EXPANDING THE VIEW

Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Future of Liberation Theology

Edited by
Marc H. Ellis & Otto Maduro

WIPF & STOCK · Eugene, Oregon

Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W 8th Ave, Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

Expanding the View
Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Future of Liberation Theology
By Ellis, Marc H. and Maduro, Otto

ISBN 13: 978-1-61097-039-6
Publication date 10/25/2010
Previously published by Orbis Books, 1990

11

The Politics of Otherness: Biblical Interpretation as a Critical Praxis for Liberation

ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA

Gustavo Gutiérrez, whose life and work we celebrate in these pages, has placed in the center of theological reflection the poor, the "others," the nonpersons who are absent from history. He has insisted over and against Euro-American "progressive" theology that the point of departure for Latin American liberation theology is not the question of the modern *nonbeliever* but the struggle of the *nonperson*[1] for justice and freedom. However, Latin American liberation theology has not sufficiently attended to the fact that the majority of the poor in the world are women and children dependent on women. This realization requires not just an incorporation of "women's questions" into the framework of liberation theology[2] but calls for a different analysis and theoretical framework.

Since Simone de Beauvoir, feminist theory also has focused on the "other." Therefore feminist theory and theology predominantly has understood patriarchy as the domination of men over women.[3] Yet feminist theory has not sufficiently attended to the fact that most women in the world are not just the "others" of white Euro-American men but are the "others" of "the others." This insight asks for a transformation in the self-understanding of feminist analysis and struggle that must address not only sexism but also racism, classism, and colonialism as structures constituting women's oppression.[4] I have therefore proposed that we understand patriarchy as a differentiated political system of graduated domination and subordination that found its classic Western legitimization in the philosophy of otherness.

The Canadian writer Margaret Atwood has given us a political novel that displays the discursive practices constituting the politics of otherness. Atwood's narrative articulates the interstructuring of sexism, racism, class

differences, and colonialism on the one hand and the availability of the Bible as language and legitimization for totalitarian ends on the other. *The Handmaid's Tale* decodes the history of a future totalitarian society whose structures and language are modeled after the Bible.

The speaking subject of the novel is a woman whose real name and identity is not known. She is a Handmaid called Offred who lives in the Republic of Gilead. Gilead has replaced the United States of America and is ruled by a group espousing an ideology similar to that of the Moral Majority in the pre-Gileadean period in the late twentieth century. After the president and congress of the U.S.A. have been massacred, the regime of this modern biblical republic is established. Women lose their right to property and employment, the black population, the children of Ham, are resettled in segregated national homelands; Jews are repatriated through the Jewish boat-plans. In this biblical republic, reading and writing are outlawed, the news media censured and controlled, and everyone is required to spy on everyone.

The stratifications of Gileadean society are marked by dress and color developed by the secret Think Tank of the Sons of Jacob. White women, for example, are classified according to their functions: the wives of the Commanders of the Faithful are blue-clad and their daughters white-veiled. Those who do household work are called Marthas and have to wear a dull green. The wives of poor men, the Econowives, wear red-, blue-, or green-striped dresses, because they have to fulfill all functions divided among different women in the elite households. Unwomen are those women who have been shipped to the Colonies, because they are childless, infertile, older women, nuns, lesbians, or other insurrectionary elements.

Handmaids are chosen because of their reproductive capabilities. Their dress is red topped by a white headdress. The Handmaid's role in the *Ceremony* and her whole rationale of being is patterned after that of Bilhah, the maid of Rachel in Genesis 30:1–3. Handmaids and Wives are under the control of Aunts who as female overseers are to control women in the most cost-effective way.

I have chosen Atwood's narrative to indicate the political context of U.S. scholarly discourse on the Bible as well as of the discourses of liberation theologies. For theological discourses that remain unconscious of their rhetorical functions and abstracted from their political contexts are in danger of "squandering the word." Atwood's futuristic projection of a totalitarian state re-creating classic-biblical patriarchy in modern technocratic terms underlines that liberation theologies cannot afford to engage in a purely apologetic reading of the Bible or to relegate a critical biblical interpretation to "bourgeois" scholarship addressing the question of the nonbeliever. Rather, a biblical interpretation for liberation has to engage in a critical analysis that can lay open the "politics of otherness" inscribed in Christian scriptures. By making feminist theoretical discourse central to my hermeneutical explorations, I invite not only biblical scholarship but also

malestream[5] liberation theologies to attend to the conversation of the "others" on the patriarchal politics of "otherness."

ISSUES IN FEMINIST BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Because the Bible is the foundational document for the Republic of Gilead, it is reserved for the elite and only to be read by men in power:

> The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read. Our heads turn towards him, we are expectant, here comes our bedtime story. . . . He has something we don't have, he has the word. How we squandered it, once.[6]

Atwood's narrator not only discloses the dehumanizing horrors of the totalitarian patriarchal state but also alludes to the potentially "incendiary" character of the Bible if it were given into the hands of "the subordinate others," the nonpersons of Gilead. In the awareness that reading can be subversive, elite men have kept the key to biblical interpretation in their own hands. It is mostly elite men who still read their Revised Standard Versions to us in liturgical celebrations and academic lectures. In the past thirty years women have entered theological schools in significant numbers and have begun to produce biblical scholarship. Yet replacing men with women and other nonpersons in pulpits, universities, the Supreme Court, or Buckingham Palace does not guarantee that the word read to us will no longer be a bedtime story legitimating situations of oppression.

Although still a marginalized minority in academy, church and synagogue, contemporary feminist theological scholarship and studies in religion have begun to claim the theological word and religious symbol-systems of biblical religions in the interest of women. However, the more feminist articulations are in circulation, the more it becomes pressing to ask how we can prevent our readings functioning like the Aunts of Atwood's Gileadean Republic who manipulate and adjust women's intellectual and spiritual needs in order to survive by serving the patriarchal system. For women's readings of androcentric texts and patriarchal traditions are always in danger of recuperating the "Commander's readings to us," of using the "biblical bedtime-story" for quieting women's and other nonpersons' anger and rebellion. Finally to own "the word" could mean in the end to own a word that legitimates the totalitarian regime of Gilead.

How, then, can a feminist biblical hermeneutics situate its readings of the Bible in such a way that they do not support the totalizing discourses of Gilead but empower women and other nonpersons in struggle for justice and freedom? In order to minimize the possibility of such a co-optation in the interests of Western patriarchy, I suggest that feminist biblical interpretation must reconceptualize its act of critical reading as a moment in the global praxis for liberation. In order to do so, it needs to decenter the authority of the androcentric biblical text, to take control of its own readings, and to deconstruct the politics of otherness inscribed in the text before it can positively retrieve biblical language and visions of liberation.[7]

Insofar as feminist biblical interpretation has been motivated by an apologetic retrieval of biblical authority, it has focused on biblical texts about women, on male injunctions for woman, on the biblical teaching on womanhood, on the great women of the Bible, or on feminine biblical language and symbols. By using "woman" or "the feminine" as a hermeneutical key, such gynecentric biblical interpretations, however, are in danger of recuperating the totalizing discourse of Western gender dualism.

Moreover, in its academic forms feminist scholarship has not only adopted diverse historical, social, anthropological, psychological, or literary critical methods of interpretation, but also the academic posture of "detached" inquiry. For the sake of scientific objectivity, such biblical scholarship often masks its own political location and forecloses theological or ethical evaluation. Although it focuses on "women" or the "feminine," it cannot but reproduce the whitemale[8] androcentric discourse.

Finally, feminist biblical interpretation seems to remain caught up in the same "logic of identity." Feminist critics have elucidated the indebtedness of modern political theories to the classic patriarchal discourses of Plato and Aristotle, and especially criticized the theories of Rousseau and Hegel, which understand the civic public expressing the "impartial and universal point of view of normative reason," on the one hand, in opposition to the private realm, which encompasses the family as the domain of women, on the other. *Ratio* as the "logic of identity" "consists in an unrelenting urge to think things together, in a unity," to formulate "an essence that brings concrete particulars into unity."[9]

To achieve theological unity, feminist hermeneutics has attempted to reduce the historical particularity and pluriformity of biblical writings to a feminist "canon within the canon" or a liberating "organizing principle" as the normative center of scripture. Feminist biblical and liberation theological scholarship has inherited this search for an interpretative key or authoritative "canon within the canon" from historico-theological exegesis that has recognized the contradictory pluriformity of scripture.

Although liberationist biblical discourses have rejected the value-neutral, objective, apolitical rhetorics of academic biblical scholarship, they have not avoided its "drive to unity and essence." Just as male liberation theologians stress God's liberating act in history, single out the Exodus as "canon within the canon," and focus on a "new reading of the bible," or stress the liberating "biblical recollection and regathering of God's salvific deeds," so also feminist liberation theologians have sought to identify a liberating theme, tradition, text, or principle as the hermeneutical key to the Bible as an androcentric-patriarchal book in order to reclaim the

authority of scripture. In this search for a "canon within the canon" or the "unity" of scripture, biblical theological interpretation engages in the universalist "logic of identity," which eliminates the irreducible particularity of historical texts and the theological differences among biblical writers and contemporary interpreters.

A debated question in feminist liberation hermeneutics remains: Must such a feminist critical hermeneutical key be derived from or at least be correlated with the Bible so that scripture remains the normative foundation of feminist biblical faith and community? Or—as I have argued—must it be continually articulated and called into question in the contemporary liberation struggle?[10] The Bible is to be understood as formative root-model rather than to be obeyed as a normative archetype of Christian faith and community. Whereas a feminist apologetics locates authority formally if not always materially in the Bible, a critical feminist reading derives its theological authority from women's experience of God's liberating presence in today's struggle to end patriarchal relationships of domination. Such divine presence, for instance, is at work today in the emerging Christian recognition that the systemic oppressive patriarchal contextualizations of our readings—sexism, racism, economic exploitation, and military colonialism—are structural sin.

My own work, therefore, has sought to shift the focus of feminist liberation discourse on the Bible away not only from the discourse on "women in the Bible" to the feminist reconstruction of Christian origins,[11] but also from the drive to construct a unifying biblical canon and universalist principle to a discussion of the process of biblical interpretation and evaluation that could display and assess the oppressive as well as liberating functions of particular biblical texts in women's lives and struggles. Concern with biblical positivity, normativity, and authority is in danger of too quickly foreclosing such a critical analysis and feminist evaluation of particular biblical texts and traditions. It neglects the Bible and its interpretation as the site of competing discursive practices.

A critical feminist theological hermeneutics of liberation positions itself at the intersection of three theological discursive practices—historical and literary biblical criticism, liberation theologies, and feminist critical theory—practices that question the Western totalizing "logic of identity." However, this positioning can only be appreciated when the interrelation of all three critical discourses is not seen as correlative but as mutually corrective interacting in the matrix of a feminist commitment and struggle for overcoming the patriarchal politics of otherness.

THE PATRIARCHAL POLITICS OF OTHERNESS

The Euro-American "classic" form of the politics of otherness is rooted in the practices of the andro-social Greek *polis*, its politico-philosophical subtext is democracy, and its social formation is patriarchy, the governing

dominance of elite propertied male heads of households. Freeborn propertied women, poor women and men, slave-women and -men, as well as barbarians, women and men, were excluded from the democratic government of the city-state. This exclusion required ideological justifications as to why only freeborn propertied Greek male heads of households could be full citizens if, as the Sophists maintained, all are equal by nature.

The articulation of human-animal/male-female dualism, of androcentrism fostering the marginalization of Greek women and the exclusion of barbarians, as well as the articulation of the "natural" inferiority of freeborn women and of slave-women and -men, of nonpersons, are ideological constructs of difference formulated by Plato and Aristotle. They continue to define relations of dominance and submission in Western culture and philosophical discourse today.[12] They were reproduced not only in early Christian writings and malestream theology but also in the modern democratic discourses of political philosophy, in the Enlightenment construction of the *Man of Reason*,[13] as well as in colonialist articulations of racism.[14] This political and philosophical rhetoric of otherness masks the oppressive relations of domination and exclusion in systemic patriarchy. However, it must be recognized that it does not simply elaborate the *generic person* but the Sovereign-Father or, in black idiom, the Boss-Man, as the universal subject. Its totalizing discourse of male-female dualism masks the complex structuring of patriarchal domination in Western societies and religions.

Insofar as feminist theory has focused on woman as the "other" of man, it has tended to identify patriarchy with sexism or gender-dualism. It has not focused on the complex interstructuring of patriarchal domination in women's lives. Although one of the earliest manifestos of the women's liberation movement in the U.S.A. categorically states: no woman is free until and unless every woman is free, feminist analyses and strategies generally have not taken their political measure, standpoint, and strategy for change with the women on the totem pole of patriarchal oppression, with the "others of the others." Instead Euro-American feminist discourse has tended to take its measure from an idealized version of the Man of Reason, the sovereign subject of history, culture, and religion. Its oppositional discourse has been in danger of reproducing the cultural-symbolic construction of masculine-feminine polarity and heterosexual antagonism that is constitutive of the patriarchal "politics of otherness."

Women's studies in all academic disciplines have greatly enriched our knowledge *about women* but have not been able to undo the marginalizing dynamics of the androcentric text and its institutions. In order to dislodge the androcentrism of Western metaphysical discourse, feminist theories or theologies of femininity, whether they have as god-fathers Jung, Tillich, Lacan, or Derrida, have valorized woman—body, sexuality, maternity, nature—as feminine archetype, essence, or divinity. Yet in this attempt to construct an oppositional discourse on woman or on gender differences, feminist theory has kept in circulation the discourse of classic Western

philosophy and theology on gender-dualism or gender-polarity that understands man as the subject of history, culture, and religion, and woman as the other.

This universalist Euro-American feminist discourse on "woman as the other of man" is more and more interrupted by the diverse resistant discourses of an emerging global feminist movement coming-into-consciousness. In an anthology of the international women's movement entitled *Sisterhood Is Global*, Robin Morgan has compiled statistics and collected reports on the worldwide struggle of women for liberation.[15] The global character of this movement is displayed in its very particular and concrete political struggles that are not to be universalized, for the configurations of patriarchy are different in different historico-cultural formations. The voices of this movement insist that feminism requires a political commitment not only to the struggle against sexism but also to the struggles against racism, classism, colonialism and militarism as structures of women's exploitation and oppression. Feminism's self-understanding and analysis must therefore shift from a preoccupation with gender-dualism in order to attend to the interstructuring of sex, race, class, culture, and religion in systems of domination.[16] This insistence of black, Hispanic, Jewish, Asian, African, or Palestinian women asks for a new analysis of the patriarchal "politics of otherness." For, only when patriarchy is understood not as a universal transcultural binary structure but as a historical political system of interlocking dominations, can it be changed.

The rhetoric of the feminist movement that is emerging around the globe, therefore, is directed not only against male supremacy but also against the totalizing discourse of Western universalist feminism. Insofar as this rhetoric elaborates racial, political, cultural, national, ideological, sexual, religious, age, class, and other systemic differences, and discriminations among women, it challenges the essentialist definition of woman and female culture as "the other" of man and male culture. However, because of its commitment to the political liberation struggle, its insistence on the perspectival character and historical particularity of knowledge does not degenerate into an endless play of deconstruction and negative reaction nor lead to a determinism and nihilism that denies women's subjectivity and historical agency.

Unraveling the unitary otherness of woman from man in Western philosophico-political discourse, the emerging discourses of global feminism insist on the specific historical cultural context and subjectivity as well as the plurality of women. By deconstructing the ideological construct "woman," such global feminist discourses also elucidate how the identity of women of subordinated races, classes, cultures, or religions is constructed as "other" of the "other," as negative foil for the feminine identity of the white Lady. For instance, with her analysis of lynching, Ida B. Wells has elucidated the patriarchal manipulation of race and gender in the interest of political terrorism, economic oppression, and conventual sexual exploitation.[17] The variety of feminist discourses emerging around the globe thus enjoins middle-class feminists in the First World not to reduplicate the whitemale universalistic discourse of gender dualism and at the same time cautions Third World middle-class feminists not to reproduce the colonial discourse on woman and femininity.

The differences and often irreconcilable contradictions among women and within women are always concretely embedded in power relationships. To collapse them into a unitary identity, homogeneous image or totalizing discourse of universalist feminism—be it Euro-American or Afro-American, lesbian or straight, activist or academic, or any other feminism—would mean to reproduce the androcentric discourses of universalist abstract humanism on woman or to reinscribe differences and contradictions among women as patriarchal divisions and oppositions.[18]

However, if just as race, nationality, or social status, so also gender is a social-cultural-historical construct and not a feminine substance or universal female essence, then the question arises: How can women transcend our being socially constructed as *women* and at the same time become historical subjects as *women* struggling against patriarchal domination? If subjectivity is seen as totally determined by gender, one ends up with feminine essentialism; if it is understood as genderless, then one reverts to the generic human subject of liberalism for whom gender, class, or race are irrelevant.

This theoretical either-or posed by cultural and poststructuralist feminism[19] can be negotiated—I would suggest—if we attend to the patriarchal politics of otherness in Western culture. The totalizing ideologies of sexism, racism, classism, or colonialism that make the patriarchal oppression and exploitation of "the others" of elite white men appear to be "natural" and "common sense," produce at the same time contradictions and fissures in the social psychological identity construction of the nonperson. Far from being irrelevant to human subjectivity, the experience and articulation of gender, race, class, cultural, or religious alienation and exploitation motivate the nonperson to struggle for human rights, dignity, freedom, and equality:

> What is emerging in feminist writings is, instead [of the posthumanist Lacanian white male subject], the concept of a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language; an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures. An identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy: "I think," writes Elly Bulkin, "of all the women [of mixed heritage] who were told to choose between or among identities, insist on selecting all."[20]

In short, in order to sustain a global feminist movement for ending patriarchal oppression, all feminist discourses must engage at one and at the same time in a continuing critical deconstruction of the politics of otherness, in reclaiming and reconstructing our particular experiences, histories, and identities, as well as in sustaining a permanent reflection on our common differences. The subordinated others must reject the rhetoric of self-lessness and articulate the "option for the oppressed" as an *option for ourselves*. Self-identity *as women* cannot be assumed but must be chosen in the commitment to the struggle for ending patriarchal structures of oppression. Moreover, the "politics of otherness" can be displaced only when identity is no longer articulated as unitary universal identity and established either by exclusion and domination of the others or by the others' self-negation and subordination.

The hermeneutical insights and theological challenges of the heterogeneous voices emerging from the global movements of liberation must, therefore, become central to a differentiated theological discourse on biblical interpretation and evaluation. A historical and global contextualization of biblical interpretation has to deconstruct the totalizing biblical rhetoric of Gilead and to generate new possibilities for the communicative construction of self and world. Christian identity grounded by the reading of the Bible must in ever-new readings be deconstructed and reconstructed in terms of a global praxis for liberation. Insofar as the Bible still is used in Western public discourse for reinforcing an Euro-American identity formation based on the exclusion and subordination or vilification of "the others," it becomes important to deconstruct the "politics of otherness" inscribed in its pages.

THE POLITICS OF OTHERNESS INSCRIBED IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

If feminist biblical interpretation should not continue to reproduce the patriarchal politics of otherness, it has to reconceive its task as critical consciousness-raising or conscientization that can explore the functions and patriarchal contextualizations of biblical discourses, and replace them with a diversified public biblical rhetoric[21] and feminist frameworks of reference.

In the following cursory discussion of the fourth Gospel[22] I will indicate the complex process of such a critical feminist reading understood as a strategy and process of conscientization. Such a focus on the contemporary reading process does not replace historical text-oriented readings but presupposes an evaluative analysis of their textual interpretations and of their reconstructions of particular historical contexts. My focus on certain Johannine problems and my theological emphases indicate my subject position as a white German Christian feminist biblical scholar and theologian living in the U.S.A. Such a particular reading invites other readings that begin from a different subject position in the liberation struggle.

Whereas historical critical exegesis attends to the text in its historical contexts, but not to its ideological formation and textual "politics of otherness," rhetorical analyses and reader response criticism seek to make conscious how the text "works" in the complex process of reading as a cultural or theological praxis. By elucidating how gender determines the reading process feminist reader-response criticism underlines the importance of the reader's particular socio-cultural location.

Every reader brings cultural (grammatical principles, social customs, cultural attitudes, historical experiences) and personal contexts (personal experience, social location, education, beliefs, and commitments) to the act of reading. "Contextualization" is often assumed but not articulated; it is often masked in order to produce an "unbiased" objective reading. Such contextual knowledge operates as "a kind of grid that obscures certain meanings and brings others to the foreground."[23] However, whereas feminist biblical scholarship has become skilled in detecting the androcentric contextualizations in malestream biblical interpretation, it has not paid sufficient attention to its own inoculation with gender stereotypes, racism, sexism, or theological confessionalism.

In recent years New Testament scholarship has elaborated the social world and symbolic universe of the fourth Gospel. It has highlighted the leadership role of women in the Johannine community, its sectarianism and anti-Jewish polemics, as well as its dualistic worldview and religious exclusivism. In all three instances of inscribed Otherness, a certain tension or contradiction in the text has been elaborated.

First, the fourth Gospel presents the Christian community as a circle of friends, an egalitarian community of the children of God, that does not exclude the leadership of women, but appeals to the apostolic women disciples of Jesus for its legitimization of this practice. Nevertheless, its symbolic language and universe is not only androcentric but patriarchal because it stresses that the Father is revealed only through the Son and at the same time co-opts the language of sophia-theology and masculinizes it.

Secondly, although the language of the fourth Gospel is very "Jewish," the term "the Jews" is predominantly a negative term. It does not include Jesus and his followers as Jews but distances them from the Jews. The expression can also be used in a neutral sense, in order to mark that not all Jews have rejected Jesus but many have believed, or even as a positive theological affirmation in the dialogue with the Samaritan woman: "Salvation comes from the Jews" (4:22). However, anti-Jewish language is predominant in the Gospel. It bespeaks not just fear of expulsion but aggressive sectarian affirmation.

Thirdly, this anti-Jewish polemics is generated by a cosmological dualism of light and darkness, spirit and flesh, life and death, above and below, "the world" and the believer, God and satan. One could say that the whole narrative of the Gospel is woven within a framework of dualism. However, the cosmological dualism of the fourth Gospel is not absolute: God has

sent the Son not for the condemnation but for the salvation of the "world."

This dualistic framework engenders not only anti-Judaism but also christological absolutism that breeds religious exclusivism, although the Gospel's intent is universal—namely, to present Jesus in an idiom that reflects the profound interests of the Greco-Roman world in religious syncretism and with religious symbols that have the widest appeal. In light of the Gospel's dualistic framework and its religious exclusivism, it is remarkable that its dualism does not include the pair male and female. Nevertheless, the Gospel exhibits a patriarchal identity formation characterized by the politics of otherness.

In the last twenty years historical critical scholarship has moved away from a gnostic or antignostic interpretation of the fourth Gospel's *Sitz im Leben* toward an understanding of its anti-Jewish polemic as an expression of the socio-religious alienation of the Johannine community because of synagogue expulsion.[24] Although Jewish scholars have disputed that such an official synagogue ban had existed at the time of the Gospel's redaction, Christian scholars maintain that explicit references to the expulsion from the synagogue of those who believe in Christ testify to the strained relationship between the Jewish leadership and the emergent Jewish-Christian movement. However, scholars do not reflect critically that such a reconstruction of the historical subtext of the Gospel reinforces the anti-Jewish Christian identity formation today.

Just as historical-critical exegesis so also liberation theological interpretations have explained away the Johannine "politics of Otherness" if they have it addressed as a theological problem at all. José Miranda, for instance, seeks to "undo" the traditional spiritualistic interpretation of the Gospel by stressing that belief in Jesus Christ (John 20:31) means that the kingdom has arrived in Jesus of Nazareth, the messianic kingdom that "consists in justice being done to all the poor of the earth."[25] Luise Schottroff in turn rejects the term "anti-Judaism" for the interpretation of the fourth Gospel by pointing to the oppression under which Jews and the emerging Christian community lived. "To accuse the Jewish leadership as it is portrayed in John's Gospel of opportunism vis-à-vis the Romans, or to accuse the Christians . . . of anti-Judaism, is to apply labels which are inappropriate to the historical situation."[26]

Stress on the prophetic principle or the prophetic activity of Jesus also makes it possible to explain the anti-Jewish statements of the Gospel historically as a remembrance of Jesus' "prophetic renunciation of a corrupt religious establishment" or as prophetic call to conversion and renewal. A feminist apologist reading in turn has proposed to dissolve the tensions in the text by claiming that the Gospel contains its own critical principle, when it says that salvation comes from the Jews, that believers are children [not sons] of God, and that "God loves the world." Such liberation theological attempts of characterizing the Johannine text positively as a liberating text

is not able to unravel and critically reject the patriarchal Christian identity formation inscribed in it.

Literary critical studies on the other hand have shown that the gospel narrative integrates these apparent tensions and contradictions of the Gospel into a realistic unitary story. Since the masculine figure of the Son as the revealer from above is the narrative axis of the Gospel, the stories about women, for example, function to harness the affection of the historical women readers for the masculine revealer of the Father. Further, the "Jewish" language of the Gospel in its positive or neutral use serves to reinforce the conflict of the revealer Son with "the Jews" whose Father is the devil, a conflict which climaxes in the passion narrative. Finally, the Gospel's relative cosmological dualism aims at a radical theologico-ethical dualism. Those who do not believe—the world, the Jews, and their leaders—will continue in darkness (15:18–16:4).

According to Culpepper, the Gospel's characterization, plot, comments, misunderstanding, irony, and symbolism "all work together in leading the reader to accept the evangelist's understanding of Jesus as the divine revealer."[27] As a reader-response critic, Culpepper does not shirk the question as to the function and impact of the Gospel's rhetoric today when he points out that the reading experience of the original reader was quite different from that of the contemporary reader, for the world of the text is quite different from our own. Insofar as modern readers distinguish between empirical and fictional narratives, between history and literature, they assume that they must read the gospels as "literally true."

Culpepper thus shares the concern of modern "progressive" theology when he insists that the real question and issue for contemporary readers is whether John's story can be true if it is not history. In response he suggests, if contemporary readers no longer would read the text as a window to the life of Jesus but with openness to the ways it calls "readers to interact with it, with life, and with their own world," they will again be able to read the Gospel as the original audience read it. The rhetorical effect of the Gospel is then profound:

> The incentive the narrative offers for accepting its world as the true understanding of the "real" world is enormous. It places the reader's world under the providence of God, gives the reader an identity with a past and secure future, and promises the presence of God's Spirit with the believer, forgiveness for sin, and an experience of salvation which includes assurance of life beyond the grave. The gospel offers contemporary readers a refuge from all the unreliable narrators of modern life and literature.[28]

Culpepper's summary appropriately underlines that the fourth Gospel narrative engenders Christian identity formation today, but he does not attend to the fact that such Christian identity is articulated in terms of

androcentric dualism, religious exclusivism, and anti-Judaism. Moreover, he does not problematize the political effects of the Gospel's narrative that according to him offers "a refuge from all unreliable narrators" of contemporary society and life. Assuming that this characterization of "what the narrative offers" is adequate, the whole narrative of the fourth Gospel and not only elements in it must be problematized and assessed if we want to unravel its anti-Jewish Christian identity formation, which is shot through with racism. Although in classical and New Testament times "darkness" was not associated with race, and therefore the original readers would not have interpreted the dualistic matrix of the Gospel in racist terms, a long history of racist interpretation provides the contextualization for racist readings today.

Whereas historical and literary criticism focus attention on the text and its historical context but does not explore and critically assess the textual inscription of the patriarchal "politics of otherness," a critical feminist hermeneutic for liberation seeks to make conscious the complex process of reading as a cultural and theological praxis. Feminist reader-response criticism has shown that reading and thinking in an androcentric symbol system produces reader *immasculation*. It requires identification with men and therefore intensifies women's feminine socialization and internalization of cultural values that are self-alienating and often misogynist.

The androcentric text of the fourth Gospel derives its seductive "power" from its generic aspirations that play on women's authentic desires and liberative aspirations in order to harness them for the process of *immasculation*. The Gospel's christological focus and attention to "the love of the Father for the Son" reinforces theologically the linguistic and cultural process of *immasculation* and establishes Christian identity as male identity in a cultural masculine-feminine contextualization. Focusing on the figure of Jesus, the Son of the Father, when reading the Gospel, "doubles" women's oppression. Not only is our experience not articulated, but we also suffer "the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male—to be universal—. . . is to be *not female*."[29] Conversely, the androcentric scriptural text communicates that to be female is to be *not* divine.

However, such a conceptualization of the first moment of reading in feminist-reader response criticism is in danger of recuperating the totalizing discourse of gender dualism when it insists that one read "as a man" or "as a woman." Reading as a woman does not necessarily mean to activate solely the ideological context of gender and femininity. Women readers can read from a feminist, black, Asian, or any number of "contexts." The identity of the reader is not a fixed gender position maintained by the exclusion of other contexts. The reading subject is not unitary but as the agent of her reading can activate different subject locations and positions. In the process

of reading, identity is always assumed and then discarded, it is decentered and reassumed.

This means that we have to learn in a series of readings from different contextualizations to unravel the full dynamics of the Christian identity formation produced by the Johannine text and elaborated in its subsequent interpretations. A feminist biblical interpretation for liberation that understands its task as ongoing conscientization engages in an ongoing process of reading that deconstructs the politics of otherness inscribed in the biblical text without getting lost in the endless play of textual deconstruction and undecidability. Different starting points in the reading process will result in competing readings of the Gospel. Nevertheless, all such feminist readings must be assessed in terms of the liberation of the women on the bottom of the patriarchal pyramid of domination.

A feminist analysis of the politics of otherness and commitment to the liberation struggle of all nonpersons also will avoid the liberal pitfall that declares race, gender, class, or cultural differences insignificant for the reading process, because in essence we are all human and the same. Empirical studies have documented that so-called generic masculine language ("man"; pronoun "he") is read differently by men and by women. This is possible because of the ambiguity of generic masculine language. In the absence of any clear contextual markers, a statement such as "all men are created equal" can be understood as generic-inclusive or as masculine-exclusive.

Insofar as a feminist analysis elucidates the function of androcentric language in different contexts, it challenges the presumption that such language functions as "generic" language in patriarchal contexts. Inasmuch as women's reading tends to deactivate masculine/feminine gender contextualization in favor of an abstract degenderized reading, such an analysis makes a conscious discrimination between patriarchal and generic-inclusive language contexts possible. Moreover, reading experiments have provided evidence that men report a higher incidence of male imagery when completing neutral sentences with generic pronouns. Women in turn associate virtually no images with generic masculine pronouns in such cases probably because we are required to suppress the literal meaning in order to be able to understand ourselves as included in the values of freedom, self-determination, and human rights.[30] Therefore, Christian women have read and still read biblical texts without attending to the fact of Jesus' maleness or the masculine images of Father-Son. As Virginia Fabella insists: "In the Asian Women's Consultation in Manila, the fact that Jesus was male was not an issue, for he was never seen as having used his maleness to oppress or dominate women."[31]

Catherine Belsey elaborates this contradictory ideological position of women reading unmarked generic male texts: "We (women readers) participate both in the liberal-humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination, and rationality, and at the same time in the specifically feminine

discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy, and irrational intuition."[32] However, I submit, only if this ideological position becomes conscious in a process of feminist conscientization are women readers able to become readers resisting the *immasculation* of the androcentric, racist, classist, or colonialist text. If this contradiction is not brought into consciousness, it cannot be exploited for change but leads to further self-alienation.

For change to take place, women and other nonpersons must concretely and explicitly reject an abstract reading. For instance in reading the fourth Gospel we should not too quickly resort to abstract God language such as God is love or God is light, without deconstructing the structural dynamics of the Gospel's Father-Son language and replacing it with images of God gleaned from the concrete contextualizations of women's life. Or, if as liberation theologians we insist that God is on the side of the poor, we need to spell out theologically what it actually means that God is on the side of poor women and children dependent on women.

However, we can appropriate as our very own only those "human" values and "Christian" utopias that can be reasoned out in a feminist process of conscientization as liberating not only for Euro-American white elite women but also for those women who suffer from multiple oppressions. Only after having deconstructed the politics of otherness, which constitutes the dualistic frame and theological identity formation of the fourth Gospel, will we be able to reclaim its vision of life and love in the context of the global movements for liberation. Christian identity that is grounded by the reading of the fourth Gospel's inscribed patriarchal politics of otherness must in ever-new readings be deconstructed and reconstructed in terms of a global praxis for the liberation not only of women but of all other nonpersons.

NOTES

1. For this expression, see for instance G. Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983), p. 93. See also C. Cadorette, *From the Heart of the People. The Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Oak Park, Ill.: Meyer-Stone, 1988).

2. See the interviews of leading male Latin American liberation theologians by E. Tamez, *Against Machismo* (Oak Park, Ill.: Meyer-Stone, 1987); see also Schüssler Fiorenza/Carr, eds., *Women, Work, and Poverty* (*Concilium*, 194; Edinburgh: Clark, 1987).

3. See the overview and discussion by Sylvia Walby, *Patriarchy At Work. Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), and the definition of the term by G. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

4. See especially B. Hooks, *Feminist Theory. From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

5. I owe this expression to the feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith.

6. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Ballantine, 1987), pp. 112–13.

7. For the fuller development of a model for a critical feminist interpretation for liberation, see my book *Bread Not Stone. The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984).

8. For this expression, see K. G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (AAR Academy Series, 60; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

9. I. Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public: Some Implications of Feminist Critiques of Moral and Political Theory," in Benhabib and Cornell, eds., *Feminism as Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 61.

10. For this discussion, see the essays in L. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

11. See especially the methodological chapters in *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Early Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

12. See also Page duBois, *Centaurs and Amazons. Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979).

13. See G. Lloyd, *The Man of Reason. "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

14. See, e.g., the essays in Jan Mohamed and Lloyd eds., *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, which have appeared as special issues of *Cultural Critique*, 6 (1987) and 7 (1987).

15. R. Morgan, *Sisterhood Is Global. The International Women's Movement Anthology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1984). See also V. Fabella and M. Amba Oduyoye, eds., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988).

16. See, e.g., the dialogue between G.I. Joseph and J. Lewis, *Common Differences. Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

17. This is pointed out by H. V. Carby, " 'On the Threshold of Woman's Era': Lynching, Empire and Sexuality," in H. L. Gates, Jr., ed., *"Race," Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 301–28.

18. See E. W. Said, "An Ideology of Difference," in Gates, *"Race," Writing and Difference*, pp. 38–58.

19. See also N. Hartsock, "Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories," *Cultural Critique*, 7 (1987) 187–206; L. Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs*, 13 (1988) 405–36.

20. T. de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986), p. 9.

21. See my "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *JBL*, 107 (1988) 3–17.

22. For an overview see R. Kysar, "The Gospel of John in Recent Research," *RSR*, 9 (1983) 314-323; see also D. Moody Smith, *John* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986, 2nd ed.) and the commentary by R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John*, 3 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1968–82).

23. S. S. Lanser, "(Feminist) Criticism in the Garden: Inferring Genesis 2–3," *Semeia*, 41 (1988) 77.

24. See the very influential work of L. J. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979, 2nd ed.).

25. José Miranda, *Being and the Messiah. The Message of St. John* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1977), p. 88.

26. L. Schottroff, "Antijudaism in the New Testament," in Schüssler Fiorenza/Tracy, eds., *The Holocaust as Interruption* (*Concilium*, 175; Edinburgh: Clark, 1984), p. 59.

27. R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 226.

28. Ibid., p. 235.

29. P. P. Schweikart, "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," in Flynn and Schweikart, eds., *Gender and Reading. Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 42.

30. M. Crawford and R. Chaffin, "The Reader's Construction of Meaning: Cognitive Research on Gender and Comprehension," in *Gender and Reading*, pp. 14–16.

31. Virginia Fabella, "A Common Methodology for Diverse Christologies," in *With Passion and Compassion*, p. 116.

32. C. Belsey, "Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text," in Newton and Rosenfelt, eds., *Feminist Criticism and Social Change. Sex, Class, and Race in Literature and Culture* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 50.