A spirituality of risk, the fight against Trafficking in Women

Speech delivered by Prof. Dr. Maaike de Haardt

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'Elena, a Reflection on Trafficking in Women'

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to be here this afternoon for the presentation of this impressive book: Elena, a reflection on human trafficking. It gives me an opportunity, from a professional point of view to outline my involvement with the SRTV. Because, as a feminist theologian I was asked by the organisers to say something regarding the spiritual and theological aspects of the involvement of everybody involved in the battle against the trafficking of human beings and in particular the trafficking of women. Because as Elma told me, this is an aspect that is often neglected.
What can you say about the impetus and spiritual motives? And in particular what can you say about the commitment and stamina required, often in the face of adversity, to carry on offering practical help to the victims of human traffickers? To continue to denounce and combat human trafficking, which although not approved by society or politicians, is to a large extent tolerated.
All this falls within the objectives of the SRTV and the many other networks involved in the fight against the trafficking of women.

Regarding the self-evidence and invisibility of women trafficking..
I recently read in the Volkskrant (Dutch quality newspaper) that the trafficking of women, especially trafficking geared towards prostitution, is regarded as a form of normal everyday criminal activity. Quite frankly, I was appalled when I read this description. When I think about "normal crime" I usually imagine something "innocent" like theft, fraud, or some type of scam. I can even go so far as to imagine that the procession of arms or drugs can be regarded as a normal criminal activity. But I would never consider the trafficking of women to be a normal crime. To describe the trafficking of women as a normal criminal activity speaks volumes about the invisibility and complexity of the fight against trafficking. Normal things are usually taken for granted. They are therefore largely invisible and often the hardest to combat. Prostitution is the oldest profession in the world. And apparently nowadays prostitution and trafficking seem to go hand in hand. We call it downplaying the problem.

In view of this I found it remarkable and disappointing that in the latest restyled edition of Opzij (Dutch feminist magazine), entitled Opzij 3.0, little attention was given to broad social problems, the bottom of society and the trafficking of women.
(by the way, in the Volkskrant cartoon Burqa Babes * two immigrant women who wear burqas* one of the babes, referring to Opzij, said "its not about me, I'm not a rich white chick") And just like the other famous women who were quoted in Opzij, the politicians amongst them focused on the important aspects of contemporary feminism such as childcare, equal pay, women in top positions, the beauty cult etc. For me it is not about playing one problem against the other. But good old Anja Meulenbelt (Dutch writer, feminist and socialist politician) mentioned the word solidarity. Along with the two young women who referred to the urgency of the battle against trafficking, I believe that the issue of emancipation and equality goes much deeper than the actual topics discussed in (the) "Opzij". Like those for example which are apparent in The Declaration of Human Rights in the additional Treaty for The Rights of Women, and also in the Palermo protocol. Deep in my heart I am convinced that the problems mentioned are secondary corollaries of much broader and deeper global issues. Such as: Poverty, exploitation, illegality, trafficking of women, migration, urbanisation, violence against women, civil wars and other conflicts, but also the environment and the depletion of the earths resources. I can also mention sexism,

racism, ethnocentrism and then all of these things combined. All these issues, whether consciously intended or not, are given political and/or religious legitimacy. Anybody who has some knowledge of these problems knows that women and children in particular are the first victims. They also know that this is not coincidental.

All these important matters are regularly on international agendas. Both politicians and religious leaders speak about their willingness to resolve these issues. But the problems of human rights violations, not to mention the violation of women's rights-unfortunately they are not the same- are not resolved with formal agreements. On the contrary. There are many differences regarding vision and strategy. And in particular the ability to recognise the gravity of the situation leaves a lot to be desired. When it comes to the problem of women trafficking the causes are varied and complicated. They involve economics, lawmaking, politics, gender relationships, morality and religion. Furthermore the problem itself: "the trafficking of women", is not acknowledged as an urgent problem. I believe the reason for this is not so much to do with the political analysis of the problem, but with the underlying cultural, philosophical and religious ideas, moral values and prejudices.
It all stems from the view on who has the right to lead a good life, a life of abundance, and why it is less important for certain groups of people.

A spirituality of risk.
And therefore I put it to you that perhaps, precisely on this point challenging the obviousness and the invisibility of the trafficking of women is one of the most important and characteristic dimensions of the work of the SRTV. And this is where the SRTV´s spiritual and theological profile comes to the fore. From my feminist theological background I'll try and specify this, while at the same time being aware that other descriptions and typologies are possible.
For the time being I will talk about the spirituality of risk.

Whatever is invisible or is taken for granted is nameless, unknown, unseen and unheard. And whoever is unseen, unknown and unheard looses his or her dignity. And so, as I've said, it is in the interest of many people to keep things the way they are. The SRTV, you here today want to try and change this. In this you are strengthened by a tradition that goes back centuries. Powered by a belief in a God who knows us, who calls us by name and who has formed us. Through this you demonstrate that fundamental human dignity doesn't depend on the opinions of political or religious leaders, on cultural customs on human capriciousness, or on power politics. Dignity is a quality that has been given to us by God. And the way you combat human trafficking shows that this dignity can only be realised through the eyes, the ears and the gestures of fellow human beings. That is precarious because it is going against the flow of things.

Isn't it true that the trafficking of women is about women and sex? It is about exploitation, abuse and violence. It is about contempt for women and turning them into consumer goods. To discuss this in public is breaking the taboo. Because it makes the otherwise well concealed, but nevertheless dominant male role in western culture very obvious. Sex and women are to patriarchal religious traditions in our western culture, including Christianity, difficult issues.
In combination with each other these topics, " sex and women ", form the basis for all the prejudices about sin, feminine inferiority, feminine sinfulness, sexual temptation, the undermining of important Christian values etc. Women and sex have to be regulated, preferably by (clerical) men, because women, by nature, are not capable of doing so themselves. Things the SRTV would say, that need to be "guarded".
But so as you mention in a friendly and subtle way on your web site,: "the history of Christianity has shown that guarding has not necessarily been beneficial" You choose for self-determination even while tackling such thorny issues as women and sex and the elimination of women trafficking. Issues in which both the political and religious spectrum are generally determined by moralism, paternalism, maternalism. You recognise, given the

wording on your site that you are well aware that not everybody is happy with your commitment. Because the Christian traditions which offer a hopeful perspective against the trafficking of women are also part of the problem. From this point of view the fight against trafficking is a battle royal, not only in a political way but also in a religious sense.
A spirituality of risk so to say.

Such spirituality requires courage. Besides stamina it also requires a kind of survival mentality. The way the prostitution of many victims of traffickers is a kind of survival sex, the protest against trafficking is a kind of survival crusade; while knowing better, not letting go of the conviction that every human being is dignified.
A crusade against the political, social and often religious obliviousness.
The victims, perpetrators and accomplices to traffickers all fade into oblivion.
Survival also because the actual possibilities of survival are fairly limited: in other words they don't really fit into the dominant contemporary ideals of a successful life.
Therefore these contemporary values (a little silly perhaps, to call them "the Opzij values") are cast in a critical light. For who do these values apply? And under what conditions?
From my point of view tackling the problem of women trafficking on the grounds of recognising the dignity of human beings, regardless of the circumstances, touches in a fundamental way a number of our core cultural values. It is not about the individual and liberal "courage to be" but about "the courage to let others dare to be themselves".
And that is in many respects precarious.

Endurance, survival, helping those who cant help themselves. Being a witness and therefore giving a face and a voice to the voiceless. Giving a voice and a face to hope and desperation. Very tangible. It's a kind of spirituality in which observance to God is expressed by seeing and hearing and in particular in giving a voice to those that have been made invisible.
The "Invisible presence" manifesting itself in those that have been made invisible.
It is about groups, that, frequently, in both political and liberating theological contexts remain invisible, because it is about women and sex. Divine presence is plural and not easy to identify.
It threatens those who want control and clarification but unfortunately also those who find themselves at the bottom of society, and that is quite often forgotten.

A similar spirituality in which the confidence and belief in the dignity of every human being is central, despite the circumstances, is not naïve or optimistic. You know that solutions are difficult to find, and they cannot be easily implemented. But this doesn't give way to cynicism or helplessness.
What happens sometimes: if I don't see immediate results, what's the point of carrying on?
You also know that the victims of traffickers are more than mere victims. It is for a good reason that in this context self-determination is a key concept for you.
Moreover, although you are not tempted into blaming the victim, or giving credence to the comment "that many women chose to do this themselves", the victims are often emotionally scared, traumatised and often even without these things suffering from complex personalities.
Both in their vulnerability, and in their ability to hurt others. In this respect victims of traffickers are no different than other human beings.
The traditional Christian terms like forgiveness or salvation are not important. What is important is healing, attention, compassion, care, providing sanctuary and recognition.
And again to have the courage to dare to let others be themselves. That is risky, because daring to let people be themselves, is daring to let people be different and not to let them go.

It is already over the edge to regard the cross and the road to the cross as being significant in this context. Many people will find it inappropriate to compare Elena's suffering with the

suffering of Jesus on the road to Calvary. Does this not distract from the exceptional redemptional suffering of Jesus who is Christ the saviour?.
Is it not blasphemous to compare the suffering of Jesus with that of a women trafficked into prostitution.? Again in this respect the battle against trafficking is borne by a spirituality of risk. To identify Elena's suffering with the road to the cross fits into a tradition in which the cross is seen as the primary indictment against injustice and violence. The cross is a summons for Christians to give hands and feet, ears and eyes. To become a witness, to see what is being kept invisible.

A spirituality of risk s carried by anger, hope, love and confidence in the gradual but ultimately social transforming power of these virtues. 'Water will break the rocks'. Despite all the sluggishness, resistance, hypocrisy, political and religious smooth talking, despite the fact that the trafficking of women doesn't seem to be increasing, or if you like seems to be becoming more visible, a lot of positive things have happened in the past years. 'Water will break the rocks', and that is our ultimate goal.

Prof. Dr. Maaike de Haardt
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