

Challenging Theological Studies

Critical Feminism and Liberating Interpretation

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With her recent book *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Fortress, 2007), Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza continues over thirty years of professional organizing, political advocacy, and practical and theoretical reworking of biblical and theological studies toward a “critical feminist interpretation for liberation.”

As the Krister Stendahl Professor at Harvard Divinity School, the first woman president of the Society of Biblical Literature, and cofounder and coeditor of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Schüssler Fiorenza is author of at least ten substantive conceptual works on biblical and theological interpretation. This book was conceived during lectures delivered by her at the Chinese University in Hong Kong; three of its seven chapters were part of that 2005 lectureship. The other chapters were either carefully revised from previous articles or written freshly for this work. The result is one of the most important statements to date of her life's work.

This book appears at a time in theological education that still often proceeds unmindful of the conceptual power and significance of her work. As influential as her work has been for many scholars, her insights also continue to be neglected in the structures of disciplines and curricula. One reason is that critical studies in feminist and liberation theologies remain generally marginalized in U.S. divinity schools and seminaries; they may become more so during the current economic crisis, when schools tend to finance mainly perceived “core” traditional faculty and curricula. Another reason is that the epistemological and theoretical paradigm enabling and embodying feminist and liberation

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approaches (concerning not only gender and sexual issues but also racial, class, nationalist, and imperialist ones) remains neglected and often under siege.

What is this epistemological and theoretical paradigm? Schüssler Fiorenza's new book provides one of her finest renderings of that paradigm and its consequences for theological scholarship. That paradigm comes into view most clearly, I believe, in relation to her important third chapter, "Ekklesia and Empire." Largely from it, but also from other parts of the book, I can highlight four notions as particularly important in her paradigm of scholarship.

Hermeneutical Horizon

First, there is Schüssler Fiorenza's notion of "hermeneutical horizon." All scholarship—not just her own but that of any others as well—is limited and conditioned by different horizons of felt, seen, and assumed interests, insights, and advocacies. These horizons are set largely by the social, cultural, and political locations of scholars, as well as by their personal life-journeys and theoretical assumptions. Entailed in these locations are the influential assemblages of race, class, empire, nation, and gender and sexuality. In the dance that Schüssler Fiorenza claims all interpretation to be, then, there is always a "hermeneutics of experience" continuously initiated and shaped by interpreters' sociopolitical locations. No subject matter is just "there" waiting to be discovered. Pauline texts, for example, do not just hold the past "waiting for us to discover how things really were or what Paul really meant." Rather, contemporary interests—arising from scholars' horizons of feeling, assumptions, and insights—are always hermeneutically at work.

Precisely here traditional biblical and theological studies often respond with dismissal and neglect. The dismissals occur in theological backrooms and faculty meetings, with such a hermeneutics of experience often dubbed "ideological" or "subjectivist." The neglect is registered in the persistence in theological faculties and curricula of objectivist and universalist paradigms of "science," which often assume that scholars' own horizons can be ignored and that their social locations (as set by gender and sexuality, race, and the politics of class, nation, and empire) simply do not matter enough to be taken as relevant to interpretation. Never mind that many of these same dismissive and neglectful scholars venerate the works of Kant and a host of others who can teach a sense of "the limits of knowledge"; nonetheless, that veneration fails often to prompt a study of the limits set by and within their own specific social locations. Schüssler Fiorenza's critical feminist liberation approach stands in that eminent philosophical tradition but critically engages the Kantian legacy

of the limits of knowledge, turning it back on itself and much Enlightenment thought, to expose the social, cultural, and political character of these limits of knowledge.

Ekklesia of Wo/Man

The second key notion, the “ekklesia of wo/man,” grows out of Schüssler Fiorenza’s critical emphasis on socially located hermeneutical horizons. This can be viewed as her name for the horizon out of which she herself works. It is the “hermeneutical space,” she writes, “in which professional biblical interpretation, as well as that of the ‘common people,’ needs to take place.” “Ekklesia of wo/man” has sometimes been more briefly rendered as “woman church,” meaning usually the collective of women in the church. This is an inadequate rendering, and by clarifying the meanings of first “ekklesia” and second of “wo/man,” Schüssler Fiorenza orients her thought to a much broader collective horizon.

First, the term *ekklesia* is one she distinguishes carefully from the notion of church, the latter English term derived mainly from the Greek term *kuriárchos*, having to do with a community faithful to lords (a “kyriarchy”) and then from other later terms (Old English *cirice*, Scottish *kirk*), implicated in a semantics and practice of hierarchy in church life and governance. *Ekklesia*, on the contrary, is a term referring to a broader collective, inclusive of some elements of church but not limited to it. Moreover, *ekklesia*, the term most frequently found in the Greek New Testament writings and translated as “church” in English versions of the New Testament, has a much more political and democratic pedigree. It is not primarily a Christian, or even religious, term. It is political, referring to a kind of entity interlaced with a matrix of Greek democratic concerns, with the issues of how citizenship and decision-making power express a radical equality and inclusivity. *Ekklesia*, for Schüssler Fiorenza, thus names a communal site of struggle where interests—in Paul’s time and our own—converge on the forging of a radically egalitarian and inclusive community or polis. To belong to *ekklesia*, then, in Schüssler Fiorenza’s sense, is to belong to a radically inclusive realm, a “cosmo-polis,” a “radical democratic assembly among many, in the cosmopolis of God’s very different peoples.” She is well aware that the ancient Greek polis, within which ideals of *ekklesia* emerged, still had patterns of exclusion, of women and others. But the notion of *ekklesia* marks a political space, a collective space of assembly, where radical democratic ethos is sought and forged through struggle.

Interestingly, in the present religio-politics of the United States, Christian theocrats have also made an argument for highlighting and then preferring *ekklesia* over *kuriarkos*. Unlike Schüssler Fiorenza, though, they move toward *ekklesia* as a separate civil religious structure in which entrenched Christian hierarchy protects and champions male power and U.S. nationalism. Thus, Schüssler Fiorenza jousts with Christian fundamentalists whose theocracy accommodates U.S. empire just as much as she does with ancient visions of the *Pax Romana* that exclude people and miss the ideals of full *ekklesia*. To be “in Christ”—to belong to the “body of Christ,” a “messianic *soma*”—is for Schüssler Fiorenza to belong to anything but a theocratic or hierarchical community; it is to be among those who celebrate communities of “equal access for everyone, Greeks, Jews, Barbarians, slaves, free, rich, poor—both wo/men and men.”

Second, the term “wo/man” in “ekklesia of wo/man” is meant to emphasize and intensify the radicality and inclusivity of the democratic polis that is *ekklesia*. The slash bar inserted into “woman” has three radicalizing and broadening effects. It makes a compound of the one word, preserving the overall reference to women but highlighting the inclusion of men within wo/men. Simultaneously, it breaks the singularity of “woman,” eroding the binary of woman/man, making more thinkable transgender and transsexual modes of being and thinking. It also destabilizes the notion of “woman,” signaling a need to inflect wo/man in terms of race, class, nation, and colonial relations. Schüssler Fiorenza’s “ekklesia of wo/man” is centered on all those who are in “struggle for survival at the lowest level of the kyriarchal pyramid” and in ways that invite and challenge any and all in pyramidal structures to move toward that center of struggle.

Kyriarchy

I have briefly introduced the important third notion, “kyriarchy,” in my discussion of *ekklesia*. Across several books, and now clearly in this one, Schüssler Fiorenza has utilized the neologisms *kyriarchy/kyriocentrism* (from Gk. *kyrios* = domination by the emperor, lord, master, father, husband, elite propertied male), in order to describe power’s exploitative effects. Included in the kyriarchy are those academic approaches that resist acknowledging their own cultural-political horizons and limits, chasing instead the will-o-the-wisp of scientific and universalist discourse. The kyriarchy can include, then, the ways of both imperialist geopolitics and university politics, of *Pax Americana* and of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed *homo academicus*.

Schüssler Fiorenza's theorization of kyriarchy is motivated by her respect for the complex and shifting nature of domination. Even "empire" and "imperialism" are insufficiently nuanced and inclusive for naming the dominations at work. She sees the kyriarchy as a fluid ethos of exploitation that is "interstructural and multiplicative," gathering up the complex interplay of gender, race, class, age, nation, empire, and coloniality. So complex and shifting is this multiplicative interstructuring that she might have been better served by a Deleuzian notion of "assemblages," in which exploitative power appears fleetingly in a continuous reordering and exploding of structures and less in complex grids of intersecting identities and localities. Women's and gender studies theorist Jasbir Puar's advice, in her *Terrorist Assemblages*, is surely right, however, in holding that both the rhetorics of assemblage and of "intersectionality" can be used together to address the changing faces and structural dynamics of oppression. Schüssler Fiorenza herself alludes to a more Deleuzian character of oppressive power when she speaks of domination as "multiplicative" as well as "intersectional." The point is that "kyriarchy" functions as Schüssler Fiorenza's important term for naming that exploitative power, both as it might be discerned in the reconstruction of biblical and theological texts and in the working of contemporary social and political life.

Rhetorical-Emancipatory Paradigm

Working out of the horizon of the "ekklesia of wo/man" and in struggle with pervasive dynamics of kyriarchy, Schüssler Fiorenza pursues a distinctive paradigm of scholarship that she usually terms a "rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm." As rhetorical, such a paradigm seeks to investigate and reconstruct the modes of persuasion at work in texts: "the discursive arguments of a text, its socio-religious location, and its diverse interpretations." As emancipatory, it also has as its aim "to underscore the text's possible oppressive as well as liberative performative actions, values and possibilities in ever-changing historical-cultural situations."

Again, this language of Schüssler Fiorenza will invite, from traditional "malestream" or "Eurocentric" biblical and theological studies, charges of political reductionism, ideology, and subjectivism. Her response throughout this book and elsewhere is clearly twofold: first, to reemphasize that all scholarly discourses have rhetorical and ethical interests and are also often positioned in relation to various communities' emancipatory interests. Charges against her that her paradigm of scholarship is ideological or politically reduc-

tive almost always presume a false binary between scholarship without political valence and scholarship with it.

A second response she makes is to remind readers that she does not propose her rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm to replace other paradigms, particularly those that she discusses in her final chapter as “scriptural-doctrinal,” “philological-historical,” or “hermeneutical-postmodern.” Against charges that her rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm ignores the concerns of these other paradigms in biblical and theological studies, one only has to turn to her sophisticated works to discern a rigorous mind at work, exegeting scriptural texts and early Christian histories, illuminating philological and historical quandaries, and respecting too the postmodern relativities of hermeneutical, poststructural turns in contemporary theory. It is part of the sophistication of her work, and of the significance of her oeuvre in general, that she develops her rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm not simply to supplant other paradigms but to create a new dynamic of interaction of mutual correction between them.

What does this mean, then, for her own process of interpretation? Drawing on one of her essays from 1984, Schüssler Fiorenza here uses a quilting metaphor to illumine the process. The biblical or theological scholar working within the horizon of the *ekklesia* of wo/man, when interpreting Pauline texts, for example, is continually “piecing scriptural remnants of the gospel of equality . . . into a new design.” These remnants can be found within Paul’s texts, not just behind or beneath them. They are remnants of a gospel of equality (the legacy of the “*ekklesia* of wo/man,” again) of which Paul’s work was just one part. Other pieces of his work, she argues, represent his participation in kyriarchal structures. The scholar in the rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm thus reads against the kyriarchal grain of Paul and his world and “pieces” remnants of Paul into a design of the early body politic of the *ekklesia* of wo/man and then also sews those pieces into a present-day design of the cosmopolis, a new body politic, a messianic people who can resist and transform an age of empire and the entire kyriarchal ethos of today.

Even though the core notions of Schüssler Fiorenza’s paradigm may be most clearly viewed in the third chapter, “Ekklesia and Empire,” other chapters treat of related important issues: political and religious fundamentalisms of U.S. imperial structures (chap. 2), her own “decolonizing” and feminist interests in relation to recent postcolonial studies (chap. 4), the ethos of kyriarchy in 1 Peter enabling her enumeration of “seven hermeneutical strategies” in a dance of interpretation (chap. 5), a reexamination of feminist

approaches to language for the divine, which pieces together *Sophia* traditions with Asian ones of *Kannon/Kuan Yin* (chap. 6), and a typology of biblical studies (chap. 7).

The fundamental axis of conflict emerging from a reading of Schüssler Fiorenza focuses, as this review emphasizes, on the engagement of her oeuvre with still powerful Eurocentric and “malestream” traditions in higher education. To be sure, there are other aspects of *The Power of the Word*, and of her work in general, that invite critique and debate. A few of these can be mentioned here only briefly. Given her continual emphasis on a hermeneutics of experience and on scholars’ social and cultural location, for example, it is surprising that she writes little and rarely about her own location. In addition, one might also note that when she reflects on her multivolume works, she rarely admits to having made course corrections or having learned from important critiques from others; instead, there is a continual taking in of new concepts and scholars’ voices that can suggest a kind of expansionist, perhaps even “imperial,” ethos in her conceptual program.

At times, too, there is a proliferation of categories of analysis that creates a grid of frameworks that is not always clarifying. Here are some examples: “three phases of a feminist imaginary,” “four approaches to biblical authority,” “four aspects” of the *ekklesia* of wo/man, “seven hermeneutical moves,” also called “strategies” and “practices,” and “four ways of speaking about G*d.” It will also be important to continue critical debates about the ways that Schüssler Fiorenza in this book distinguishes her own critical feminist liberation approach from postcolonial ones. Just as crucial will be the ongoing debates about her criticisms here of the empire studies of biblical scholars and historians in early Christian history, such as Richard Horsley, Neil Elliott, John Dominic Crossan, and Jonathan Reed.

While these critical matters are important to pursue and will remain controversial for many, *The Power of the Word* is most noteworthy for the renewed challenge it places before biblical and theological studies, which, especially in European and North American settings, still have left so much of Schüssler Fiorenza’s thought unaddressed and her insights unheeded. The most significant critical work lying before scholars in theological education today is not simply to debate the contours and claims of Schüssler Fiorenza’s texts, important as that may be, but to work to transform seminary and divinity school structures of biblical and theological disciplines, thus enabling and welcoming the decolonizing, feminist, and emancipatory future toward which her work so trenchantly points.