

## An Interview with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza “Critical Reflections on Philosophy and Theology”

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**JPS: The conference in which you are here to participate—“Religion & Postmodernism 4: Transcendence and Beyond”—is for the most part a philosophical one. So, simply put, why are you here?**

ESF: I accepted the invitation because this conference engenders a very important discussion on a very significant topic. I am here because I am concerned that we critically reflect on how such scientific discourses—philosophical and theological discourses—have been constructed traditionally on the basis of the positive exclusion of women, and all people who were subjugated or subordinated, who were not counted as full citizens or as fully human throughout most of Western history. This is the problem I am always concerned with when I accept invitations to conferences where the discourse is set in a disciplinary way. It is especially important when the discourse is about G\*d. The challenge is to get people to think about this rhetorical situation of exclusion in which the tradition of the theological and philosophical disciplines places us. I am always hoping that participants will question the set academic discourse that consciously or not excludes a vast majority of people as philosophical and theological subjects. I need to bring up this question again and again in order to insist on the responsibility

connected to engaging in disciplinary discourses such as this one.

**JPS: How would you say philosophy and religious discourse influence each other?**

ESF: I think as disciplinary discourses both philosophical and theological (or religious studies) discourses share a lot in common: they have been articulated by an elite group of educated (clergy)men and have fulfilled ideological functions of exclusion and kyriarchal legitimation of domination. Philosophical discourses maybe more strongly oriented toward society at large, and theological discourses more strongly to the churches or religious communities, but they both have often been discourses of domination. For instance, if one looks at democracy and political philosophy in antiquity, one will see that the classical political philosophies of Plato and Aristotle have ideologically rationalized the exclusion of the Others. The same is true for Aquinas and the whole theological history; you find theologians as well as philosophers formulating arguments as to why certain people cannot participate fully in a democratic society or in church and religion. A critical feminist analysis as I have developed documents that theology and philosophy have a lot in common because of their common history of ideological legitimization and exclusion. Hence, they both have also a lot of work to do to rectify this common heritage.

**JPS: So, do you see the domains of philosophy and theology—respectively, as you said, society-at-large and religious communities—as being two separate arenas, or are they in some way intertwined? Is one a subset of the other?**

ESF: If one looks at them as scholarly disciplines, then historically speaking, philosophy has been a subset of theology. With the secularization of the university in modernity, this relationship has changed drastically, and has become almost the reverse since, in modernity, philosophy took

over many of the functions that theology had in the pre-modern age. I suggest that in each case this relationship between philosophy and theology needs to be looked at critically, since it has been construed in terms of subordination. In antiquity philosophy and theology were not as much separated. I think it is a traditional Christian and modern disciplinary emphasis that separates and dichotomizes their relationship.

**JPS: In the postmodern situation, is there going to be yet another change?**

ESF: What I realized again at this conference is how strongly Western philosophy is shaped by Christian religious and theological articulations. This is true if one looks back at Hegel, or Kant, and other great philosophical masters. However, I also realized at this meeting that some aspects and certain castings of the philosophical discourse are not as critical as a critical feminist discourse of liberation; in such a critical feminist theological context certain procedures would not be acceptable anymore. For instance, certain philosophical lectures quoted out of context a scripture passage here, or a scripture passage there, in order to bolster their argument. This would no longer be tolerable in a critical theological discourse but seems still to be acceptable—or again to be acceptable—in some postmodern philosophical discourses. Moreover, it was quite an experience for me to realize that philosophical discourse, at least at this conference, seems still to be very heavily Christian. Such an emphasis would for instance not go unchallenged in critical feminist discussions in religion because in such critical feminist discussions one would have to spell out clearly in what kind of discursive framework one operates. Some lectures seem to have taken for granted that we have still a predominantly Christian culture where we can articulate problems within a Christian framework and linguistic universe.

**JPS: Would you say that scripture, as revelation, cannot tell us anything purely affirmative about God or divine reality?**

ESF: This is a Christian theological question which needs to be unpacked. What do you mean by scripture as revelation, what by “purely” affirmative? It is also a philosophical question: do you think that human language can adequately express divine reality, be it purely negative or purely affirmative? Modern biblical studies have raised these questions for 300 years or more but—as I have already pointed out—it seems that postmodern philosophical and theological discourses again fall behind such critical insights. Whatever ideological-critical knowledge critical biblical scholarship has already achieved, in some postmodern reflections it is now being taken back to a pre-critical stage when dealing with scripture—a move which then allows one to recover a kind of Christian dogmatic understanding of revelation that goes back to the Book of Revelation. Such an uncritical understanding of revelation, however, is not only a step backwards with respect to modern biblical criticism insofar as it does not allow for the ideological-critical task. It also falls back behind pre-modernity insofar as it does not recognize the traditional notion of multiple senses of Scripture and multiple ways of interpretation. At the same time, it remains within the positivist scientific horizon of modernity insofar as it understands texts as windows to the world, accurately reflecting divine reality, or sees texts as factual transcripts of divine revelation and claims to be able to identify their single true meaning. From a critical feminist perspective such an understanding is very questionable.

Because of the work of critical biblical scholarship, we have learned that the bible is written in culturally and historically conditioned human language that is not only plurivocal but also grammatically androcentric (that means male-centered language, which functions as generic language). Feminists have pointed to the androcentric character of biblical languages

and African-Americans, Latina/o/s and scholars from non-Western cultures have even further complicated this critical insight by elaborating that androcentric biblical languages and translations are white, Western, and Euro-centric. Feminists and scholars from non-androcentric cultural language contexts have pointed out that androcentric language has an enormous influence over how we speak about G\*d and how we understand revelation and the divine. Big debates have ensued with conservative theologians who insist that G\*d is 'He,' male, all-powerful, king, etc.

To come back to your question, if they are right—and they certainly have the text on their side—that G\*d is male, Lord, King, and Father because it is revealed in Scripture, then only elite males, but not wo/men and non-elite men, are made in the image of G\*d. If you insist on such an understanding of revelation, then you also must claim that it is divinely ordained that the majority of people are excluded from representing the divine, or that revelation is against democracy because Scripture teaches that G\*d is King and the earth is under His kingly rule. This belief has for centuries engendered the theological legitimizations of exclusion and domination. So that is why a postmodern step behind critical biblical studies and into piety is very worrisome to me.

**JPS: Is there room somewhere for an experience of the divine that can step outside these androcentric, kyriocentric structures?**

ESF: What I tried to suggest in my paper is that the divine can be experienced today not by stepping outside kyriarchal structures—we can't do this because we are deeply implicated in them—but by trying to change them. The divine can be glimpsed in the struggles for justice and transformation, struggles that are also reflected in Scripture understood as the prototype of Christian life and community. So wherever people are engaged in these struggles, there the divine presence, the *Shekinah*, can be glimpsed.

This view is somewhat similar to what Richard Kearney tried to say today using Etty Hillesum as an example. But then he seemed not quite to follow through with it. I also would not want to appeal only to altruism, so that it is always the faceless poor who are objects of our search for the divine. Rather, it is in the struggle of everyone for integrity, for justice, for food and survival, for changing structures of domination, for transformation, it is in such everyday struggles that we can glimpse the divine. If we locate the divine in these struggles at least we can defend against using G\*d language for legitimating oppressive and unjust structures of domination and dehumanization.

Melissa Raphael has written a book that argues something similar to what Kearney tried to say, but her argument is quite different insofar as she is critical of the kind of holocaust theology which says that G\*d was absent in the camps; this emphasis is directed against Elie Wiesel and others. She points out that if one reads the literature of the wo/men in the camps, to which holocaust theology and its equivalent philosophical discourses have not paid much attention, then one can uncover the conviction that the divine is present wherever people are acting *with* humanity and stand up against the inhumanity of the camps. G\*d is present wherever people act in solidarity, in the intersubjectivity of helping each other to survive. Here I want to point to another difference with a lot of the talk about love at this symposium, which again in my view is very strongly determined by the malestream Christian theology of "othering" and not understood in terms of intersubjectivity. It is in helping the poor, the quintessential others, and not in struggling together for justice that the divine is made present. This otherness talk presupposes that there is one subject—traditionally a white, propertied, educated, powerful man—who is superior and whose altruistic actions make the divine present. It overlooks that self-sacrificing love has been inculcated in the subordinates in the interest of domination, of serving Him.

**JPS: Would you like to comment on the place or political ramifications of the conference at all?**

ESF: I hesitate to do so, but I think it is important. Although I appreciate having been invited, enjoyed the presentations, and savored the rich array of ideas, I am somewhat disheartened. I had hoped there would be a possibility to discuss the central critical question as to how much our discourses about G\*d have the socio-political function of legitimating the status quo. This question is even more pressing at a time when Bush and the New Right openly use Christian biblical G\*d talk to legitimate war, the curtailment of democratic freedoms, and the reduction of social services. I tried to raise this question in my talk, but the conference on the whole seems not to have been concerned with it. During the lectures I asked myself: what in our present context and socio-political situation is the ideological function of a discourse that is highly abstract? I had hoped that there would be some critical discussion of this central question.

Or to take another concern: The valorization of the discourse about the Other is making waves in postmodern academic circles at the exact moment when the “others” of elite, educated, white, Western male theologians and philosophers have reclaimed their authority to be speaking subjects and to shape academic theological, and philosophical discourses differently. So why is there this fascination with “the Other” rather than a fascination with what these so-called others have to say? Why do conferences like this still not really wrestle with what “the others” have to teach?

I was disturbed that this conference had no speakers from non-European traditions or scholars of color as presenters. Three papers by white Euro-American wo/men were invited, but the feminist papers were “framed” by bundling them together and by setting the stage, as well as following up on them, with the hegemonic standard elite male discourse. The stage for the conference

discourse was set in the morning, and then there were the three presentations by white wo/men, which were not interspersed with the other papers so that a dialogue or debate with them could have ensued. The focus was also not on feminist theoretical questions, but it seems to have been expected that we would speak the dominant language and address in our papers issues raised by the dominant postmodern discourse. Such a segregating and encircling structure does not allow for raising the theoretical issues of the so-called others—in this case white wo/men feminists—or for engaging their proposals? How can we be heard, and how can our ideas receive critical attention, if the overall structure allows only for the possibility of incorporating them into what has already been pre-defined as the theoretical framework, the acceptable discourse and the subject matter of the conference?

If that sounds too critical, I do not mean it that way, because the conference was a great intellectual feast. But I need to engage in a critical analysis, because you asked about the political ramifications of conferences like this. I am not so much critical of this particular conference as I am concerned how we can bring about systemic institutional change. For what I am saying about this conference is true for most other academic meetings. I am convinced that as long as our discourses don’t change, we will be doomed to re-enact the history of exclusion and silencing. As a wo/man I could not have become a theologian or a philosopher in the past, because I couldn’t go to university or study theology and philosophy. The same is true for instance for my colleagues Cornell West, Fernando Segovia, or Kwok Pui Lan, and many other scholars from the margins. We are supposed to have “made it” having gone through all the hoops, excelled in all the exams, and having become as full professors a part of the academy. Yet we still do not define academic discourse but remain marginal.

Or to give another example: one still has to do doctoral exams at Harvard—and I don’t know how it is at Villanova—on the Euro-centric male traditions of the modern

West, be it in biblical studies, philosophy, systematic theology, or ethics. Although there are now tons of literature—philosophical, political, sociological, and theological feminist and postcolonial literatures—that question the great masters of the modern West and their limited or biased vision, doctoral students are not required to read this literature because it is “marked” as feminist, African-American, Asian, postcolonial or liberationist. True, feminist and other students from the margins are now allowed to study this body of new knowledge, but only after first having mastered the “tradition” which naturally is not “marked” as “malestream” or “Euro-centric.” So feminist, womanist, Asian, African, or indigenous students still have to do “double” or “triple” intellectual work, just as their ancestors had the double and triple burden of manual labor. They need first to learn the language of the dominant discourse without being allowed to critically question and properly “mark” it as “Euro-centric malestream.” Only then can they bring in, on the edges or fringes, what feminists or African-Americans or postcolonial scholars have to say. But the malestream students who are seen as the real future scholars need only to “master” the Western malestream tradition which is not properly “marked” as such. They don’t have to know anything about the feminist or the African-American or the Asian critique of this Western tradition and still are regarded as “great” scholars.

In short, these are some of the political ramifications of our scholarly discourse on G\*d. I hope I have made it clear why it is very important that conferences, doctoral programs, lectures, bibliographies, and so on look critically at how we continue to institutionalize and to re-inscribe the dominant, elite, malestream, Euro-centric discourse of “othering” and exclusion. I thank you for engaging in this interview. ■