

Struggle is a Name for Hope: A Critical Feminist Interpretation for Liberation

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Abstract: The author attempts to find a way between defence of religion and the bible on the one hand and the exodus from religion and church on the other. In reclaiming the authority of wo/men as religious-theological subjects for interpreting biblical texts, the act of biblical interpretation emerges as a moment in the global struggle for liberation. This essay has four parts: Scripture as a site of struggle over theological authority; the bible as a site of struggle over religious meaning; wo/men's struggles as a site of biblical interpretation; and reclaiming a radical democratic feminist tradition.

*SHE DID NOT TELL THEM to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, it's inheriting meek or its glory bound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would no have it.*¹

For almost twenty years I have pioneered and sought to work out a critical feminist interpretation for liberation. Whereas I had reviewed biblical texts on women in my first dissertation on *Ministries of women in the church* which appeared in book form in 1964, I owe my interest and ability to develop such a critical feminist hermeneutics not to theological studies but to the second wave of the women's movement in the churches and to the emergence of feminist studies. If I were to identify a key interpretive metaphor for my feminist theoretical work, I would choose that of struggle.

I remember quite vividly one of the many academic panel discussions on *In memory of her* where the book was criticised for either being too "Germanic" because of its many footnotes, too difficult for students because of its scientific rigour, or too much tinged with "male" rationality. At the height of the discussion an African American woman in the audience got up to defend my work: "I don't understand what you all are complaining about," she chided my colleagues on the panel. "I am only a first year seminary student but I had no difficulty

1. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987) 88.

understanding the book. Although I had to look up many of the academic words, I could not put it down until I finished it. When I went off to college my mother told me: 'Believe in and respect yourself, stand up for your dignity and rights, and always remember the struggle.' Isn't that what the book is all about?" She had gotten it right! The notion of wo/men's² emancipatory struggles for dignity, authority and self-respect are key to the epistemological/hermeneutical frame of meaning that determine my work.

Feminist studies in religion have brought to public consciousness the fact that throughout the centuries patriarchal religion and theology have silenced wo/men and excluded us from religious institutions of authority. As a result some scholars in religion have concluded that Scripture and theology are patriarchal through and through. Hence Christian religion should be abandoned by feminists, that is, by women struggling for liberation. In response feminist religious apologists have defended religion and Scripture as meaningful and liberating for women.

My own feminist hermeneutical proposal begins with and explores these two contradictory feminist proposals in order to develop a critical feminist interpretation for liberation as a third hermeneutical practice. These seemingly contradictory feminist insights are based on experience. They argue, on the one hand, that the bible is written in androcentric language, has its origin in the patriarchal cultures of antiquity, and has functioned throughout its history for inculcating misogynist mindsets and oppressive values. On the other hand, they maintain that the bible has also served to inspire and authorise wo/men in their struggles against multiple and interstructured forms of kyriarchal oppression.³ Christian liberationist studies by women of all colours have made this latter point by stressing that the bible and religion have not just served to oppress wo/men. Rather, in the

2. In *Jesus: Miriam's child, Sophia's prophet: critical issues in feminist christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), I have adopted this way of writing in order not only to indicate the unstable meaning of the expression "women" but also to signal that disenfranchised men also are defined by their subordinate kyriarchal status and determined as "feminine" in kyriocentric dualistic symbolic world constructions. Such a spelling must be understood in light of the systemic analysis of patriarchal kyriarchy which I have developed in my work. Kyriarchy is the Greek word for the domination of elite propertied men over women and other men, whereas patriarchy is generally understood in feminist discourses in terms of the western sex/gender system which posits a man/woman opposition. In contrast, I understand patriarchy as a structure of kyriarchy as a social and discursive system that interstructures gender, race, class, and colonialist oppressions and has as its focal point women at the bottom of the socio-political and religious pyramid. In general I have used patriarchy in this latter sense since the late 70s.

3. For the category of "oppression" in feminist theory see also Anna Yeatman, "Interlocking oppressions", in Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle (eds.), *Transitions: new Australian feminisms* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995) 42-56.

experience of their own communities religions and Scriptures also have authorised and energised wo/men in their struggles for liberation.

Whereas those feminist scholars who seek to defend biblical religion have a tendency to downplay the androcentric-patriarchal character of biblical texts, post-biblical feminists tend to declare the assertion that the bible has been read by women in a liberating way as hermeneutically unimportant or as an instance of "false consciousness". Feminist biblical studies in one way or the other presuppose and continue to wrestle with this either-or alternative. My own approach has attempted to navigate between the call to exodus from religion and church on one hand and the apologetic defence of religion and bible on the other by articulating a "third" way or approach. Feminists in religion, I have argued, must neither abandon nor defend kyriarchal texts and religions. Rather we must articulate what it means for wo/men to have religious-theological agency, voice and authority to participate in the critical construction and assessment of religious, biblical and theo-ethical meanings, and to assert their authority to do so. In reclaiming the authority of wo/men as religious-theological subjects for interpreting biblical texts, for shaping religious communities and for defining biblical religions, my own feminist work has attempted to reconceptualise the act of biblical interpretation as a moment in the global praxis for liberation. Biblical interpretation becomes a site of struggle, and emancipatory struggles are the site of feminist biblical interpretation.

1. SCRIPTURE – A SITE OF STRUGGLE OVER THEOLOGICAL AUTHORITY

A critical feminist interpretation does not need to deny or repress the hermeneutical conflict inscribed in feminist religious discourses but takes such contradictory feminist evaluations of the bible as its starting point. Hence it seeks to reconceptualise biblical interpretation as a site of feminist struggle over religious authority and meaning. A critical feminist interpretation for liberation therefore reads the bible with the lenses and in the contexts of wo/men struggling for changing patterns of oppression which are inscribed in religious, cultural and societal texts and institutions. Hence it is distinct from both academic gender studies of the bible and Christian apologetic approaches. Popular biblical readings *by women*, academic readings of the bible as *a woman*, or biblical interpretation in terms of *gender*, are not simply identical with a critical *feminist* reading, insofar as these modes of reading do not problematise their preconstructed dualistic gender frames of meaning and dualistic lens of reading.

My own hermeneutical approach of a critical feminist interpretation for liberation is clearly situated and shaped not only by my academic location but also by my Christian theological involvement in the

women's movements in biblical religions.⁴ Its socio-religious location is not just the academy but Christian wo/men's communities of faith and their use of the bible as Sacred Scripture.⁵ If the literary canonisation of texts in general places a work outside of any further need to establish its merits, then the canonisation of Sacred Scriptures enforces uncritical identification and acceptance even more. Readers of biblical texts learn to develop strategies of textual valorisation and validation rather than of critical interrogation and judicious assessment of Scriptural texts along with their visions, values and prescriptions. Canonisation compels readers to offer increasingly more ingenious interpretations, not only in order to establish "the truth or the text itself" or "a single sense" correct meaning of the text, but also in order to sustain the acceptance and affirmation of the bible either as sacred Scripture or as a cultural classic.

Christian churches which continue to insist on the authority of the bible for Christian life and community face the rhetorical problem of how such Scriptural authority can be maintained in the face of modern biblical studies. These studies have underscored the bible's plurality, historicity and linguisticity as well as highlighted its theological relativity and ideological functions in the interest of relations of domination. A Christian theological hermeneutic thus confronts a rhetorical situation that is determined by the theological problem of how to articulate revealed authority and authoritative truth in the face of a critical biblical scholarship that intellectually rules out fundamentalist literalism and plenary inspiration. If biblical norms and traditions are not only historically conditioned but also distorted, then one must ask how one can determine the normative truth of the bible or how one can derive canonical principles from a human document that is limited by its linguistic and historical horizons. The questions as to what kind of authority and spiritual meaning the bible as a historically and theologically limited book still has for believing communities today, constitute one of the central problems of malestream biblical hermeneutics.

Feminist criticism of Scripture, I have argued, does not begin with this question as its primary problem. Rather, it is compelled by the question as to how biblical authority and texts function in maintaining or subverting the oppression of wo/men. Because critical feminists claim that wo/men have the religious authority and responsibility to

4. For more recent works see Donald K. McKim (ed.), *A guide to contemporary hermeneutics: major trends in biblical interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Charles M. Wood, "Theological Hermeneutics", *Quarterly review* 7/3 (1987) 91-100; and K. Berger, *Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments* (Gutersloh: Gerd Mohr, 1988).

5. See the contributions in Letty M. Russell (ed.), *Feminist interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) and my own response "The will to choose or to reject: continuing our critical work", in the same volume, 125-36.

assess and evaluate biblical texts and their truth claims in terms of wo/men's liberation and well-being, they stand in tension with the malestream doctrinal or historical paradigms of biblical studies since they are bent to establish revelatory truth or historical fact. These differences and contradictions between malestream biblical criticism and a critical feminist interpretation for liberation are occluded when, for the sake of biblical apologetics, it is argued that a critical feminist hermeneutics remains entrapped in the doubt and scepticism of the Enlightenment because it allegedly moves from a hermeneutics of suspicion to a "reclaiming of the text". Such Christian apologetic argument in the interest of women's spiritual edification would rather have us "reading a text naively, opening ourselves to its dynamic in the way children listen to stories..."⁶ Instead of putting the proverbial feminist label on all biblical texts, "caution: could be dangerous to your health and survival", we are invited to make a contribution to the renewal of the Christian tradition and are warned:

If we begin reading Scripture in a suspicious frame of mind presupposing its androcentrism (or whatever), our interpretation can become entrapped, at best in a "neutral" reading that ignores the place of faith and the Spirit, and at worst in negativity, prejudice, self-projection, and the desire for control.⁷

Such a criticism does not recognise that a "hermeneutics of suspicion" – as I have developed it – does not derive its inspiration from the rationalism of the Enlightenment but from Christian emancipatory impulses and the practice of spiritual discernment. This objection also overlooks my careful distinction between androcentrism/kyriocentrism as a symbolic/linguistic system and patriarchy/kyriarchy as a socio-political system of dominations and subordinations. Since "androcentrism" is a property of biblical language, grammar and text, feminist critical readings do not presuppose "androcentrism (or whatever)" but seek to recognise, analyse, and interpret it in the very act of reading a text.

Another objection against a critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation alleges that it does not respect the biblical interpretations of conservative women, because it rejects biblical texts and readings that advocate kyriarchal values. It allegedly is guilty of biblical essentialism which in turn is defined as both ascribing sexism to biblical texts and as not respecting the positive "meaning making" of conservative women who derive self-worth and respect from reading such biblical texts.⁸ In

6. Dorothy A. Lee, "Reclaiming the sacred text: Christian feminism and spirituality", in Morny Joy and Penelope Magee (eds.), *Claiming our rites: studies in religion by Australian women scholars* (Sydney: The Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1994) 81.

7. Lee, "Reclaiming the sacred text", 82.

8. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Contesting feminist canons: discourse and the problem of sexist texts", *The journal of feminist studies in religion* 7/2 (1991) 53-74.

response, I would point out that a critical feminist hermeneutics of suspicion does not subscribe to linguistic cultural determinism and ascribe sexism to biblical texts. Rather it calls for an assessment of all texts as to *whether and how much* they reinscribe kyriarchal values or advocate liberating visions, both in their historical and contemporary contextualisations. Wo/men's readings are not feminist readings if they do not transgress the patri-kyriarchal frameworks of malestream doctrinal or academic biblical hermeneutics. Readings of conservative or liberal women are *not* in themselves *feminist* readings simply because they are readings by women.

Insofar as such biblical readings of wo/men do not deploy a critical feminist analysis of wo/men's socio-political and ecclesial-religious subordination and second class citizenship, they tend to construe respect and dignity for wo/men in terms of the internalised ideological frameworks of cultural-religious femininity and true womanhood. Consequently such apologetic or conservative readings cannot but keep the ideological structures of wo/men's oppression in place. By continuing to insist that such readings are not feminist or liberationist and by disagreeing with their often anti-feminist interpretations, one does not deny agency and respect to individual women but rather underscores that theological discourses on the authority of Sacred Scripture constitute a site of feminist struggles.

Wo/men of faith have engaged in this struggle over biblical authority throughout the centuries. At least since the nineteenth century they have pointed out that the bible has not only been written by men but also that it is the product of patriarchal cultures in the past. Particularly Protestant theological hermeneutics, with its emphasis on *sola scriptura*, faces the problem of how to articulate biblical authority and truth if it is only available in patriarchal expressions. As Mary Ann Tolbert has pointed out:

For Protestants, the central and unavoidable problematic posed by the role of scripture is its *authority* but exactly what that authority entails varies from denomination to denomination and indeed is often a hotly contested issue within denominations.... Scripture, then, for Protestants becomes the primary medium of communication with God....⁹

If for Protestants the bible is "not primarily a source of knowledge about" G* d,¹⁰ but "rather a source for *experiencing*, hearing, God or

9. Mary Ann Tolbert, "Protestant feminists and the Bible", in Alice Bach (ed.), *The pleasure of her text: feminist readings of biblical and historical texts* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990) 11.

10. To the consternation of every copy-editor I have again changed my writing of G-d which I advocated in *But she said* and *Discipleship of equals* since such a spelling recalls for many Jewish feminists a fundamentalist orthodox mindset. My new way of spelling G*d seeks to indicate that G*d is "in a religious sense unnamable", and belongs to the "realm

God-in Jesus in each present moment in life",¹¹ then the question of criteria for judging the truth claims of such experiences in light of wo/men's liberation becomes most urgent.

Yet the question of criteria is not just a problem for Euro-American Protestant feminists. Although traditional Roman Catholic theology has insisted that the teaching authority of the church defines biblical norms and criteria, such an assertion does not provide a way out of the problem because the teaching authority of the hierarchy not only is kyriarchally defined but it in turn remains bound to the norms of Scripture. Hence, the articulation of feminist theological criteria remains an ecumenical problem. Feminist hermeneutics developed different approaches to this problem which is caused by the critical insight into the kyriocentric linguisticity of Scripture. These approaches which are dependent on malestream hermeneutics vary not only in terms of confessional dogmatics but also in terms of socio-political interests.

One well known feminist evangelical approach holds that Scripture corrects itself. Therefore, the canon as a whole is the norm of truth. Texts that mandate the submission of slave wo/men for instance are corrected by texts that stress the freedom of all Christians. Another feminist approach isolates a canon within the canon as the revealed centre of Scripture. For instance, Elsa Tamez¹² has argued that the Pauline teaching of justification by faith if it is interpreted from the perspective of the poor still functions as such a central canonical criterion of truth. A third approach advocates a hermeneutics of correlation¹³ which seeks, in a continuous to and from, to relate with each other a particular revealed principle within the canon and a particular ethical-theological principle today. This feminist approach correlates for instance the critical prophetic principle of Scripture with the feminist critical principle of women's full humanity.¹⁴ A similar hermeneutical approach personifies the biblical text or Scripture as a

of the ineffable". God is not G*d's "proper name". See Rebecca S. Chopp, *The power to speak: feminism, language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 39.

11. Tolbert, "Protestant feminists and the Bible", 12.

12. Elsa Tamez, *The amnesty of grace: justification by faith from a Latin American perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

13. For a discussion of diverse hermeneutical discourses and a critique of the method of correlation see Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The crisis of hermeneutics and Christian theology", in Sheila Greeve Davaney (ed.), *Theology at the end of modernity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1991) 117-40; see also his earlier article, "The crisis of scriptural authority; interpretation and reception", *Interpretation* 44/4 (1990) 353-68 and his forthcoming book *Beyond hermeneutics: theology as discourse* (New York: Continuum, 1996).

14. For such an approach see especially the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, David Tracy and Edward Schillebeeckx.

pilgrim¹⁵ who has been – and still is – the conversation partner of believing communities throughout the centuries. Such a conversation between Scripture and believer is ongoing, mutually corrective and of reciprocal benefit.

Additional feminist approaches stress either that the eschatological horizon of the reign of G*d constitutes the final criterion toward which we move or that the “power” of metaphor or narrative draws the reader so much into the text’s world of vision that a fusion of horizons takes place. However, the notion of the fusion of horizons or the achievement of a second naiveté in the process of understanding does not allow for critical distance and evaluation of the text’s persuasive power as the final goal of interpretation. The exclusive emphasis on the reader’s free agency in the making of meaning when reading classic or sacred canonical texts also does not address the implication of readers in multiplicative structures of domination.

It is obvious that my work joins the discussion on theological hermeneutics from a social location within post-Vatican II Catholicism. After decades of resistance to critical biblical scholarship, the Council’s document on *Divine Revelation* embraced critical exegesis with its attendant recognition of the linguisticity and historicity of biblical texts. It recognises that the bible “contains revelation, namely in the form of a written record: but that not all of Scripture is revelation”.¹⁶ In line with Augustine and Thomas it articulates a criterion that limits revealed truth to matters pertaining to salvation: the bible teaches “firmly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of our salvation”.¹⁷ Although the Council probably intended to state that the truth revealed in Scripture for the sake of our salvation is comprehensive and sufficient, one can read this text “against the grain” and understand it as asserting that the criterion of revealed truth is everything that fosters human salvation and well-being.

Utilising this traditional hermeneutic criterion, I have argued that the bible is best understood as a root-metaphor or prototype, which keeps alive the tension between the already and not yet of liberation. The bible informs but does not provide the theological lenses for a critical feminist reading of particular biblical texts in the interest of liberation. Rather such evaluative criteria or theological lenses are to be articulated in contemporary struggles for justice and liberation which are inspired

15. Such a hermeneutical approach has been consistently developed in the work of Phyllis Trible. See her biographical statement, “The Pilgrim Bible on a feminist journey”, reprinted in *Daughters of Sarah* 15/3 (1989) 4-7.

16. W. Abbott and J. Gallagher (eds.), *The documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966) 108. See also my article “Understanding God’s revealed word”, *Catholic Charismatic* 1 (1977) 4-10.

17. Abbott and Gallagher, *The documents of Vatican II*, 119.

already by religious and cultural biblical notions of justice and well-being. In a similar fashion, the Protestant scholar Katherine Doob Sackenfled has proposed more recently that

given this perspective on authority in community the "locus of revelation" is neither in the text or in the history that produced the text, but where *God is at work* in the whole life of the believing community, including its text production and its ongoing reflection on its texts.¹⁸

However, Doob Sackenfled's proposal does not challenge the traditional hermeneutical frame of reference insofar as it does not specify the subjects of the community of interpretation nor focus on wo/men's struggles for liberation and transformation as the hermeneutical criterion with which to evaluate such "authority in community".

In the last analysis, my own hermeneutical proposal is neither Catholic nor Protestant because its chosen socio-theological location and hermeneutical starting point is liberationist and feminist. Neither the teaching authority of the Catholic hierarchy nor the Protestant *sola scriptura* principle have articulated revealed truth given for the sake of *wo/men's salvation*. What is "revealed" for the sake of wo/men's salvation, liberation, and well-being cannot be articulated once and for all.

The criterion of "wo/men's salvation" is a principled and pragmatic criterion at one and the same time. It is a formal criterion that needs to be "spelled" out in ever new socio-political-religious situations of struggle. It is not inherent in the biblical text nor in the individual subjectivity of the woman reader. Rather it must be articulated again and again in the practice of biblical interpretation and within particular historical contexts. In short the principle for testing and assessing biblical texts and traditions is to be articulated again and again in the context of actual religious experiences of liberation and particular struggles for wo/men's well being. Although such an argument has been controverted at first,¹⁹ it nevertheless has steadily gained ground in the last decade.²⁰

18. Katherine Doob Sackenfled, "Feminist biblical interpretation", *Theology today* 46/2 (1989).

19. See the panel discussion at the 1982 AAR/SBL Annual meeting on my article "A feminist biblical hermeneutics and liberation theology", in L. Dale Richesin and Brian Mehan (eds.), *The challenge of liberation theology: a first world response* (New York: Orbis Books, 1981) 91-112, which was prepared for a conference at Chicago Divinity School in 1979, where I introduced the term "feminist hermeneutics". See also the contributions in Russell, *Feminist interpretation of the Bible*, especially her introduction.

20. Especially Asian and Hispanic feminists have found this hermeneutical approach helpful. See for instance, Hyun Kyung Chung, *Struggle to be the sun again: introducing Asian women's theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990); Kwok Pui Lan "Discovering the Bible in the non-biblical world", *Semeia* 47 (1989) 25-42. A. M. Isasi-Diaz, "The Bible and Mujerista Theology", in B. Thistlethwaite and P. Engel (eds.), *Lift every voice: constructing Christian theologies from the underside* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990).

2. THE BIBLE – A SITE OF STRUGGLE OVER RELIGIOUS MEANING

Historical and religious meaning is always socio-politically constructed insofar as biblical interpretation is located in social networks of power/knowledge relations that shape society, university and biblical religions. Hermeneutical theological discourses which remain unconscious of their rhetorical functions and abstracted from their socio-political-ecclesial contexts do not produce a more objective criterion of truth. Rather they are less critical insofar as they hide and deny the social constructedness and relativity of their claims to divine revelation.²¹ Biblical texts, readers and contexts are not fixed once and for all in their relations to each other. Rather, they function differently within different reading formations. Thus, a critical feminist interpretation for liberation operates not only within a different theological framework than apologetic feminist interpreters but also with an understanding of texts and close textual readings different from that of malestream biblical criticism.

As long as Scripture is used not only against wo/men struggling for emancipation and in support of patriarchal kyriarchy but also influences wo/men's religious self-understandings, feminist biblical interpretation must pay attention not only to the kyriocentric text but also to wo/men as reading subjects. Recognising this kyriocentric dynamics of biblical texts a critical feminist hermeneutics of liberation, I have argued, must abandon the quest for a liberating canonical text or biblical principle and shift its focus to a discussion of the *process of feminist biblical interpretation*. It must inquire as to what kind of hermeneutic process enables wo/men as theological subjects and allows them to critically wrestle with the oppressive as well as liberating functions of particular biblical texts in their lives and struggles. Feminist literary critics have pointed out that readers do not engage texts in "themselves". Rather, insofar as readers have been taught *how* to read, they activate reading paradigms.²² Both professional and non-professional readers draw on the "frame of meaning"²³ or reading formation²⁴ provided by shared symbolic-religious constructions of

21. See my article "The ethics of biblical interpretation: decentering biblical scholarship", *Journal of biblical literature* 107/1 (1988) 3-17.

22. Annette Kolodny, "Dancing through the minefield: some observations on the theory, practice, and politics of feminist literary criticism", in Elaine Showalter (ed.), *Feminist criticism: essays on women, literature, theory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 153.

23. For the expression "frame of meaning", see Anthony Giddens, *New rules of sociological methods: a positive critique of interpretative sociologists* (New York: Basic Books, 1976) 64.

24. For the notion of *reading formation*, see Tony Bennett, "Texts in history: the determinations of readings and their texts", in D. Attridge, G. Bennington and R. Young

social worlds. Reading paradigms consist of a set of discursive determinations which organise the practice of reading insofar as they relate texts, readers, and contexts to one another in specific ways. Especially, feminist theologians of the second/third world have therefore insisted that the socio-political location of wo/men as reading subjects constitutes the central reference point of feminist biblical readings.²⁵

Whereas a dogmatic reading paradigm relates texts, readers, and contexts in terms of church doctrine, a historical reading paradigm seeks the text's "original" meaning in its socio-historical contexts, and a literary reading paradigm traces the text's androcentric narrative strategies and symbolic world constructions, a liberationist paradigm both insists on wo/men who struggle to overcome multiplicative dehumanisation as reading subjects and stresses the importance of a systemic analysis of readers' socio-political-religious location. If reading paradigms establish different relations between texts, readers, and contexts, then such different rhetorical readings cannot be adjudicated in terms of "the true meaning of the text itself"; rather they must be assessed politically in terms of their implications and consequences for emancipatory struggles today. In consequence, I do not subscribe to the hegemonic notion of hermeneutics simply as a theory of comprehension and understanding, but rather conceive of it as a rhetorics of inquiry and a broad interpretative practice which entails epistemological-ideological reflection and socio-cultural analysis of power relations.

In distinction to a hermeneutic-aesthetic inquiry which strives for textual understanding, appreciation, application, and consent, a critical hermeneutic-rhetorical feminist inquiry pays attention also to the power structures and interests that shape language, text and understanding. As a feminist scholar I have been concerned not just with exploring the conditions and possibilities of understanding and with appreciating and reading kyriocentric biblical texts with the lenses of a "second naiveté". Rather my work has been concerned with the theoretical problem as to how one can critically assess kyriocentric texts in the interest of

(eds.), *Post-structuralism and the question of history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 68-78.

25. See for instance the contributions in R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the margins: interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991) and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (eds.), *Lift every voice: constructing Christian theologies from the underside* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1990); Katie Geneva Cannon and E. Schüssler Fiorenza (eds.), *Interpretation for liberation (Semeia 47; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989)*; Renita Weems, "Reading her way through the struggle" in Cain Hope Felder (ed.), *Stony the road we trod: African-American biblical interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 57-80 and the articles by Rita Nakashima Brock, Ada Maria Iasi Diaz, Kwok Pui-Lan, Ivone Gebara and Katie G. Cannon in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the scriptures: a feminist introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

wo/men's socio-political liberation and dismantle their corrosive power of persuasion in the interest of the spiritual well-being of wo/men. For that reason I have constructed a feminist theoretical framework that would move toward the articulation of a critical rhetoric of inquiry, an epistemological move which is often overlooked.

A critical feminist interpretation for liberation also differs from post-structuralist theorists insofar as it focuses on the rhetorical dimensions and elements in interpretation that are generated by the materiality of texts, the historicity of readers, and the politics of communication in past and present socio-historical and ideological contexts. Whereas a postmodern reading rejects any focus on the ideologies inscribed in biblical texts and generally rejects a systemic analysis or "social analytic" of the multiplicative structures of domination, I have consistently advocated the necessity to anchor a critical rhetorical analysis of biblical texts in a systemic analysis of their function in particular historical rhetorical situations and socio-political contexts. Hence I continue not only to argue for the possibility of socio-historical reconstruction but also to insist on the importance of reclaiming subjugated knowledges as memory and heritage for feminist liberation struggles. Since biblical texts are religious texts articulated in a definite moment of history, their possible meanings are historically, politically and contextually circumscribed because

the hermeneutics of a text is conditioned by the text itself. The text indicates the limits (however broad) of its own meaning. A text says *what it permits to be said*. Its polysemy arises from its previous *closure*. Hence, the urgency of situating it in its proper context, by means of historical-critical methods, and of exploring its capacity for the production of meaning (according to the laws of semiotics), in order thus to cause its forward to blossom from within life.²⁶

In short, a critical feminist biblical interpretation for liberation, I have pointed out in *Bread not stone* and theorised in *But she said*, is best understood as a practice of rhetorical inquiry that engages in the formation of a critical historical and religious consciousness. Whereas hermeneutic theory seeks to understand and appreciate the meaning of texts, rhetorical inquiry and its theo-ethical interrogation of texts and symbolic worlds pays close attention to the kinds of effects not only biblical discourses but also biblical readers produce and how they produce them. Hence, I have proposed in *Bread not stone*, and elaborated further in *But she said*, a complex model for a critical process

26. Severino Croatto, *Biblical hermeneutics: toward a theory of reading as the production of meaning* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987) 80.

of feminist interpretation for liberation.²⁷ Such a complex model of interpretation seeks to overcome the hermeneutical splits between sense and meaning, between explanation and understanding, between critique and consent, between distancing and empathy, between reading the text “behind” and “in front of” the text,²⁸ between the present and the past, between interpretation and application,²⁹ between realism and imagination.

As I have elaborated elsewhere, this model entails *four* hermeneutical strategies: *suspicion*, *reconstruction*, *evaluation*, and *imagination*. These hermeneutical strategies, however, are not to be construed simply as successive independent steps of inquiry or as methodological rules but must be understood as interpretive practices that interact with each other simultaneously in a feminist process of interpreting a particular biblical or any other cultural text. These strategies have as their doubled reference point the language-systems, ideological frameworks, and socio-political-religious location of contemporary readers in kyriarchal systems of domination, on the one hand, *and* the linguistic and socio-historical systems inscribed in biblical texts and their effective histories of interpretation on the other. Such a critical theoretical model of feminist interpretation for liberation engages the four hermeneutical strategies mentioned above as rhetorical discursive practices in order to *displace* positivist and depoliticised academic practices of reading – practices which seem to have gained ground even in Biblical Women’s Studies. In developing such a complex interactive model of a critical feminist interpretation for liberation I sought to challenge the prevalent positivist ethos of biblical studies and its rhetorics of inquiry in order to transform both of them.

In short, such a critical feminist process of interpretation for liberation³⁰ engages in biblical hermeneutics as a cultural-religious practice of resistance and transformation. To that end it utilises not only historical and literary critical as well as ideology-critical and theo-

27. See especially Schüssler Fiorenza *But she said*, 51-76 and 195-218 for the elaboration of this process with reference to a particular text.

28. For such a hermeneutical reading see Sandra Schneiders, *The revelatory text, interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

29. Klaus Berger, *Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments*, insists on the distinction in order to safeguard the distancing power of exegetical-historical interpretation and the freedom of selectivity in the application of texts in contemporary situations.

30. It is curious that Gerald West, *Biblical hermeneutics of liberation: modes of reading the Bible in the South African context* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991) does not discuss this process model of interpretation although (or because?) he is interested in the “interface between biblical studies and the ordinary reader”. Instead he tries to limit my hermeneutical proposal to a “reading behind the text”, pointing out its similarity to Itumeleng Mosala’s (*Biblical hermeneutics and Black theology in South Africa* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989]) approach, although Mosala’s work not only has appeared later but also uses a Marxist rather than feminist analysis. It seems that even in a *Hermeneutics of liberation* the “ordinary reader” remains male.

ethical evaluative methods which focus on the rhetoric of the biblical text in its historical contexts. It also employs methods of storytelling, role play, bibliodrama, poetry, pictorial arts, dance, music and ritual for creating a "different" religious imagination. The critical rhetorical strategies and hermeneutical processes of such a critical feminist interpretation for liberation are not limited to canonical biblical texts, but can be equally applied to extra-canonical sources and other classics of religion and culture. It has been "translated" and used in work with illiterate women, with highly trained theologians as well as in feminist bible study groups.³¹

By concentrating on the rhetoricity of historical reconstruction and the historicity of biblical text and interpretation³² at a time when the "new" rhetorical criticism of the Muilenburg school which is represented by Phyllis Tribble in feminist biblical studies, focused on linguistic expression, literary form and ahistorical textual reading, I might have inadvertently fostered positivist misreadings of my hermeneutical work. Critics who label my work as primarily interested in the history behind the text overlook its critical rhetorical emphasis. Such misreadings neglect that the hermeneutical framework of rhetorical inquiry seeks to challenge the hegemonic model of interpretation which divides interpretation either into three discrete stages as reading behind the text, as reading the text, and as reading in front of the text or separates it into three discrete operations of explanation, understanding, and application.

The model of a critical feminist interpretation for liberation argues instead for the integrity and indivisibility of the interpretive process as well as the primacy of the contemporary starting point of reading. Not only feminist but also malestream biblical interpreters always read in front of the cultural or religious "influential" classic or canonical text. Cultural classics and canonical scriptures in turn always already inform our readings. Insofar as they are cultural or religious "classics", they have "performative authority" that is a continuing significance and influence in shaping people's thought and life. They function as persuasive rhetorical texts that continue to influence western cultures and biblical religions. Hence, they must be critically scrutinised as to their interaction with kyriarchal structures of oppression and their function in wo/men's struggles for liberation.

31. See for instance Alison M. Cheek, "Shifting the paradigm: feminist Bible study", in Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the scriptures*, 338-50 and Lieve Troch, "Feminist study in the Netherlands", *Searching the scriptures*, 351-66.

32. See my article "The rhetoricity of historical knowledge: Pauline discourse and its contextualizations", in Lukas Bormann, Kelly Del Tredici, Angela Standhartinger (eds.), *Religious propaganda and missionary competition in the New Testament world: essays honoring Dieter Georgi* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994) 443-70.

3. WO/MEN'S STRUGGLES AS A SITE OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The critical rhetorical model of a feminist interpretation for liberation which I have sought to outline here again, does neither take over the theoretical frameworks of malestream hermeneutical theory,³³ nor is it dependent on formalist literary criticism, abstract reader-response criticism, or sociological functionalism. Rather it belongs to the epistemological paradigm shift engendered by critical theories and liberation theologies. Such a shift from a modern western malestream to a critical liberation theological frame of reference engenders a four-fold change in hermeneutical-rhetorical inquiry: a change in interpretive goals, a change in epistemology, a change in consciousness, and a change in central theological questions.

A critical feminist interpretation for liberation does not commence by beginning with the text and placing the bible at the centre of its attention. Instead it begins with a critical systemic analysis of patri-kyriarchal structures of dehumanisation and focus on the struggle of wo/men at the bottom of the patri-kyriarchal pyramid of domination and exploitation, I continue to insist, because their struggles reveal the fulcrum of oppression and dehumanisation threatening every wo/man. Accordingly, a feminist critical interpretation for liberation does not simply begin with experience. Rather it begins with a systemic analysis and reflection of the experience of wo/men on the bottom of society. It insists on the hermeneutical priority of feminist struggles in order to be able not only to disentangle the ideological (religious-theological) functions of biblical texts for inculcating and legitimating the patri-

33. See, for example, Erin White, "Figuring and refiguring the female self: towards a feminist hermeneutics", in Morny Joy and Penelope Magee (eds.), *Claiming our rites*, 135-55. After claiming that "feminist scholarship lacks extended discussion of hermeneutical questions", she goes on to argue that Phyllis Trible's and my own work "focus on the text" and in my case "on the communities of women and men who produced the text", but that we do not focus "on the relation between text and (female) self-identity" (136). In her elaboration of my alleged position she does not refer to either my books *Bread not stone*, *But she said*, or *Vision of a just world* nor to any of my other hermeneutical-epistemological essays. Instead she (mis)reads *In memory of her* in a positivist historical vain and claims that I do "not sufficiently recognise the place of both text and present context in the construction of any community of the past" (138). She concedes that her critique might seem "niggardly" (*sic*) and then goes on to show how much better off we would be if we had read Ricoeur, although a reading of *Bread not stone* and my discussion of, for example, Sandra Schneiders' proposal could have shown that I have considered this approach but found it wanting. She caps it all by claiming that like Ricoeur I do not begin with my own life experience but with the inherited biblical text, although she could find many statements sprinkled throughout my writings to the effect that feminist theology begins with experience and a critical feminist theology with systemically analysed and explored experience. However, at no point does she mention that the basic difference between our feminist hermeneutical proposals is neither my lack of hermeneutical sophistication nor my abandoning of experience, but the theoretical difference between a feminist analysis in terms of gender and one in terms of the multiplicative structures of kyriarchal oppression and kyriocentric symbol systems.

kyriarchal order but also for explaining, their potential for fostering justice and liberation.³⁴ Feminist Christian readings that do not prioritise women's struggles against multiplicative oppressions but privileges the biblical text itself and malestream doctrinal, theological, spiritual, or theoretical frameworks, cannot be liberative.

This paradigm shift articulates first of all a change in the aims and goals of biblical interpretation and theology. The task of interpretation is *not just to understand* biblical texts and traditions *but to change* western idealist hermeneutical frameworks, individualist practices and socio-political relations. Hence liberation theologies of all colours take the experience and voices of the oppressed and marginalised, of those wo/men traditionally excluded from articulating theology and shaping communal life as the starting point of all epistemological and theological reflection. Before postmodern theories liberation theologies have not only recognised the perspectival and contextual nature of knowledge and interpretation but also asserted that knowledge and theology are – knowingly or not – always engaged for or against the oppressed. Intellectual neutrality is not possible in a historical world of exploitation and oppression. Yet, as the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire has pointed out a long time ago, the oppressed have also internalised oppression and are divided in and among themselves:

The oppressed, having internalised the image of the oppressor and adopted his (*sic*) guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom...must be pursued constantly and responsibly.³⁵

34. Although Anthony C. Thiselton, *New horizons in hermeneutics: the theory and practice of transforming biblical reading* (London: Harper Collins, 1992) 449f., in his discussion of my work, claims that "what is at stake is hermeneutical theory", he does not bother to discuss *Bread not stone* but rather focuses on a particular exegetical topic regarding women's witness to the resurrection discussed in *In memory of her*. In so doing he seeks to show that I did not take all possible interpretations into account. Yet such a criticism overlooks the limits set by my choice of genre for this work and mistakes a work of historical reconstruction for one of hermeneutical critical theory. The interests driving his misreadings come to the fore in his emotionally laden comparison of my own work with that of Susanne Heine. Although Heine's work has appeared later and is dependent on my own work, albeit without acknowledging it, she finds Thiselton's favour because she attacks the work of other feminists. It also comes to the fore in his repeated questioning as to how much a given tradition can undergo transformation before it ceases to be this tradition, as well as in the questioning of whether the transformation of which I speak comes "into being by imposing one's community values upon another in a hermeneutic of conflict, or by progress toward a universal commitment to a transcendental critique of justice and of the cross which speaks from beyond given contextbound communities in a hermeneutic of openness?" Obviously Thiselton is not able to understand either commitment to wo/men as a universal stance nor feminist struggle as a commitment to a "transcendental critique of justice" or to the "cross" as the symbolic expression of such struggle.

35. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973) 31.

Since both the oppressed and their oppressors are “manifestations of dehumanisation”,³⁶ the methodological starting point of liberation theologies cannot be simply “common sense” experience but rather must be systemically analysed and reflected experience. Since wo/men have internalised and are shaped by kyriarchal “common sense” mindsets and values, the hermeneutical starting point of feminist interpretation must be the experience of wo/men which is to be critically explored in the process of “conscientisation” and interpretation.

Hence, liberation theologies of all colours derive their lenses of interpretation not from the modern individualistic and spiritualised understanding of religion and the bible. Rather they shift attention to the politics of biblical interpretation and its socio-political contexts. They claim the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed and marginalised for reading and evaluating the bible. In distinction to modern liberal theologies which address the questions and ideas of the “non-believer”, liberation theologies of all colours focus on the experiences and struggles for survival and liberation of the “nobodies” who have been marginalised and dehumanised. For instance, whereas Schleiermacher, the “father of hermeneutics”, addressed the cultured critics of “religion”, Gustavo Gutierrez argues that liberation theologians take up the questions of the “non-persons”.³⁷

Such a reading of the bible from the perspective of the oppressed is not confessional and doctrinal but ecumenical and liberating. It seeks to enable and to defend life that is threatened or destroyed by hunger, destitution, sexual violence, torture and dehumanisation. Liberationist biblical readings seek to give dignity and value to the life of the non-person as the presence and image of G*d in our midst. Their goals are to inspire biblical readers to engage in the struggle for transforming internalised cultural-religious kyriocentric mindsets and socio-political kyriarchal structures of domination. They engage in a process of conscientisation that presupposes a critical systemic sociopolitical analysis. Such an analysis allows wo/men to perceive the reality of oppression neither as a “closed world”, nor as an individual problem or as a personal dysfunction but rather as a limiting socio-political and existential situation which can be transformed. It is the critical experience of those engaged in emancipatory struggles for transforming situations of dehumanisation and exploitation that is the starting point for a critical feminist theology of liberation.

36. Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, 33.

37. See also Sharon Welch, *Communities of resistance and solidarity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, n.d.) 7: “...the referent of the phrase ‘liberating God’ is not primarily God but liberation. That is, the language here is true not because it corresponds with something in the divine nature but because it leads to actual liberation in history. The truth of God language and of all theological claims is measured...by the fulfillment of its claims in history.”

Those wo/men who have been “conscientized” are the “interlocutors” or theological subjects of liberation theologies who are asking the questions and are posing the problems which feminist theologians try to address. The theoretical “more” that a critical feminist theology of liberation brings to the table of malestream theologies and feminist hermeneutical discourses is not just a difference in method and object. Nor is it simply the difference of social location which is stratified according to race, class, religion or sex. Rather, I suggest, it is primarily a difference in reading subject and process of interpretation as well as a difference in systemic socio-political analysis and hermeneutical horizon.³⁸

Although this seems no longer fashionable, I have sought to theorise a sociopolitical feminist systemic analysis³⁹ that differs not only from the capitalist or class analysis of liberation theologies. It also takes exception to the gender analysis advocated by liberal or radical gender feminisms and academic women’s studies because they still employ gender-dualism as the primary category of their analysis.⁴⁰ However, neither an analysis solely in terms of class and colonialism nor one in terms of gender and heterosexuality can theoretically articulate the multiplicative structures of oppression that dehumanise wo/men. Therefore, I have developed a model of systemic analysis as a social analytic that is able to explore and articulate the complex contemporary and historical interstructuring of oppressions which operate within an overarching historical system of domination.

Since in feminist biblical discourses patriarchal and androcentric have been used interchangeably, I have introduced the distinction between patriarchal socio-political structures of domination and androcentric dualism that is reinscribed through language, symbol-systems and ideologies. Such androcentric dualism is always produced in response to a situation where patriarchal domination is no longer common sense and alternative possibilities exist. This distinction is overlooked when it is argued that I claim that the bible is patriarchal or when it is not recognised that a hermeneutics of suspicion is necessary

38. In their introduction Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips, *Destabilizing theory: contemporary feminist debates* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992) distinguish the feminist theoretical discussions and political strategies of the 70s as preoccupied with social structures from those of the 90s which are concerned with questions of meaning, identity, representation and difference. In contrast, I would argue, feminist biblical studies have always been concerned with meaning, authority, and representation but have not paid sufficient attention to the analysis of socio-political contextualisations.

39. For this problem see Rosemary Pringle, “Destabilising patriarchy”, in *Transitions: new Australian feminisms*, 198-211.

40. Sylvia Walby characterises such a theory as post-postmodern. However, in distinction to my own theoretical work, she continues to use patriarchy as connoting sexism and gender oppression. See her “Post-post-modernism? Theorizing social complexity”, in Michelle Barrett and Anne Phillips, *Destabilizing theory*, 31-52 and her book *Theorizing patriarchy* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

because of the androcentric linguistic and ideological cultural symbolic universe inscribed in biblical texts and readings.

However, because the categories patriarchy and androcentrism continue to be understood simply in terms of gender as the domination of all men over all women, I have sought to replace the terms androcentrism and patriarchy in *But she said* with the neologisms *patri-kyriarchy* (Herr-schaft) and *kyriocentrism* (from the Greek for "rule/dominion of the master"/master-centrism) for naming the socio-political and religious multiplicative structures of wo/men's systemic oppressions and forms of dehumanisation. A kyriarchal analytic focuses on multiply oppressed women who struggle for survival, human dignity, self-determination, and well-being. They are the interlocutors of a critical feminist theology of liberation.

At the heart of such a critical feminist interpretation for liberation is not the generic "option for the oppressed" but the recognition that the dehumanisation and the survival of wo/men struggling against multiple oppressions "reveal" the full destructive powers of kyriarchy as well as the possibility for liberation from them. Such a hermeneutical option requires that feminist interpreters articulate their self-identification as wo/men who are threatened by the same destructive powers of dehumanisation that determine in various degrees the life of all wo/men. Such a practice of self-affirmation and solidarity as wo/men challenges and empowers wo/men to engage in emancipatory struggles for liberation. In theological terms such a critical systemic analysis and practice for liberation names the powers of structural sin, reveals G*d's power for liberation and well-being in concrete socio-political situations and provides the "ontological" criterion for evaluating religious and theo-ethical truth claims.

The socio-political vision and religious horizon for such a critical interpretation for liberation is the *ekklesia of wo/men as the congress of full decision making citizens*. *Ekklesia* is not just a Christian religious term but expresses a socio-political radical democratic vision. It seeks to convey the radical notion of democracy which has never been fully realised in history⁴¹ since in western traditions wo/men have not been accorded full citizenship and self-determination.⁴² To construct the relation between wo/men-church and the discipleship of equals as a simplistic continuity not only overlooks the creative space in between the reality

41. For the struggle between dominant kyriarchal structures and the vision and practice of the *ecclesia* as a discipleship of equals in early Christianity see my article "A discipleship of equals: ekklesial democracy and patriarchy in biblical perspective", in Eugene C. Bianchi and R. Radford Ruether (eds.), *A democratic catholic church* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 17-33.

42. For a similar but quite different discussion of such a radical democratic vision see the discussion in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Dimensions of radical democracy* (London: Verso, 1992).

and vision or the interpretive centre and normative horizon inhabited by the *ekklesia of women*. It also does not appreciate the contradiction and conflict between egalitarian radical democratic practices of community and the dominant reality of patri-kyriarchy as an interlocking system of discriminations and subordinations. Only a theoretical model that comprehends the ongoing conflicts and struggles between the vision and emancipatory practices of radical democracy on the one hand and those of patri-kyriarchal social systems on the other, I argue, is able to make visible or conscious the submerged knowledges of the oppressed and to provide for a fragile historical continuity of emancipatory struggles. Indeed, feminist emancipatory movements must position themselves both within this history of conflict and struggle for human freedom, dignity, and well-being (the *ekklesia*) and the biblical vision of the *basileia*, G*d's different society and world liberated from poverty, hunger, suffering, homelessness, murder, and injustice.

This vision of the *basileia* as G*d's alternative virtual reality must not be reduced to a "mere" sociological-political vision but be understood as a theological one. In a review of *In memory of her* Luce Irigaray has dismissed the hermeneutical theological vision of the *basileia* as describing "what already exists without inventing a new subjectivity" which she does not "believe can be reduced to a social effect".⁴³ Rather than to underscore that her own theoretical framework and my own theorising of feminist agency are quite different, she prefers to read my text in a reductive fashion. The substantive theoretical difference which her text alludes to and simultaneously elides is the "qualitative threshold" which she understands in anthropological terms as marked by "sexual difference", and which I see in socio-political terms as marked by the "theoethical difference" of the *basileia*. As Morny Joy has pointed out:

The other that claims us, and who, on Levinas' reading calls us forth, becomes not another human being, but those alienated parts of *woman* [emphasis added] that have been repressed, rejected, abandoned, despised and denigrated [*sic*]. To enter into a relationship with these dimensions of her being, is for Irigaray to become Divine. God then is....the realization of our unrestricted potentialities....⁴⁴

Or in Irigaray's own words: "to become divine men and women,... to refuse to allow parts of ourselves to shrivel and die that have the potential for growth and fulfillment".⁴⁵ A statement like this reveals why Irigaray's work presently enjoys such high currency among

43. *Differences* 1 (1989) 74.

44. Morny Joy, "Sainthood or Heresy", in *Claiming our rites*, 177.

45. Luce Irigaray, "Divine women" in *Sexes and genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 69.

women in religion. It feeds into the consumerist self-help mentality and new age spirituality of individualistic fulfillment and potential for growth that is presently in vogue.⁴⁶ The articulation of the Divine in the radical democratic struggles of the *ekklesia of wo/men positioned within the horizon of the basileia* is different. It is not situated within anthropological, psychoanalytic discourses but conceptualised and theorised quite differently. It seeks to break out of the theoretical preconstructed frame of the kyriocentric western sex/gender system in order not to reinscribe but to subvert it.

4. RECLAIMING A RADICAL DEMOCRATIC FEMINIST TRADITION

This radical egalitarian religious vision which I have proposed represents at once a new spiritual articulation and a theological reaffirmation of the indigenous roots of global feminist movements. In an article entitled "Red roots of white feminism", Paula Gunn Allen, one of the foremost Native American literary critics in the USA, has argued that the radical roots of feminist egalitarian dreaming cannot be found in the democratic traditions of Ancient Greece or modern America or France because the classic European form of democracy did not allow women to participate in decision making government. Rather the feminist vision of radical democracy must be derived from tribal governments in the Americas, such as the Iroquois Confederacy, in which the Council of Matrons was the ceremonial, executive, and judicial centre.

The root of oppression is loss of memory. An odd thing occurs in the minds of Americans when Indian civilisation is mentioned: little or nothing.... How odd then must my contention seem that the gynocratic tribes of the American continent provided the basis for all the dreams of liberation that characterise the modern world.... The vision that impels feminists to action was the vision of the Grandmothers' society, the society that was captured in the words of the sixteenth-century explorer Peter Martyr nearly five hundred years ago. It is the same vision repeated over and over by radical thinkers of Europe and America.... That vision...is of a country where there are "no soldiers, no gendarmes or police, no nobles, kings, regents, prefects, or judges, no prisons, no lawsuits.... All are equal and free..."⁴⁷

46. Unfortunately Patricia Brennan does not critically problematise this aspect of Irigaray's discourses on God, women and men. See Patricia Brennan, "Loosed and bound: women's reform and the question of God", in Maryanne Confoy, Dorothy A. Lee and Joan Nowotny (eds.), *Freedom and entrapment: women thinking theology* (Melbourne: Dove, 1995) 79-99.

47. Paula Gunn Allen, "Who is your mother? Red roots of white feminism", in *Multicultural literacy*, 18f.

To European eyes Native Americans seemed gloriously free. Their willingness to share their goods, their respect for the earth and all living beings, their preference for scant clothing, their derision of authoritarian structures, their permissive childrearing practices, their frequent bathing, their living in a classless and propertiless society, all these attitudes led to the impression of a "humanity unrestrained". Iroquois observers who travelled to France in the colonial period in turn expressed shock at the great gap between the lifestyles of the wealthy and the poor and marvelled that the poor endured such injustice without rebellion.

In addition, Paula Gunn Allen argues that Columbus' and other Europeans' contact with the indigenous populations of the Americas and their reports about the free and easy egalitarianism of indigenous Americans were in circulation by the time the Reformation took hold. Gunn Allen's view is corroborated by Gary Nash, a historian of colonial America:

Many of the early colonists had envisioned a virtuous society organised around concepts of reciprocity, spirituality and community. [With the passage of time] the only people in North America who were upholding these values, and organising their society around them, were the people who were being driven from the land.⁴⁸

Although this modern democratic system resembles in many ways that of the non-feudal Iroquois confederacy, it is also quite different from it. According to Gunn Allen two of the major differences consist in the fact that the Iroquois system is Spirit-based and that the clan matrons performed the executive function which was directly tied to the ritual nature of the Iroquois democracy. "Because the matrons were the ceremonial center of the system, they were also the prime policy makers."⁴⁹ Only the "indigenisation" of classical notions of democracy and biblical understandings of *ekklesia*, a merging of the "grandmothers' society" both with biblical visions of socio-political justice and human dignity as the image of G*d and the modern notions of individual freedoms and equal rights, I submit, will result in a feminist vision and practice of radical democratic change. A feminist theological re-visioning of the biblical past must consequently locate itself in such a radical oppositional democratic imagination. The radical democratic imagination of the Grandmothers' society challenges feminists in theology and Religious Studies to re-vision biblical community and Christian spirituality in such a way that they can contribute to the creation of a Spirit-centre for a radical democratic Confederacy of global

48. Gary B. Nash, *Red, white and black* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974) p. xiv.

49. Gunn Allen, "Who is your mother?", 219.

dimensions. Indigenous peoples around the globe preserve such spiritual visions and practices that celebrate the sacredness of everyone.

Although this radical democratic vision of the *ekklesia of wo/men* is articulated quite differently, it nevertheless takes up and continues the nineteenth century vision of the African-American suffragist Anna Julia Cooper. The recently published dissertation of Karen Baker-Fletcher points out that equality and freedom were not simply physical states of mind but political-spiritual realities for this nineteenth century African-American theorist.⁵⁰ Cooper believed that democratic progress was a "shadow mark of the creator's image" derived "from the essential worth of humanity". She envisioned a future for humanity governed by the principles of equality, freedom and democracy which she conceptualises as ontological universal aspects of human nature, "an inborn human endowment – a shadow mark of the Creator's image, or if you will an urge-cell, the universal and unmistakable hall-mark traceable to the Father of all."⁵¹

Anna Julia Cooper also understands democracy in religious terms but broadens the white suffragist ethos of struggle for full citizenship when she insists that democratic equality and freedom are G*d-given, inborn ontological capacities of every human being regardless of race, sex, class and country. Over and against Anglo-Saxon suffragists who claim democracy, equality and freedom as the property of the superior races of western European civilisation,⁵² Cooper insists that these were inherent in the fact of being human and hence could never be suppressed. The key-metaphor for G*d in Cooper's religious discourse according to Baker-Fletcher is a "Singing something" which in every nation cries out for justice. As Baker-Fletcher puts it:

What makes one human is one's inner voice, the voice of equality and freedom that is directly traceable to God. The voice of God, in this sense, sings through the human spirit and calls humankind to action, growth, development and reform. There is movement involved in the act of vocalisation.⁵³

50. Karen Baker Fletcher, *A singing something, womanist reflections on Anna Julia Cooper* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

51. Anna Julia Cooper, "Equality of races and the democratic movement", privately printed pamphlet, Washington, DC., 1945, 5, as quoted by Baker Fletcher.

52. Like other Anglo-Saxon suffragists and social reformers, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was very much determined and limited by her social status and class position. Not only did she express anti-immigrant sentiments by arguing that the suffrage of women of her own class would increase the numbers of Anglo-Saxon voters. She also appealed to ethnic and racial prejudices when she exhorted: "American women of wealth and refinement. If you do not wish the lower orders of Chinese, Africans, Germans, and Irish, with their low ideas of womanhood to make laws for you, demand that woman, too, shall be represented in the government", as quoted by Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "Daughters of Jefferson, daughters of bootblacks" in *Racism and American feminism* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986) 31.

53. Baker-Fletcher, *A singing something*, 192-3.

While my own radical democratic understanding of the *ekklesia of wo/men* is theorised quite differently and speaks to a different rhetorical situation and historical context,⁵⁴ it nevertheless is a part of and continues this nineteenth-century religious suffragist tradition, although critics have not connected my work with this feminist democratic tradition. Instead my theoretical-theological framework and proposal is usually assessed as to whether and how much it is stamped by or in line with the intellectual tradition of the “great men” or “fathers” of hermeneutics, rhetorics, or dogmatics. Whereas, reviewers have suggested that the intellectual framework of my work is articulated in dialogue with or dependence on one of the “masters” of hermeneutics such as Gadamer, Bultmann, Ricoeur,⁵⁵ the Frankfurt School,⁵⁶ Dworkin,⁵⁷ or the American pragmatist philosophical tradition,⁵⁸ they have not inquired as to its intellectual “foresisters”.⁵⁹

Such an evaluation of feminist work in terms of malestream hermeneutical discourses, however, not only neglects that feminists have independently raised many of the questions theorised by the postmodern masters. It also overlooks that as a critical theoretical inquiry feminist biblical hermeneutics must be elaborated and evaluated in terms of its own theoretical frameworks and practical goals which determine its selective use and “bricolage” or “quilting” of the hermeneutical theories on which it draws. By constructing the genealogy of feminist hermeneutics primarily in light of malestream biblical hermeneutics, or by spanning it into the Procrustean bed of the “great fathers” of hermeneutics, feminist scholars are in danger of

54. For discussion of this theoretical context see for instance, Anne Phillips, *Engendering democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds.), *Feminists theorize the political* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Joan Cocks, *The oppositional imagination: feminism, critique and political theory* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Mary Lyndon Shanley and Carole Pateman (eds.), *Feminist interpretations and political theory* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

55. See for instance Erin White, “Figuring and refiguring the female self: towards a feminist hermeneutics”, who concedes that my work does not quite “fit” into the hermeneutical framework of Ricoeur (p. 54, n. 12). She seems not to recognise that the introduction of gender analysis or of women as subjects of interpretation explodes the hermeneutical framework of Ricoeur insofar as it makes a “second naïveté” impossible.

56. Marsha Hewitt, “The redemptive power of memory: Walter Benjamin and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza”, *The journal of feminist studies in religion* 10/1 (1994) 73-90.

57. For such an attempt see Linnell E. Cady, “Hermeneutics and tradition: the role of the past in jurisprudence and theology”, *Harvard theological review* 79 (1986) 439-46.

58. See for example Rebecca S. Chopp, “Feminism’s theological pragmatics: a social naturalism of women’s experience”, *The journal of religion* 67 (1987) 239-56 who has perceptively situated my proposal of a critical feminist interpretation for liberation within the North American pragmatic tradition; but tends to overlook its indebtedness to critical theory.

59. For instance, I am not aware of any review of *Bread not stone* or *But she said* that seeks to assess as to how much my theoretical framework is influenced by the work of feminist critical theory and liberationist epistemological discourses.

collaborating with the continuing patri-kyriarchal silencing and marginalising of feminist theoretical accomplishments.

This submerged feminist intellectual tradition of religious agency and biblical interpretation, in which my own work stands, has claimed and continues to claim the authority and right of wo/men to interpret experience, tradition and religion from their own perspective and in their own interests. This tradition has insisted that equality, freedom, and democracy cannot be realised if wo/men's voices are not raised or not heard and heeded in the struggle for justice and liberation for everyone regardless of sex, class, race, nationality or religion. Although this feminist tradition of wo/men's religious authority and theological agency remains fragmented and has not always been able to escape the contextual limitations and prejudicial frameworks of its own time and social location, its critical knowledge and continuing vibrancy remains nevertheless crucial for contemporary feminist theology and studies in religion.

To transform patri-kyriarchal religious and theological traditions of silencing and exclusion, feminist theologians and scholars in religion, I have argued elsewhere, must remain permanent immigrants and resident aliens in academy and theology. We must resist the temptation of continuing to be motherless daughters who are proud to be "firsts" among women and to have sprung from the head of the Fathers. To prove our intellectual brilliance and religious faithfulness by demonstrating our "fit" with malestream theories and theologies means to disqualify other feminist work, deprives us of our roots, and diminishes our power for change. As white western women in particular we must cease to perform the civilising role of the "white lady" who is expected to mediate the cultural and religious kyriarchal knowledges of elite white western man. Only if we firmly plant our feet in a critical feminist hermeneutical and theological tradition that insists on the rights, dignity, and power of all wo/men will we be able not only to critically analyse the oppressive mindsets and ideological frameworks of our academic or religious fathers but also to change them in the interest of every wo/man.⁶⁰

60. An excellent example of such a careful, appreciative and critical reading of my work in the interest of critiquing her "sociological fathers" can be found in the contribution of Kath McPhillips, "Reconstructing women's religious agency: critical feminist perspectives and the ekklesia of women", in *Claiming our rites*, 247-63.