and of discoveries which can be made on crossing the borders, is an awareness of the fact that the border exists. Borders need recognition.

That is not only important for countries but also for us people in different areas of our life and coexistence. That is where the second part of the motto of our conference comes in - respecting differences - and that means being aware of them. So I don't think much of people saying we are all the same or our cultures, confessions and religions are basically all the same. I feel the indisputable conviction that all people are fundamentally equal is too important to be levelled out in this way. The insistence that we should apply equal human rights to everyone and show regard for the human dignity of everyone is still sometimes contended, in that it is claimed we don't take seriously enough the fact that differences do exist, for example between men and women. But people still don't understand what feminist theory has been teaching as commonplace: that every comparison needs a *tertium comparationis*, that is equality between two things can only be established in relation to a third. Otherwise we would not be talking about equality, but self or identity.<sup>3</sup> Since we in the women's movement have recognized that, we don't need to sweep differences between us under the carpet but can accept them with curiosity as an enrichment and a challenge, because everything unusual makes one question one's own views.

Recognizing differences, however, implies that we must also recognize that there are ways of behaving, convictions, forms of religious belief which separate us from one another and form barriers

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<sup>3</sup> Vgl. Ute Gerhard, Gleichheit ohne Angleichung. Frauen im Recht, München 1990, 13-18. Vgl. auch Sieglinde Rosenberger, Geschlechter – Gleichheiten – Differenzen. Eine Denk- und Politikbeziehung, Wien 1996.

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between us. To recognize these barriers can make us more aware of each other. We can discover to our amazement what is different for others and we can try to observe their boundaries with care. Together we can develop ways of knocking on each other's door and giving and understanding a welcome or the rejection of an invitation. Recognizing boundaries basically means you never cross a boundary without having obtained permission - unless you have reason to believe it is an illegal boundary<sup>4</sup>; or if you have the right to live in the border zone. But fundamentally the essential acknowledging of the border means asking for admission. (Perhaps that is why the unguarded border crossing in the wood made such an impression on me, because it proved how unimportant this previously so carefully controlled border has become. Permission was no longer needed. And yet it was marked as a border and expected to be seen as such.)

So my vision is not that we remove borders in the sense that they should no longer exist. My vision is that we learn to respect the borders between us - people, nations, churches, religions and cultures - so that they no longer divide but bind us. And I think that we can only achieve that if we observe them and no longer want to obliterate them, if we are sensitive to them and don't cross them uninvited.

Borders are not only dividing lines, they unite as well. We have seen that the difference between 'I' and 'you', between us and the others is important and necessary to establish identity, to be a human being. It also means that this ambiguity of the border is part of being human, what makes us human: individuality and bonding - independence and dependence - standing alone and relying on others. As people we are always both and always have been both, neither quality takes precedence. It is not a case of one being of primary importance and the other subordinate to it, rather that both are inextricably interwoven. We are creatures of freedom in dependence (relation), or rather dependence (relation) in freedom. And we are so because we are limited beings, because we have boundaries, which limit us and set us apart but also link us and draw us into a relationship. So we are limited beings engaging with one another.

I can only meet you where 'Not-I' is. That demands that I give up wanting to be everything; I must relinquish my claims on totality and be content within my boundaries. Then I shall be able to recognize and appreciate the other as other and be able to meet her and see more of her than just as a reflection of myself. But life across the border, be it the other woman, the other person, the other nation, the other confession or religion or culture will always be foreign to me. I cannot and should not obliterate this border, unless I want to conquer and make the others a part of myself, to incorporate them into me. Where I want to preserve the borders (and that is what we are charged with doing wherever there are people), I must reckon with a continuing sense of strangeness. Where the foundation for our meeting is to be love and not enmity, love must accept this residual strangeness without trying to possess it or tame it or adapt it or cut it to size. Genuine encounters only take place when we give each other mutual support in our individuality and our relationship is strengthened.

The theological basis for this is that we are all primarily drawn towards God, so our relationship with each other can never be complete. This is the crucial boundary in any attempt to relate to other people. We can never completely understand ourselves or each other and remain a mystery to ourselves and each other, so that an intruder is forced to withdraw, but someone who knocks gently is allowed in. And yet the mystery is never solved completely. In that sense people are transcendent beings, who ignore boundaries: drawn to that which is eternal, beyond all boundaries, to God, at home in the only thing without boundaries - the love of God.

So it is our human limits which guide us towards what is unlimited. And yet we are challenged to accept our limits and not to excuse them or conceal them, even if they cause us pain, for example, when full of grief we reach the limit of what can be done, when we stand uncomprehending at the border of the death of a friend or fearful at the limit of our own life and look across at our own border of death. When we accept our boundaries - our own and those between us and others - we accept the fragmentary nature of our life, which will never be complete here, which has disjointed sections and remains unfinished, to which failure, rejection and unsolved problems belong. But these boundaries are also a place of encounter, the border offers new space to enjoy life. This fragmentation of our life makes us open to others, to the world, to God. Being true both to the fragment and to the boundaries means affirming them. It also means that we deny ourselves any attempt to overcome ourselves, to engage in the market or any other ideology, to serve false gods.

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<sup>4</sup> As I said: I do not think every border is to be respected at every time. There are indeed also borders, which we have to disregard and cross - even sometimes without asking for permission to do so: As it does in that fairy tale that little girl crying out loud: the emperor has no pants. I thank the participant in the general assembly who has given me that example!

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We deny ourselves any totality, because we are and remain limited fragments, because we are open and rely on God and each other, because there is something "more than everything"<sup>5</sup>.

For this reason the protestant practical theologian, Henning Luther, describes spiritual counselling as action on the borders, which doesn't eradicate the border but keeps it open and allows people freedom in their encounters with one another and with God. In this sense it is my vision for Christian women today to be spiritual carers for each other in this Europe in which borders have a new significance.

Borders create both freedom and relationship; borders make us human, borders allow us to focus on the unlimited love of God. I hope that you will all live within these borders and at the same time experience life without limits in all its fullness.

Thank you.

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### *Recent publications of the author:*

Veronika Prüller-Jagenteufel, *Werkzeug und Komplizin Gottes. Hildegard Holzer und die Seelsorgehelferinnen in Österreich 1939-1968*, Münster (Lit-Verlag) 2002.

Maria Elisabeth Aigner/ Anna Findl-Ludescher/ Veronika Prüller-Jagenteufel, *Grundbegriffe der Pastoraltheologie*, 99 Wort Theologie konkret, München (Don Bosco Verlag) 2005.

Frauen, in: *Handbuch Praktische Theologie Band 2 Durchführungen*, hg. v. Herbert Haslinger, Mainz 2000, 111-125.

Veronika Prüller-Jagenteufel, *In doppelter Differenz: Seelsorge als Frauenberuf. Von den Seelsorgehelferinnen zur heutigen Situation von Frauen in pastoralen Berufen*, in: Pemsler-Maier, Sabine (Hg.), *Zwischen Alltag und Ausnahme: Seelsorgerinnen. Geschichte, Theologie und gegenwärtige Praxis*, Ostfildern 2001, 139-164.

Veronika Prüller-Jagenteufel, *Frauen machen Kirche!...? Zwischen (Amts-)Behinderung und Neuentwurf [Seminareinheit 2 des Kapitels Kirche]*, in: Irene Leicht/Claudia Rakel/Stefanie Rieger-Goertz (Hg.), *Arbeitsbuch Feministische Theologie*, Gütersloh 2003, 305-308.

Veronika Prüller-Jagenteufel, *Alte und junge Frau Kirche*, in: Hadwig Ana Maria Müller (Hg.), *Neues erahnen. Lateinamerikanische und europäische Kirche im Gespräch*, Ostfildern 2004, 148-155.

Veronika Prüller-Jagenteufel, *"Tröstet mein Volk!" Relevanz und Präsenz als zentrale Kategorien für Theologie und Pastoral*, in: Anna Findl-Ludescher/ Johannes Panhofer/ Veronika Prüller-Jagenteufel (Hg.), *Die Welt in der Nusschale. Impulse aus den Ortskirchen im Horizont der Weltkirche*, Festschrift für Franz Weber, Würzburg (echter Verlag) 2005, 151-167.

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<sup>5</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *Es muss doch mehr als alles geben. Nachdenken über Gott*, Hamburg 1992.