

# The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Rhetoricizing the Foundations

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Until recently, research dealing with biblical ethics has dealt almost exclusively with the question of what the Bible has to say about right living and moral decision-making. Since the same texts have yielded a variety of ethical stances depending upon the historical circumstances in which they are interpreted, the question has arisen as to the basis upon which ethical conclusions are specifiable. From divine inspiration to the canons of “unbiased” scientific description, the assumption of most paradigms for interpreting Holy Writ is that the ethics under investigation are in some sense an attribute of the biblical text itself, and as such, have already been determined at the time the text was written. Interpreters, by whatever method of extraction, need only busy themselves with recovering the deposited meaning.

Exegetes now look to culture, economics, and politics as keys to understanding the way in which meaning in general and ethics in particular are construed during the interpretive act. Attention has shifted from the context of production to the contexts of reception, as scholars consider the influences exerted by the social, cultural, and political location of the reader. Language in these models of analysis is understood, either tacitly or explicitly, as a form of power. In addition to drawing attention to factors which constrain biblical interpretation prior to the interpretive act, a call has been heard to consider the effects that a given reading may produce, from an ethical perspective, on the historical situation into which it is received.

In what follows, I will examine the contribution of a few scholars working in the area, paying particular attention to the work of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. While I agree with the inspiration of Schüssler Fiorenza’s work and with most of her conclusions, I believe that in the end she undercuts her own argument by refusing to follow the argument for a rhetorical stance to its persuasive conclusion. Motivated by her desire to stand in solidarity with those struggling against the poisoned legacy of a colonial past, Schüssler Fiorenza refuses to make the move

away from essentialist hermeneutics—a decision which prevents her from fully embracing a hermeneutics of persuasion and faith.

### Changing Paradigms

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza recently examined the ethical stance of four interpretive models operating in the field of biblical studies.<sup>1</sup> The paradigms examined include (1) the doctrinal-fundamentalist, (2) the scientific-positivist, (3) the (post)-modern cultural, and (4) the rhetorical-emancipatory. Some years earlier, Fernando Segovia had already charted the use of four similar paradigms, albeit using a different nomenclature.<sup>2</sup> I will say a few words about each of these models as a way of situating my own contribution to the debate surrounding the ethics of biblical interpretation.

Neoconservative Christians from a variety of fundamentalist movements subscribe to the doctrinal-fundamentalist paradigm, which insists on a literalist reading of Scripture, understood both as factual truth and will of God. These readers tend to de-politicize the biblical message and spiritualise the current global crisis of injustice in which the necessities of life and happiness are denied to the majority of the world's population. Rejecting religious tolerance and pluralism and insisting on the subordination of women as natural and ordained by God, fundamentalists promise religious security, a certainty of faith, and a clear-cut identity in an ever changing and conflictive world.<sup>3</sup>

The scientific-positivist paradigm of historical exegesis was established by scholars seeking to free themselves from doctrinal prejudices in biblical interpretation. This approach emerged against the backdrop of several heresy trials, a legacy which explains its continued rejection of all overt religious, socio-political and theological engagement as unscientific.<sup>4</sup> Seeking to establish historical study of the Bible as an academic discipline capable of establishing the single true meaning of the text, these biblical critics tended and tend to perceive the biblical era as fundamentally alien to modern people and assert a deep chasm between the past and the present. One of the overarching assumptions in the positivistic paradigm of historical biblical scholarship is the notion that the work of exegesis consists in a recovery of the thoughts of the author and therefore with a flow of ideas from the past to the present.

Many newer forms of text-centred criticism<sup>5</sup> fit the scientific-positivist paradigm as well in that they do little more than shift the foundations of epistemological surety from the empirical data of history to the seemingly objective forms and structures of the text. As with the historical model of exegesis, information in the formalist model flows from text to reader with little or no recognition of the reader's essential contribution to the production of meaning in the reading event. In both the author-centred and text-centred paradigms, influences from the world of the exegete are frowned upon as unscientific contamination, i.e., as impairing the emotional, intellectual and political detachment required for obtaining results that are objective, reliable and "repeatable."

Even a cursory examination of the results of biblical scholarship in the last century, however, will reveal the remarkable degree to which scientific exegesis has proved inescapably value-laden. Daniel Patte characterizes the so-called neutral practices of the scientific model as both Eurocentric and *androcentric*<sup>6</sup> while Schüssler Fiorenza impugns positivist theory as *scientistic*. Her neologism exposes the supposedly value-neutral and objective discourse of science as simply a form of rhetoric behind which positivistic methods hide as they legitimate the existing structures of oppression.<sup>7</sup> Inquiry which is unaware of its own presuppositions and oblivious to the impact its results will have in the context in which they are released is not genuinely scientific at all.

Positivist paradigms of both the historical and formalist variety have come under attack over the last decade by theoreticians who have effectively undermined the very foundations not only of biblical criticism but of all scientific description. A growing number of theoreticians and practitioners have taken the *linguistic turn* and recognize that all scientific observation and interpretation is subject to the conventional and therefore provisional character of language. This theoretical position undercuts claims to a possible truth of correspondence between linguistic constructions and a world once thought to be knowable independently of those linguistic constructions.<sup>8</sup> Knowledge of the world or, for that matter, of ourselves seems to be ineluctably tied up with language; and, in one sense, one might even say that the world comes into existence, i.e., becomes an object of knowledge, at the moment we begin to speak about it.

Since words do not refer directly to objects that exist in the world but rather to a linguistic system,<sup>9</sup> the notion that description of any sort can be entirely accurate, in the sense that it would be grounded in the object itself, comes undone. Mikhail Bakhtin expresses a similar idea in *Discourse in the Novel*:

The direct word, as traditional stylistics understands it, encounters in its orientation toward the object only the resistance of the object itself [...] but it does not encounter in its path toward the object the fundamental and richly varied opposition of another's word. No one hinders it, no one argues with it. But no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other alien words about the same object, the same theme [...] Indeed, any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist—or, to the contrary, by the “light” of alien words that have already been spoken about it. It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents.<sup>10</sup>

Methods such as reader-response criticism, poststructuralist literary analyses and semiotics understand that texts, far from being univocal, can produce a plurality of readings. Certain versions of these methods proceed upon an antifoundationalist tack as they accept the argument that scientific inquiry cannot ground its claims to objectivity either on the independence of observational data (so T. Kuhn, M. Heidegger) or on the existence of a scientific language, either of which might allow scientists to communicate their results in a value-free way (so S. Fish). Exegesis takes place within a methodological framework and, like all inquiry, remains always and unavoidably theory-laden and limited in perspective; and this remains true whether the exegete is aware of the epistemological underpinnings of his or her work or not.<sup>11</sup> Within this paradigm, feminist theologians and liberation theologians have been particularly deft in pointing out just how the social, cultural, political and economic location of male researchers from affluent societies have determined the kinds of questions we ask of the biblical text as well as the kinds of prejudice we bring to the text.<sup>12</sup>

## The Power of Language

For theologians and exegetes who make no effort to hide the “interested” character of their research, there is a danger that we get bogged down in a quagmire of epistemological foundations, unable to move forward or backward to the question of the effects produced by language. By “effects”, I mean the rhetorical power of language to move people to change old habits of thought and action.

If language is a closed system cut off from direct contact with a world outside language, we may, with Jacques Derrida, be tempted to see all linguistic interaction as a series of games that refer to nothing but themselves.<sup>13</sup> If the power of language to produce effects is not taken seriously, justice in areas of food distribution, work, education, and healthcare, and freedom from sexual, racial, ethnic and academic discrimination may be examined chiefly as linguistic phenomena. *Hunger*, as a word, may indeed refer first to the English language, but most of us understand that hunger produces even in non-language bearing animals effects every bit as devastating as those experienced by starving humans. When we suffer, we will of course want to move beyond the idea of language as our only way of reflecting upon our situation, if indeed we have the luxury of reflecting long on anything except the misery in which we find ourselves. We will naturally seek out that particular use of language that will allow us to put an end to our distress.

While the very genius of post-modern thought is tied up with an unavoidable antifoundationalist reflection, intellectuals risk losing touch with the power of language to shape the physical, social and economic worlds in which we live and thus of losing sight of the real effects our discourse produces on those who languish at the margins of the global economy and who have no voice in decision making. It is interesting to note that the term “Gospel” was originally part of the rhetoric of a succession of Roman Caesars who announced the *good news* of imperial salvation to those who managed to survive their imperial conquest.<sup>14</sup> This word and several other political terms (for example *faith*, *justice*, *peace*, *parousia* and *apantesis*) were co-opted by subversive writers like Paul who were trying to direct a word of liberation and hope at the despised underclasses whose very status was essential to the functioning of the pyramidal social structure of the Roman system.<sup>15</sup> Politically-interested exegesis remains interested

in the question of an *euangelion* for the victims of empire, the central question being how to put exegesis at the service of the liberation of the modern-day counterparts of those whom Paul refers to as the weak.

Neo-pragmatism may offer a way of avoiding an impasse in anti-foundationalist reflection. Thinkers such as Stanley Fish and Richard Rorty do not look to the past for essentialist clues to the meaning of discourse, but direct their attention to the future and to the effects produced by language as a way of determining meaning. I will return to the neo-pragmatists a little later but for now I will turn to the fourth and final interpretive paradigm which Schüssler Fiorenza describes as still in the process of emerging.

The rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm “inaugurates not just a hermeneutic-scientific but an ethical-political turn.”<sup>16</sup> Other names considered for the model were the pastoral-theological, the liberationist-cultural, the rhetorical-ethical and the rhetorical-political.<sup>17</sup> Whatever its name,

. . . this fourth paradigm seeks to redefine the self-understanding of biblical scholarship in ethical, rhetorical, political, cultural, emancipatory terms and to understand the scholar in religion as a public, “transformative,” connected, or integrated intellectual who is able to communicate with a variegated public with the goal of personal, social and religious transformation for justice and well-being [for everyone].<sup>18</sup>

My own position fits well into the rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm thus described and I highly recommend Schüssler Fiorenza’s book *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* for its lively and creative introduction to the most important issues currently being discussed in the ethics of biblical interpretation. Like hers, my position

- (i) proceeds from a politically and theologically inspired perspective;<sup>19</sup>
- (ii) is ‘energized and compelled by marginalized discourses and minority theories’;
- (iii) renounces claims to positivistic objectivity and neutrality of the sort claimed by biblical scholars whose main interest proves antiquarian;
- (iv) seeks to elucidate the ethical consequences and political functions of biblical texts and their interpretations,<sup>20</sup> identifying not only contemporary structures of domination but also those inscribed in biblical texts;<sup>21</sup>

- (v) reads with the victims of poverty, of sexism and misogyny, racism, religious exclusion, heterosexism and colonialism in mind;<sup>22</sup>
- (vi) believes that biblical studies should be advanced as a form of public discourse,<sup>23</sup> which makes the public character and political responsibility an integral part of its contemporary readings and historical reconstructions.<sup>24</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza offers a brilliant list of elements for the agenda of biblical studies, as a public discourse:<sup>25</sup>

- Explicitly reflect on its socio-political religious location and ideological functions;
- Understand biblical discourses as inscriptions of struggle and reconstruct them as public debates of the *ekklesia*;
- Identify the languages of hate and the death-dealing ideologies inscribed in the Scriptures;
- Identify biblical visions and values that would contribute to a radical democratic understanding of society and religion;
- Explore cultural practices such as film, music, or art and their use of the Bible;
- Foster an understanding of biblical authority that allows for the questioning of the text in a critical practice of the discernment of the Spirit;
- Create public discourses and debates that could intervene in the discourses of the religious right and other antidemocratic groups;
- Refashion biblical education in such a way that it engenders scholars and religious leaders who are critical public intellectuals.

### The Promise of Neo-Pragmatism

Despite these wide areas of agreement, however, there are some notable differences which distinguish our positions. While Schüssler Fiorenza describes her position as “conversant with postmodernism” even though “it does not derive its inspiration from postmodern debates,”<sup>26</sup> I understand the antifoundationalist challenge to the ontological stability of author, text, and reader to be central to a discussion of the ethics of interpretation. All three elements in this triad have been variously deconstructed in recent years. The very need for a “rhetorical” model, it seems to me, is a consequence of the destabiliza-

tion of metaphysical dualism which was the philosophical grounding for the idea that the knowing subject could assume a critical distance from the object of knowledge. That all knowledge is necessarily personal knowledge and that it is subject to historical limits of the knower and the constraints of language as a conventional means of communication is now accepted as a given by an ever-increasing number of exegetes. In antifoundationalism, the distance separating the knower and the object, imagined possible in the Enlightenment, has collapsed. Knowledge is always linked to people of a particular time and place and death remains their only escape from their particular historical conditions and limitations.

Schüssler Fiorenza's radical solidarity with those at the political and social margins of the world leads her to an *à la carte* approach to the postmodern.

In contrast to postmodern criticism, the voices from the margins of biblical studies insist that the colonialized others cannot afford to abandon the notion of the subject and the possibility of knowing the world differently. Rather, they insist that the subordinated others must engage in a political and theoretical process of constituting themselves as subjects of knowledge and history.<sup>27</sup>

I believe it would be a mistake to lump all postmodern thinkers into a group of defeatists who oppose political activism. In fact, it is a mistake to maintain that antifoundationalists claim that there are no truths that hold across cultures that would allow for such activism. In his book *Doing What Comes Naturally*, Stanley Fish, an American neo-pragmatist, contends that this kind of argument proceeds from false premises:

. . . it mistakes the nature of the anti-foundationalist claim, which is not that there are no foundations, but that whatever foundations there are (and there are always some) have been established by persuasion, that is, in the course of argument and counter-argument on the basis of examples and evidence that are themselves cultural and contextual. Anti-foundationalism, then, is a thesis about how foundations emerge, and in contradistinction to the assumptions that foundations do not emerge but simply are, anchoring the universe and thought from a point above history and culture, it says that foundations are local and temporal phenomena and are always vulnerable to challenges from other localities and times. This vulnerability also extends, of course, to the anti-foundationalist



thesis itself, and that is why its assertion does not involve a contradiction, as it would if what was being asserted was the impossibility of foundational assertion; . . . anti-foundationalism can without contradiction include itself under its own scope and await the objections one might make to it; and so long as those objections are successfully met and turned back by those who preach anti-foundationalism (a preaching and a turning back I am performing at this moment), anti-foundationalism can be asserted as absolutely true since (at least for the time being) there is no argument that holds the field against it.<sup>28</sup>

In *Is there a text in this class?*, Fish had already explained that his goal was not to rule out the possibility of a true reading.

The business of criticism, in other words, was not to decide between interpretations by subjecting them to the test of disinterested evidence but to establish by political and persuasive means . . . the set of interpretive assumptions from the vantage of which the evidence . . . will hereafter be specifiable.<sup>29</sup>

Fish preserves the possibility of arriving at truth in language by rhetorizing it. In the absence of a single truth, communities and their agents will have to enter the *polis*, the *ekklesia* and seek to have their voices heard. This position assumes, of course, that all have access to the *ekklesia*.

Beyond her rejection of the deconstructed self, Schüssler Fiorenza rejects other concepts commonly associated with postmodern criticism. Even as she welcomes a plurality of readings, she introduces such notions as "legitimate" interpretation and finds a basis for evaluating the legitimacy of a particular reading either in the historical context of the text's production or in the form and structures of the text. "Texts have a surplus of meaning that can never be fully mined," she affirms at one point.<sup>30</sup> In other words, meaning is an attribute of the text. I, on the other hand, would argue that neither authorial intent nor formal features but rather the reader in his or her particular historical circumstances is the source of the surplus of meaning that has normally been associated with the text. Different communities produce similar but different texts when confronted with an identical arrangement of ink on paper.

Elsewhere Schüssler Fiorenza writes:

An ethics of critical reading changes the task of interpretation from finding out “what the text meant” to the question of what kind of readings can do justice to the text in its historical context. Although such an ethics is aware of the plurality of historical- and literary-critical methods as well as the plurality of interpretations appropriate to the text, it nevertheless insists that the number of interpretations that can legitimately be given to a text are limited.<sup>31</sup>

Again the notion of legitimate interpretation assumes that the criteria for judging legitimacy pre-exist the reading of the text in a community. Now legitimacy, in the form of objectivity, is precisely what positivist exegesis is concerned with bestowing, using the canons of historical or formalist interpretation as a yard stick. It seems to me that Schüssler Fiorenza cannot have it both ways. Thanks to the way in which antifoundationalists have undermined the foundations of the self—of both author and reader—and of the text, the truth and legitimacy of all and any interpretation issuing from even the most rigorous method are debatable.

Schüssler Fiorenza attacks scientism and *kyriarchy*<sup>32</sup> (a broader, less gender-based notion than patriarchy) by attacking the truth of correspondence theory upon which their claims to scientific objectivity and power are based. One cannot rationally destroy the truth of correspondence theory for language in general and then proceed as if the “self” existed independently of language.<sup>33</sup> Because the self is constantly emerging from a language, which is not its property but upon which it is dependent for its flickering presence, it cannot be bracketed in epistemological arguments under the claim that it is somehow a special case. This lapse of logic unnecessarily imperils Schüssler Fiorenza’s otherwise convincing argument.

Legitimacy, like meaning, is a function of reception rather than one of correlation with some pre-existing standard, be it authorial intent or formal features. With Fish, I would argue that meaning is held neither within the text nor with the author who put ink to paper, but with the reader in the world which makes the text-event happen. Textual meaning is construed during an event which emerges as a result of the poietic activity of the reader with ink and paper that has been arranged in a predictable manner using recognizable linguistic and literary conventions at many different levels. In this sense the flow of meaning during the reading event is not from author to reader or text

to reader but from reader to text. The reader is in this sense writing the text as she reads it.

If the reader does not know the language well, (Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic . . .), if he or she is unaware of certain literary conventions (for example chiasm or apocalypse), of hints of the presence of irony, of the play of intertextuality, of the levels of story and discourse and so forth, the reader will have a different experience from the exegete who has a long experience with ancient texts and has developed competencies in the appropriate areas. Only if an understanding of the conventions that produced the text are still in effect (that is to say *known*) in the tradition into which the text is received, will the reader be able to assume convincingly the place of the author in the creation of the text-event.

An example may prove useful here. Genre is one such literary convention that governs both the composition and interpretation of texts. Frank Kermode describes it as a state of expectation, "an internal probability system" that helps one comprehend a sentence, book or life.<sup>34</sup> E.D. Hirsch understands it to be a sort of *contract* or agreement, often unspoken if not unconscious, between an author and a reader, which allows the author to write according to a set of expectations and conventions and the reader to interpret what was written according to those same conventions, thereby giving the reader a way of predicting what is likely to come up next in a given type of text.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond a mastery of techniques and conventions, reading is more than a way of organizing material. When a method helps readers pay attention to what is happening to them throughout the reading experience, reading can then become a way of transforming minds.<sup>36</sup> This is precisely what the affective stylistics of Stanley Fish attempt to do.

Although the notion of objectivity has been set aside in the paradigm of neo-pragmatism, the subjectivity which emerges is far from a solipsistic individualism. On Fish's understanding, which I share, readers do not construe meaning in an arbitrary manner but act as the agents of the interpretive communities from which they emerge. Language is not simply a mechanical system for encoding and decoding information, it is shot through with values and perspectives that represent the interests of the communities which use it. Interpretive communities are of course as unstable and evolving as the subjects of which they are comprised.

The reader is thus constrained in many more ways than by requirements related to grammar, language, literary devices and the like. Not only will the reader not pay attention to a literary form or stylistic convention he does not know before reading a text (we can only recognize what we know in advance), neither will he pay attention to elements in the text that his socio-economic situation, political beliefs and gender-based assumptions preclude him from seeing. Social location is not simply one more element among several in the construal of textual meaning. Beyond the grammatical and stylistic decoding that must go on, it plays a central role in the production of meaning during the reading event. Interpretations will appear to the reader to be legitimate if they conform to the values currently in force within the community of which he or she is a member. Communities often have a history of reading that forms a recognizable tradition, tradition being that set of presuppositions that guide the reader in the correct construal of the text. Fundamentalists, for example, legitimate readings which reinforce the values they espouse as a community: apolitical, literalist readings which see female submission, and often wealth and poverty as predestined by the Creator. Readers from the feminist community focus attention on elements of the text which reveal structures of oppression and paths to liberation, either as they affect women specifically or, more commonly, in solidarity with all oppressed people.

Ian MacDonald's book, *Biblical Interpretation and Christian Ethics*, may be read as an anthology of the way in which agents of various theological communities have approached the question of the ethics of interpretation during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>37</sup> Exegetes and theologians have inquired about the ethics that the Bible itself (usually the Christian Bible) advances. The assumption in force in the academic community where such projects were carried out was, of course, that the biblical position or positions on ethics could be described in an objective way, given that rigorous scientific methods were available for studying them. If one undermines the notion of value-neutral description, no access to the biblical witness independent of theory or communitarian interests can ever be established. The reader attempting to specify what the text says will always be doing so against the backdrop of the values and perspectives in force in that community. Fish states the position well when he says:

I now believe that interpretation is the source of texts, facts, authors and intentions. Or to put it another way, the entities that were once seen as competing for the right to constrain interpretation (text, reader, author) are now all seen to be *products* of interpretation. A polemic that was mounted [by Fish] in the name of the reader and against the text has ended in the subsuming of both the text and the reader under the larger category of interpretation.

This is not to say that a community can convincingly place any meaning it wishes on a text, since grammatical rules and other conventions of reading normally provide certain safeguards for anyone looking for even a modest degree of acceptance by an audience. Since recourse to an objective standard is impossible, and given the enclosed nature of all language, what options are left?

For Stanley Fish, a sense of the limits of language and human knowledge lead to the conclusion that a plurality of perspectives exists, each representing a community of interests, or to borrow a phrase from Northrop Frye, a myth of concern.<sup>38</sup> Fish argues in favour of public discourse and debate. Without the ability to specify “truth” in any absolute sense, thinkers must enter the *ekklesia* and make themselves heard, identifying their community and its particular interests. The community, the community’s agent and dialogue partners are transformed by this action: debate is redefined, voices are heard and change may take place. All of this of course assumes that access to public speech and influence is readily available to all comers in a democracy—this notion is, of course, patently ridiculous as we saw not too long ago in Canada when a journalist who criticized the prime minister too severely was sacked by the owners of his newspaper, who happened to be great personal friends of Prime Minister Chrétien. The man was reinstated after the whole affaire hit the media. If this is the treatment afforded journalists, what chance do the marginalized in society have to be heard. Theologians and exegetes can choose to stand in solidarity with the disenfranchised helping them to have their voices heard.

Despite the difficulties strewn upon the path of those at the margin who would enter the *ekklesia*, I see no alternative to them entering the debate, identifying their community and its interests and trying to persuade others of the justness of their cause. Even violence leads nowhere but to more violence as the War on Terror, the American response to attacks on the World Trade Center, has amply illustrated.

## Conclusion

The debate around the ethics of biblical interpretation seems to be shifting from issues of authorial intent and the context of production to the social and political location of readers as a key to understanding how certain readings of the Bible have been and continue to be justified. E. Schüssler Fiorenza has called for a consideration of the effects which a given reading will produce in the context into which it is likely to be received.

Without repeating the numerous positive elements in Schüssler Fiorenza's programme of ethics in biblical interpretation, suffice it to say that she argues convincingly in favour of a position which is both theologically and politically interested. She wishes to stand in solidarity with those many people, especially women, who have been marginalized by the many forms of colonial imperialism.

Despite overwhelming agreement with Schüssler Fiorenza's conclusions, her notions of the "self" and of "legitimate" interpretation must be rejected by the very force of the argument which she puts forward in favour of a rhetorical-emancipatory approach.

In the absence of an unambiguous truth which rallies the support of all those taking part in public debate, rhetoric and persuasion are all that are left. Colonialized others, oppressed others will have to find persuasive ways to convince their dialogue partners to stop the oppression. To attempt to constitute the self as an island of stability in the interpretive act, as Schüssler Fiorenza recommends, is to dismiss the notion that the "self" is a linguistic construct that is subject to the force of rhetorical persuasion in its attempts at self-assertion. This sort of change has as much to do with conversion of the heart as it does with simply cognitive assent to a set of objective principles.

Although I do not have the time to pursue it here, it is obvious that individual conversion will not be enough to change the structures of oppression. If conservatives want to preserve the status quo, and liberals are content to tinker with what they see as a perfectible system, radicals seek no less than a reconceptualization and restructuring of the economic, social and sexual relationships based on domination.

Even groups from different traditions with conflicting values share some ground since complete disagreement remains impossible just as complete unintelligibility is impossible.<sup>39</sup> To the extent that we understand the other, we agree with them, maintains Fish. Any who

would have their voice heard and their interests respected need to gain enough support from those who exercise power over them to do something about it and to do this they must, if dialogue is possible, seek out common ground with their oppressors. Barring this, peaceful resistance of the sort practised by Ghandi and by many of the protestors currently opposed to the policies of globalization of the G-7 may be the only other viable solution. Violence against empire produces nothing but more violence. If truth remains inaccessible and war is to be avoided, the only option is faith in the power of political rhetoric to transform the world.

## Notes

1. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1999). On the level of method, these paradigms clearly interact with one another, but I agree with Schüssler Fiorenza when she says that their theoretical frameworks are nevertheless mutually exclusive.
2. Fernando F. Segovia, "Introduction: 'And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues': Competing Modes of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Criticism," in *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, and Mary Ann Tolbert, (Minneapolis, Augsburg/Fortress, 1995), 1–32.
3. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 39.
4. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 41.
5. As a way of distinguishing them from *diachronic* or historical approaches, text-centred methods are often referred to as *synchronic* methods.
6. This androcentrism often takes the form of patriarchy according to Patte. See his book, Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation*, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1995), 25.
7. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, ix.
8. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 43.
9. For example the word "tea" does not refer *first* to a reddish potable liquid usually drunk hot but rather to the English language where its meaning is established by contrasting it to all the other signifiers in the system.
10. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Except from *Discourse in the Novel*," in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986) (Hereafter, CTSN).

11. Thomas Kuhn, the physicist become philosopher, concluded that even in the pure sciences researchers opting for one theory over another inevitably make subjective choices that depend not only on shared criteria but also on idiosyncratic factors arising from individual biography and personality. What appears at first glance to be an entirely logical and scientific process proves to be shot through with subjective values. See Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) especially the chapter on theory choice and value judgment.

12. That women and other oppressed majorities remained voiceless for much of the history of positivist and fundamentalist exegeses likely has something to do with the fact that white men from affluent countries have not been quick to ask questions of the sort that would require them to share power and influence. See the critique offered by thinkers such as E. Schüssler Fiorenza, M. Bal, R.R. Ruther, J.L. Segundo and L. Boff etc. Other authors which represent this trend are Fernando Segovia, *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, op.cit., and J.L. Segundo's *The Liberation of Theology* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1977), 13–25. As an example of male *mis*-readings of biblical texts, I would recommend Mieke Bal's meta-critique of the work of male exegetes on the David and Bathsheba episode: see *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1987).

13. On the self-reflexive character of language, see especially pages 122–25 of Jacques Derrida's *Différance*, available in translation in CTSN, op.cit.

14. See S.R.F. Pierce, "Rituals and Power," in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. R. Horsley (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity, 1997), 48.

15. R. Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 140.

16. Schüssler Fiorenza, 44.

17. Fernanda Segovia refers to this model as the paradigm of cultural studies. See Fernando F Segovia, "Cultural Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism: Ideology Criticism as a Mode of Discourse," in *Reading from this Place*, 1–17.

18. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 44.

19. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 28.

20. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 28.

21. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 50

22. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 5–6. Schüssler Fiorenza coins new words and uses old ones in most innovative ways, thereby calling the reader's attention again and again to the scars left by misogyny and other forms of oppression on the shape of the English language. Her use of the nouns



“wo/men,” “kyrio-centrism,” and of the adjective “*scientistic*” are but three examples of how she raises the readers’ consciousness in such a sustained way that the experience of reading her work becomes not only an invitation to acquire new information but also an invitation to a critical conversion.

23. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 11. That is, as a service to the *ekklesia*, where *ekklesia* is understood both as a Greek political term denoting the decision-making assembly of full citizens and as the NT term for Church.

24. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 45.

25. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 10.

26. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 1.

27. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 46.

28. Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1989, 29-30.

29. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities*, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 1980, 16. [Hereafter: ITTC]

30. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 43.

31. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 27.

32. Schüssler Fiorenza (*Rhetoric and Ethic*, ix) coins this word from the Greek term for lord, underscoring the idea that domination is not simply a matter of patriarchal, gender-based dualism but of more comprehensive, interlocking, hierarchically ordered structures of domination, evident in a variety of oppressions, such as racism, poverty, heterosexism, and colonialism.

33. See note 27 above.

34. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 162–63, note 20.

35. See E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967), 83.

36. Fish, *ITTC*, 66.

37. J.I.H. McDonald, *Biblical Interpretation and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

38. Northrop Frye, “From The Critical Path,” in CTSN, 253f.

39. Donnelly, Phillip J., *Rhetorical Faith: the Literary Hermeneutics of Stanley Fish* (Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria, 2000), 30–31.