

Cornel West, Review of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins.* *Religious Studies Review*, 11 (1) (1985), 1-5.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* is a ground-breaking work. For the first time, we have a powerful defense of new theological emancipatory models of hermeneutics, critical method, and historical reconstruction and an application of these models in one book. This intentional traversing of academic disciplines—theology, ethics, church history, and biblical studies—for the pursuit of knowledge and empowerment of women represents a coming of age for liberation theology. In this essay, I shall focus solely on Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutical and methodological formulations, without losing sight of her broader concerns.

Any major challenge to prevailing paradigms in scholarship must build upon the profound and persuasive insights generated by mainstream scholars yet call into question their uncritically accepted presuppositions, prejudgments and prejudices which deter new breakthroughs. Schüssler Fiorenza adopts this strategy with great effectiveness. She begins by accepting the starting point of biblical historical criticism: the acknowledgement of biblical texts as neither verbally inspired revelation nor doctrinal stipulations but rather historical responses within the context of religious communities over time and space. Following the feminist claim that such contexts are patriarchal and androcentric, Schüssler Fiorenza demystifies mainstream biblical scholarship by revealing its captivity to androcentrism—its relative silence on and marginalization of women's lives in the past and present—and by disclosing the oppositional Christian women's culture concealed by traditional church his-story.

Schüssler Fiorenza moves from this "hermeneutics of suspicion" to hermeneutical combat by putting forward an alternative model of interpretive criteria and methodological orientation for unearthing, understanding, and under-girding women's individual and collective agency in the past and present. This move is neither a glib attack on the cult of objectivity in the academy nor a vulgar call for women's freedom. Rather, it is a sophisticated fusing of hermeneutics, social theory, Christian ethics, and church history which specifies standards for evaluation and appropriation of past texts and histories, highlights gender system (women's oppression and resistance) as a fundamental category of historical and social analysis, and promotes Christian women's heritage.

Schüssler Fiorenza's feminist critical hermeneutics quickly dismisses the doctrinal and historical exegetical models of biblical interpretation by rejecting the former's ahistorical claim of revelational immediacy in the Bible and the latter's positivistic commitment to "value-free" inquiry. Of course, Schüssler Fiorenza realizes that both models have been severely criticized and thoroughly discarded by most twentieth-century biblical scholars—yet residues such as the quest for timeless truth and an allegiance to detached, value-neutral investigation persists. The model of dialogical-hermeneutical interpretation is predominant in biblical scholarship. The philosophical influence of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur insures biblical interpretive sensitivity to the "otherness" of the text, the inescapable prejudices of the interpreter, and the pervasive web of language, tradition, and community. For Schüssler Fiorenza, this model is important yet limited. It is important because it takes *historicity* seriously by acknowledging the temporal situating of the interpreter and the illuminating potential of the interpreter's biases. Yet it is limited in that it does not take *history* seriously, that is, the model refuses to dig into the depths of the cultural, political, and societal

contexts of texts and interpreters Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur have taught biblical scholars to accent the existential interestedness of interpreters while listening to the "strangeness" of past texts, but this important insight does not encourage biblical scholars to examine also the social, political, and economic interests of interpreters contained in texts The model of liberation theology highlights these interests and brings to the surface the ideological commitments of interpreters and texts within the context of class struggle, cultural/racial conflict, and feminist resistance

Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that feminist Christian scholars—since Elizabeth Cady Stanton's monumental *The Women's Bible* (1895)—have appropriated liberation themes without critically examining the problems of the hermeneutical models they adopt. She focuses on two such models the neo-orthodox model and the sociology-of-knowledge model Feminists such as Letty Russell, Phyllis Trible, and Rosemary Ruether have put forward influential claims regarding the patriarchal language of the Bible while holding that there is a nonpatriarchal content therein This apologetic move presupposes fundamental distinctions between revelatory essence and historical accident, timeless truth and culturally conditioned language, constant Tradition and changing traditions The aim of such neo-orthodoxy is to confront candidly the specter of historical conditioned-ness without succumbing to historical relativism and to specify the biblical grounds for Christian identity (by preserving christocentric revelation) in the face of objections by natural theologians.

Schüssler Fiorenza's critique of feminist neo-orthodoxy is threefold. First, she argues that neo-orthodox models ultimately put the burden of historical agency on God, not women. The worldly skepticism of neo-orthodoxy can accommodate liberation themes, but it cannot rest transformative powers in the praxis of oppressed peoples. Therefore the reinterpretation of the gospel

from a liberationist perspective can yield, at most, a moral ideal and an abstract prophetic tradition with little grounding in the flesh-and-blood past and present of struggling peoples. Second, this model—against the intentions of its feminist representatives—idealizes the biblical and prophetic traditions by refusing to come to terms with the oppressive androcentric elements of these traditions. This idealization produces rather romanticist claims about the "liberating" effects of recuperating past prophetic traditions. The intent is admirable; yet the effect is rather empty. To put it crudely, the model yields theological critique, moral outrage, and ahistorical tradition-posturing, but not engaged empowerment of the downtrodden. Third, neo-orthodoxy posits an "Archimedean point" which attempts to meet secular (or religious post-Christian) feminist objections regarding the patriarchal and even misogynist character of Christianity; this "Archimedean point"—divine revelation in Jesus Christ—preserves the liberating kernel within the patriarchal husk.

The sociology-of-knowledge model, best exemplified in Mary Daly's work, accents the overwhelming sexism shot through biblical texts and church traditions. This model holds that reconstruction and revision of such texts and traditions is anachronistic. Instead of disclosing a liberating essence in such texts and traditions, the model calls for new construction and new vision: the creation of feminist life-centers that will generate alternative ways of naming reality and modes of women's empowerment. It assumes that the medium is the message, that patriarchal language can yield only patriarchal content. Therefore new mediums and languages must be constructed by feminists. Schüssler Fiorenza is enchanted by the audacity of this model, especially with its willingness to push Christian feminists to the edge with its sober assessment of patriarchy in Christian texts and traditions. Yet she refuses to construe complex Christian practices as mere

patriarchal enactments. Since the model focuses primarily on sexist language and sado-ritual repetitions of Goddess repression and murder, it provides shock effects to the novice (feminists-to-be). Yet it does not deal in any serious manner with concrete socio-economic structures of oppression and feminist opposition to these structures. The model opts for marginality, "Otherworld sisterhood," and "sacred space" which reinforces the peripheral status imposed upon women in patriarchal society and gives the "center," the "old territory," namely, human history, to oppressive men and subjugated women. This model surely heightens feminist awareness of patriarchy in history, but it elides specific historical forms of patriarchy, abstracts from the social and historical relations that shape these forms, and, most important, denies the protracted struggles of women at the "center," in the "old territory," within human history.

Schüssler Fiorenza's new model of feminist critical hermeneutics of liberation moves the focus from questions concerning the authority of biblical revelation to discussions regarding feminist historical reconstruction of the background conditions under which biblical texts were constituted—from androcentric texts to patriarchal-historical contexts in which women contest and resist as well as defer and lose. Such reconstruction proceeds not only by delving into the liberating impulse within the biblical texts, but, more important, going beyond the texts to examine women's struggle against patriarchal canonization. Since these texts are not objective, factual reports of the past but rather pastorally engaged responses to particular circumstances, it is not surprising that they represent the views of (and for??) the "historical winners." By critically scrutinizing the canonization process itself, Schüssler Fiorenza goes beyond the neo-orthodox model as well as that of liberation theology. No longer can one simply turn to the canonical Christian texts for insights and even

imperatives for present social and political struggles. Rather the formation of the biblical texts becomes a terrain of ideological and historical contestation. To start with the biblical texts, the final canon, and infer liberation themes, deliverance motifs, salvific principles which then serve as sources to criticize the texts themselves still dehistoricizes and depoliticizes the canonization process.

For Schüssler Fiorenza, the revelatory criteria for theological evaluation and appropriation of the Christian past and present is trans-biblical; that is, linked to biblical texts yet substantively beyond them. At times, Schüssler Fiorenza nearly excludes the biblical texts and offers only Christian women's struggle for liberation from patriarchal oppression. At other times, she admits that this struggle in the past produced nonpatriarchal elements in the biblical texts. This ambiguity is seen in her metaphor for biblical revelation as a historical prototype not a mythic archetype—as an all-too-human process open to critique and change rather than an ideal, timeless form. The ambiguity arises in that if one locates revelation first and foremost in the Christian (or non-Christian) feminist struggle for freedom, and if the biblical texts are fundamentally androcentric, it is unclear why the adjective "biblical" is used in "biblical revelation."

This dilemma haunts Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutical and methodological discussion. Her critiques of the prevailing interpretive models are often persuasive. And her attempt to seriously analyze the historical context with gender system as a fundamental category as well as highlight the ideological conflicts within the canonization process is welcome. Yet her model seems to lead her into feminist history about Christian women rather than *Christian* feminist historical reconstruction. Does she pull the Christian rug from under her project and relegate her work to historical inquiry on Christian feminist women by failing to generate Christian normative criteria to regulate her

interpretation and appropriation of the past? I think not. She pushes us to the edge of the Christian tradition precisely to help us understand it as a deeply historical yet revelatory phenomenon.

Schüssler Fiorenza's conception of truth and justification—her implicit ontology and epistemology—within her new hermeneutical model provides us with clues to her Christian identity. In contemporary hermeneutics there are three basic philosophical strategies regarding the separate yet related problems of truth and justification. The first strategy follows Hegel by discerning Truth within the depths of the historical process. This discernment consists of keeping track of the active, reflective, autonomizing *Weltgeist* who ultimately overcomes the historical process in order to achieve absolute self-consciousness and self-transparency. Refined versions of this perspective—put forward in religious form by Wolfgang Pannenberg and in Marxist form by Georg Lukács—holds that every hermeneutics requires some degree of transcendental, i.e., totalistic viewpoint. Therefore every hermeneutics, if honest about itself, presupposes a philosophy of history and hence is but a disguised form of Hegelianism.

The second strategy incorporates Kierkegaardian insights regarding the radical transiency of historical claims and the ultimate mystery (or utter "absurdity") of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. This strategy, developed by Barth and others, sits at the center of the neo-orthodox model. It employs sophisticated modes of historicist argumentation and, contrary to Schüssler Fiorenza's claim (culled from Peter Berger) that it invokes an "Archimedean point," refuses to look at the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. Yet this strategy claims that the existential power and world view generated by an encounter with Jesus Christ in the preached Word of the Christian community warrants the truth-status of Christian revelation.

The last strategy rests upon Gadamer's historicist perspective which understands Truth as revealment and concealment, as part and parcel of the perennial process of cultivating and refining inescapable traditions in relation to particular situations and circumstances. On this view, there can be no transcendental standpoint, but there indeed are transcending possibilities which build upon prevailing finite standpoints. The criterion for Truth here resides neither in Hegelian transcendentalism nor in Kierkegaardian fideism, but rather in the regulative ideal of the "Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit" (anticipation of perfection)—the openness to newness and novelty on the way to a perennially deferred unity. Like Dewey's pragmatism, this strategy shuns a Der-ridean unregulated free play of truth-effacing which lacks an applicatory, praxis-dimension and any form of closure. Instead this strategy promotes regulated historical praxis with only provisional closure without a constitutive telos.

This third strategy runs deep throughout Schüssler Fiorenza's philosophical discussion. Her fundamental concern with human agency, the dialectical interplay of revealment and concealment, the situating of texts within *Wirkungsgeschichte* (continuously operative and influential history) shot through with social conflict and the conception of biblical texts and subsequent interpretations as human practices are all compatible with Gadamer's historicism. Yet, Schüssler Fiorenza refuses to go all the way down the historicist road. And, if she did so the Christian locus of truth and justification would be sacrificed. Contrary to the perceptions of many, the consequences of full-blown historicism are neither nihilistic relativism nor promiscuous pluralism; but for the Christian such historicism does result in a radical de-privileging of Jesus Christ as rendered in the biblical texts. One can surely follow the historicism of Gadamer and Dewey and sidestep vulgar relativistic traps. But for

Christians to follow such paths means giving up the unique status of Jesus Christ. This is so because if one's historicism "goes all the way down" (like Hegel's) but resists neo-Platonic-like epistrophes (unlike Hegel's and like Gadamer's), then Jesus Christ becomes not only a historical person but also permeated by contradiction and imperfection. For the Christian, historical status of Jesus is crucial, but mere peer status of Jesus is unacceptable. To preserve the privileged status of Jesus Christ is ultimately to reject the Hegelian and Gadamerian strategies—and remain on Kierkegaardian terrain. This does not mean subscribing to a neo-orthodox model, simply that a neo-orthodox element sustains one's Christian identity.

The privileged status of Jesus Christ looms large in Schüssler Fiorenza's text. Given her shift from androcentric texts to patriarchal contexts, one would expect a thorough interrogation of the patriarchal sensibilities and practices of Jesus, in and beyond the biblical texts. Instead, we are offered a view of Jesus as a "woman-identified man" with a *basileia* vision of a discipleship of equals, as if a reincarnate Jesus would join the contemporary feminist struggle against patriarchy. Such a presentist reading of the synoptic gospels reeks of Christian confessionalism and ahistorical moralism—the very charges Schüssler Fiorenza makes against feminist neo-orthodox Christian scholars.

My point here is neither to promote a secular de-privileging of Jesus Christ nor to return to pre-feminist readings of biblical texts and the Christian tradition. Rather my point is to acknowledge the degree to which the Kierkegaardian-Barthian touchstone of modern Christian identity remains intact in Schüssler Fiorenza's work. I applaud this element in her text, but I remain unconvinced that it follows from her new hermeneutical model. The irreducible life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ— whose power and perspective is always found in human communities in dialogical

form—is the mark of modern Christian identity. Schüssler Fiorenza's presentist portrait of Jesus Christ affirms this mark. Given her deep feminist commitments, this portrait becomes her way of preserving the privileged status of Jesus Christ. Without this status, the struggle for women's liberation has no Christian normative source. The struggle may warrant support, but there would be no Christian grounds to arrive at this conclusion. I believe that Christian texts and traditions—without a presentist reading of Jesus Christ yet while preserving the irreducibility of Jesus Christ—justify feminist liberation movements. But this justification is a historically-informed moral one.

Is it contradictory and disempowering that Jesus Christ (male in human form) normatively grounds women's fight for freedom? I think not. Just as it is not contradictory that Jesus Christ (Jewish in ethnic origins) normatively grounds Arabs' struggle for human dignity in Israel—even as it grounds any struggle for human dignity. Only in an age obsessed with articulations of particularities (e.g., gender, race, nation) often relegated to the margins by false universalities (e.g., technocratic rationality, value-free and value-neutral inquiry) could such questions arise with potency. And only with a sophisticated emancipatory hermeneutics can a new conception of differential universality emerge which provides the framework for new perspectives and practices. Schüssler Fiorenza's powerful Christian interpretation and reconstruction of the biblical texts and early church move us closer to such a conception.