

Intersectionality

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Other language version: Intersektionalität (Deutsch)

Intersectionality identifies the mutual interpenetration and interaction or “intersection” (*Überkreuzung*) of different aspects of identity and discrimination. Developed in the 1980s by US lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw , it has since been adopted in anti-discrimination work and social science-oriented analyses in various disciplines, including theology. In addition to the initial aspects of identity – namely, *race*, *class*, and gender – that were integral to the development of Black feminism (womanism), others have been added to the current discussion, such as disability, age, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation.

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Editorial Note

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1. The “Discovery” of Intersectionality

The US lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw  analyzed labor law rulings by the US Supreme Court. One example: five black women sued General Motors after they had been fired. General Motors successfully defended itself by arguing that, because other black (male) employees remained employed, the company had complied with the anti-discrimination measures of the Civil Rights Act – it therefore could not be a case of racial discrimination. Nor could it be sexist discrimination because other (*white*) women retained their jobs. Crenshaw recognized that this was a case of intersecting discrimination that affected this particular group of black women.^[1] Based upon this insight, she developed intersectionality as an approach to social-scientific analysis that identifies the convergence of different

patterns of discrimination and that (in most cases) simultaneously criticizes them.^[2] Exactly which aspects of identity are taken into account varies. The intersections of *race*, *class*, and *gender* were the initial focus. Currently, as many as 13 categories are sometimes identified, including religion and geographical location.^[3] With increased sensitivity to individual aspects of identity and with a clearer awareness of the distinction between the original foundational categories (*Oberkategorien*), the list of aspects that can be taken into consideration is likely to be endless. This had led some leading researchers to emphasize the openness of the concept.^[4]

2. Theological Reception of Intersectionality

Because intersectional analyses are used to explore diversity in greater depth, church and diaconal bodies dealing with issues concerning equality are familiar with this concept. For example, the guideline, “Inklusion gestalten – Aktionspläne entwickeln,” published in 2022 by and in Diakonie and the EKD (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland/Evangelical Church in Germany) recognizes different aspects of diversity as well as “multiple allegiances” (*Mehrfachzugehörigkeiten*) to various dimensions as worthy of consideration.^[5] In theology, intersectionality is used primarily in religious education,^[6] diaconal studies, and theological discourses critical of power and discrimination. Both Protestant and Catholic theologians have embraced intersectionality, especially within theology that deals with gender.^[7] In this sense, intersectionality’s reception and adaptation in theology is similar to other disciplines in which intersectionality has been addressed primarily in the context of gender.^[8]

Biblical studies has also adopted and adapted intersectional approaches, particularly in social-historical exegesis. Intersectionality is here used to analyze various aspects of discrimination. In Church history, or rather the social history of Christianity, there are also recognizable debates on intersectionality that deal in particular with the role of religious affiliation as an aspect of identity, privilege, and discrimination and that emphasize its relevance.^[9] Since intersectional analyses make various aspects of humanity (e.g., its structural entanglement and diversity) clearer, it has much potential for systematic theology, particularly in ethics but also in theological anthropology.^[10] The concept of inclusive religious education introduces intersectional analyses and demands to religious instruction.^[11] According to Ulrike Witten ^{GND} and Wolfhard Schweiker ^{GND}, this requires not only an analysis of the dynamics of exclusion but also “self-criticism, [...] coming to terms with the history of guilt, and [...] analyzing one’s own point of view.”^[12] In intercultural theology, Claudia Jahnel ^{GND} in particular has worked on the body and its epistemic relevance, also from a perspective sensitive to discrimination. In view of pluralization and a growing awareness of the contextuality of theologies, intersectionality also offers starting points for reflection and clarification in academic discourse regarding the awareness and representation of one’s own positionality as a theologian.

3. Three Specific Characteristics of Theological Work On Intersectionality

With regard to theological work on intersectionality, there are three distinct theological issues that are worth noting. First: when conducted by a theologian and/or member of a religious community, research into intersectional relationships may result in greater importance being attached to the identity of religious affiliation than one normally finds in research on religion outside of theology. This must be stated openly.

Second: for a theology critical of antisemitism, Karin Stögner’s ^{GND} intersectional analysis of ideologies offers a deeper understanding of antisemitism’s modes of thought and action.^[13] Her intersectional analysis of antisemitism as an ideology shows the relation between the racist, sexist, queerphobic, and nationalist elements of antisemitism and other corresponding ideologies. According to the “classical” intersectional perspectives operative in the history of antisemitism, Jews were framed as “anti-categorical” (*antikategorial*) because they have not been unambiguously classified in terms of gender, class, or race.^[14] This ambiguity and intertwining with other ideologies strengthened antisemitism.^[15]

Third: with her notion of “kyriarchy” (*Kyriarchat*), Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza  advanced a theological intersectional concept. In the 1990s, the Roman Catholic feminist theologian and New Testament scholar developed the concept of “kyriarchy” [“rule of the master (*Herren*)”], which more accurately describes the modes of operation of patriarchy (“rule of the father”) or “hierarchy”^[16] (“rule of the holy” which, in her opinion, is only to be used in connection with religious power structures).^[17] To this end, she analyzed ancient Hellenistic power relations and pointed out that it was not “the fathers” but the free masters [κύριος = master (*Herr*)] who held power inside and outside the household and who oppressed other men and all women.^[18] Various aspects of identity are therefore intertwined (“entangled”) in her analysis of kyriarchy. Her treatment of New Testament household codes also demonstrates the same entanglement.^[19]

These three exemplary examples stand alongside other theological approaches, such as anti-racist intersectional research as well as a still emerging discourse in German-speaking countries that is also fueled by the practical needs of the Church.

Recommended Literature

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Kim, Grace Ji-Sun/Shaw, Susan M., *Intersectional Theology. An Introductory Guide*, Minneapolis 2018.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, *Congress of Wo/men. Religion, Gender and Kyriarchal Power*, Cambridge 2016.

Yang, Keming, *Analysing Intersectionality. A Toolbox of Methods*, London 2024.

Citations

- ¹ Cf. Crenshaw, Kimberlé, Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex. A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, in: *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139 (1989), 139–167.
- ² The 1851 “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech by Sojourner Truth  is often described as intersectional, the concept (*avant la lettre*) existed. See Degele, Nina, Intersektionalität. Perspektiven der Geschlechterforschung, in: Kortendiek, Beate et. al. (Eds.), *Handbuch Interdisziplinäre Geschlechterforschung (Geschlecht und Gesellschaft 65)*, Wiesbaden 2019, 341–348, 342. As a black slave, Truth asks: “Ain’t I Also a Woman?”– Truth, Sojourner, Bin ich etwa keine Frau*?, in: Kelly, Natasha A. (Ed.), *Schwarzer Feminismus. Grundlagentexte*, Münster 2019, 15. Historically speaking, it is unlikely that this quote and this version of the speech reflect Truth’s actual words. This is a translation of the 1863 publication and not the first transcript by a listener in 1851 – cf. The Sojourner Truth. Project, <https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches/>, accessed on 02.06.2026 as well as Israel, Carlotta, Eine klassische “Win-Win-Situation”? Intersektionalität und Kirchengeschichte nach 2020, in: Bauer, Benedikt/Mettner, Jennifer C. (Eds.), *Verstaubt, verdrängt, vergessen? “Frau” und “Geschlecht” in der Kirchengeschichte*, Festschrift für Ute Gause zum 60. Geburtstag, Göttingen 2025, 165–180.
- ³ See Lutz, Helma/Wenning, Norbert, Differenzen über Differenz – Einführung, in: idem (Eds.), *Unterschiedlich verschieden. Differenz in der Erziehungswissenschaft*, Opladen 2001, 11–24.
- ⁴ Cf. Lutz/Wenning, *Differenzen*, 20.
- ⁵ Kirchenamt der EKD/Diakonie Deutschland (Ed.), *Inklusion gestalten – Aktionspläne entwickeln. Ein Orientierungsrahmen der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland und der Diakonie Deutschland (EKD-Texte 141)*, Hannover 2022, 17 (https://www.ekd.de/ekd_de/ds_doc/ekd-texte_141_inklusion_2022.pdf), accessed on 02.06.2026.

- ⁶ Cf. Knauth, Thorsten, Art. Intersektionalität, in: WiReLex, 2020 (<https://doi.org/10.23768/wirelex.Intersektionalitt.100233>), accessed on 02.06.2026.
- ⁷ Cf. Arzt, Silvia, Gender in der Religionspädagogik. Feministische Theologien – Geschlechterforschung – Intersektionalität, in: Theo-Web. Zeitschrift für Religionspädagogik 20/2 (2021), 121–123 (<https://doi.org/10.23770/tw0206>), accessed on 02.06.2026.
- ⁸ Cf. Lutz, Helma/Herrera Vivar, María Teresa/Supik, Linda, Fokus Intersektionalität. Eine Einleitung, in: idem (Eds.), Fokus Intersektionalität. Bewegungen und Verortungen eines vielschichtigen Konzeptes, Wiesbaden ²2013, 9–31.
- ⁹ Cf. Bauer, Benedikt, Quellen im Kreuz(ungs)feuer, Kirchengeschichte am Scheideweg. Intersektionalität und Kirchengeschichte, in: Handbuch der Religionen 75 (2023), 1–16; Heil, Uta, Intersektionalität in der Kirchengeschichte, in: Verkündigung und Forschung 67/2 (2022), 113–126.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Werner, Gunda, Intersektionalität und Theologie, in: Heimbach-Steins, Marianne et. al. (Eds.), Gender Studies in der Theologie. Begründungen und Perspektiven, Münster 2021, 225–234.
- ¹¹ Cf. Knauth, Thorsten et. al. (Eds.), Inklusive Religionspädagogik der Vielfalt. Konzeptionelle Grundlagen und didaktische Konkretionen, Münster 2020; see also Schweiker, Wolfhard/Witten, Ulrike, Inklusive Religionspädagogik der Vielfalt, in: Grümme, Bernhard/Pirner, Manfred L. (Eds.), Religionsunterricht weiterdenken. Innovative Ansätze für eine zukunftsfähige Religionsdidaktik, Stuttgart 2023, 255–268.
- ¹² Schweiker/Witten, Religionspädagogik, 255, translation by Dylan S. Belton.
- ¹³ Cf. Stögner, Karin, Antisemitismus und Intersektionalität. Plädoyer für einen neuen Zugang, in: Biele Mefebue, Astrid et al. (Eds.), Handbuch Intersektionalitätsforschung, Wiesbaden 2022, 93–108.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Stögner, Antisemitismus, 100f.
- ¹⁵ Cf. Stögner, Antisemitismus, 104.
- ¹⁶ Vgl. Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, Intersektionalität, Kyriarchat und Christliche Religion, in: Jost, Renate/Jäger, Sarah (Eds.), Vielfalt und Differenz. Intersektionale Perspektiven auf Feminismus und Religion (Internationale Forschungen in Feministischer Theologie und Religion. Befreiende Perspektive 6), Münster 2017, 19–36, 25.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, Intersektionalität, 26.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, But She Said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation, Boston 1992, 117.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, Intersektionalität, 28.

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