

## LIBERATING THE WORD: SOME THOUGHTS ON FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS

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### Abstract

*The need for a feminist hermeneutic arises out of the imperative to find a new interpretive framework for critical feminist consciousness. If a community's experience and practice of faith is a source of theology, such experience and practice should be reflected on and interpreted inclusively. A critical feminist hermeneutic seeks to redress the interpretive imbalance so common in hermeneutic scholarship.*

*This article first gives attention to the hermeneutics of Letty Russell, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as examples of contemporary feminist theologians who work within the biblical paradigm. Thereafter, certain critical principles for feminist hermeneutics and hermeneutical methodology are discussed. In conclusion, a hermeneutical approach based on principles of equality and mutuality in the search for justice in the South African context, is spelt out.*

### 1. Introduction

According to José Severino Croatto (1987:1) the term 'hermeneutics' designates three particular aspects of interpretation.

First and foremost, the 'privileged locus' of the hermeneutic function is the interpretation of *texts* ... Secondly, it is a matter of common knowledge that all interpreters condition their reading of a text by a kind of *pre-understanding* arising from their own life context. Thirdly - and this is not always well defined, ... the interpreter *enlarges* the *meaning* of the text being interpreted.

Sallie McFague (1982:55) says that the hermeneutical process is a natural one for '(w)e are hermeneutical creatures; to interpret is the distinctive way of being in the world'.

To the same extent that our interpretations are based on our experience of conscious reality, the language in which we choose to express meaning is also derived from our consciousness. However, it is equally valid to say that meaning is produced by language (Eagleton 1983:60). There is a dialectical tension between the position that holds that language expresses consciousness and the belief that we can only have meanings and experiences in the first instance because we have a language in which to have them. The link between consciousness and language is based on the belief that there is a unity between *res* and *verba* in our expression of reality. A hermeneutical concept of language does not deny the reality external to language. It simply holds that the reality in which we live, insofar as it is relevant, is a language reality. We live in a world in which language is already articulated and interpreted. The exploring of our lifeworld requires a further use of language and of interpretation - it needs to be creative and to seek new links between the particular use of language and universal meanings.

Theological hermeneutics today have been influenced by the debate in philosophical hermeneutics. In practical theology the work of, *inter alia*, Heidegger, Gadamer and Habermas has played a role in the search for a usable hermeneutic. Feminist theology emphasizes the importance of the 'sociology of knowledge' in the interpretative act. The presuppositions of the interpreter are always present and the relationship between her and the text is dialogical.

The text does not have only one possible immutable interpretation, but each hermeneutical act is fresh; a fusion between the speaker, the hearer and the text itself (McFague 1982:57). The aspects of hermeneutics mentioned by Croatto and the emphasis on existential subjectivity all contribute to the understanding of a critical feminist hermeneutic which will now be dealt with.

## 2. Critical feminist hermeneutics

The need for a feminist hermeneutic arises quite simply out of the need to find a new interpretative framework for critical feminist consciousness. If a community's experience and practice of faith is a source of theology (Villa-Vicencio 1981:3), such experience and practice should be reflected on and interpreted inclusively. As this has not been the case hitherto, a critical feminist hermeneutic seeks to redress the interpretative imbalance so common in hermeneutical scholarship. As a Christian feminist liberation theologian, I choose to work within the biblical paradigm. This will be the focus of the ensuing discussion of hermeneutics.

Herman Waetjen (1987), a New Testament scholar, comments that Christian socialism, liberation theology, feminist hermeneutics and to some extent the utilization of the social sciences in the interpretation of the Bible, have exposed the bankruptcy of Western biblical scholarship, its ideological captivity and the unethical character of its supposed neutrality.

Women of faith have to deal with the source documents of their particular traditions. Many obstacles, questions and problems arise in this process. Feminist hermeneutics has to deal with the fact that the Bible is an androcentric collection of books, which has been produced, compiled, edited and exegeted by men. The search for female answers to female questions in the quest for understanding one's faith as a woman, needs a critical feminist hermeneutic.

## 2.1 Some exponents of feminist hermeneutics

Attention will now be given to the hermeneutics of Letty Russell, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as contemporary feminist theologians who work within the biblical paradigm.

Letty Russell, Professor of the Practice of Theology at Yale Divinity School, is unequivocal about biblical basis of her theology, the patriarchal nature of biblical texts notwithstanding. The Bible, she writes (Russell 1985:138):

... continues to be a liberating word as I hear it together with others and struggle to live out its story. For me the Bible is 'scripture', or sacred writing, because it functions as 'script', or prompting for life.

Russell's interpretative key, arrived at through her own life story and in particular many years of pastoral experience among the poor in East Harlem, is the witness of scripture to God's promise of bringing about the restoration of the creation in the Christ event. She looks to the horizon of expectation of the Bible as the source of her own expectation of justice and liberation. In this way the Bible becomes not only a prototype but also a 'memory of the future', opening up new possibilities as we perceive glimpses of God's partnership at work in both the biblical story and our own lives.

In God's action of New Creation, women and men are already set free to develop new ways of relating to one another, to the world, and to God. This freedom of living in the 'already, but not yet' of the New Creation is key to those who are struggling with structures of oppression and with biblical texts that are used to justify and even to bless these structures ... (Russell 1985:139).

Waetjen (1987), commenting on Russell's hermeneutic, finds that this eschatological reality empowers those engaged in overthrowing all forms of oppression and dehumanization. The paradigm shift to which the Bible bears witness includes the liberation of the Bible and its interpretation from patriarchy and sexism. Russell sees this paradigm shift as one which moves away from authority as domination (that is, authority over community) to a feminist liberation paradigm of authority in community. A view of authority as partnership interprets reality as a circle of interdependence.

In the perspective of authority in community, the interpretative key is no longer one external or one internal biblical key but rather a configu-

ration of sources of faith that seek to enrich the way God might be present with us (Russell 1985:146).

Rosemary Radford Ruether, a classical scholar and Professor and Applied Theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, has a different hermeneutical key to Russell's in that it does not emerge from the biblical horizon of the expectation of justice and liberation. For her, women's experience of oppression is the starting point. She rightly points out (Ruether 1983:12) that what have been called the objective sources of theology, namely scripture and tradition, are themselves codified human experience:

Human experience is the starting point and the ending point of the hermeneutical circle (Ruether 1983:12).

She continues (1983:13):

The uniqueness of feminist theology lies not in its use of the criterion of experience, but rather in its use of *women's* experience, which has been almost entirely shut out of theological reflection in the past. The use of women's experience in feminist theology, therefore, explodes as a critical force, exposing classical theology, including its codified traditions, as based on *male* experience rather than on universal human experience.

Ruether is at pains to point out that all women do not have the same experience and that there are many variations in the consciousness of women shaped by their different contexts and life experiences. The use of women's experience as a hermeneutical key or theory of interpretation means (1985a:114):

... precisely that experience which arises when women become critically aware of these falsifying and alienating experiences imposed upon them as women by a male-dominated culture. Women's experience, in this sense, is itself a grace event, an infusion of liberation empowerment from beyond the patriarchal and cultural context, which allows them to critique and stand out against these androcentric interpretations of who and what they are.

The exclusion of women's experience both from within scripture and from its subsequent interpretation by the church, has enabled the sanctioning of oppressive practices in regard to women. According to Ruether (1985a:115), the critical principle of feminist theology is 'the affirmation of and promotion of the full humanity of women'. Thus '(w)hatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of woman is, therefore, to be appraised as not redemptive'. Conversely, (1985a:115):

What does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, does reflect true relation to the divine, is the true nature of things, is the authentic message of redemption and the mission of the redemptive community.

Ruether (1983:19) comments that this principle is hardly new and rests on the theological concept that all of humanity is made in the image of God. It is, however, a central theme in feminist liberation theology.

Scripture can thus be appropriated as a source of liberation paradigms. This only occurs, however, if the correlation between the above critical feminist principle and the critical principle by which biblical thought critiques itself, is understood (Ruether 1985a:117):

The critical biblical principle is that of the prophetic-messianic tradition.

This tradition is not simply a canon within a canon but a

... critical perspective and process through which the biblical tradition constantly reevaluates, in new contexts, what is truly the liberating Word of God, over against both the sinful deformations of contemporary society and also the limitations of past biblical traditions ... (Ruether 1985a:117).

This choice is based on an analysis of biblical tradition which finds a tension between two very different social stances. These she describes as follows (1989:172):

'Sacred canopy theology' assumes that the dominant social order is founded by God. Its social relationships are given by God as the order of creation. The king-ruler was seen as the divinely appointed representative of God on earth. To obey the king-ruler was to obey God. The social hierarchy of man over women, ruling class over subject classes, the election of a privileged nation to rule other nations as God's people - all this is seen as 'natural', divinely given, and expressions of God's will.

The theology of prophetic critique, by contrast, locates God and the spokespersons for God on the side of those victimized or despised by the social and political elites. The word of God comes as a critique of these elites, calling them to reform their ways in order to be faithful to divine justice ...

The Christian Bible, despite its androcentrism, remains the source for feminist theology. Ruether is, however, open to the use of other texts, ancient and modern, which can serve

... as a spring-board for constructing what must become a new expression of theology from the perspective of the full personhood of women (1985b:ix).<sup>1</sup>

No feminist theologian has devoted more time, skill and painstaking scholarship to the hermeneutical question than Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, biblical

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1. See Ruether (1985b) for such a collection of readings. They are not to be seen as a substitute canon, but as a broadening of the textual base of women's experience.

scholar and Professor of New Testament at Harvard Divinity School. She recognizes that

... the Bible is source for women's religious power as well as for their religious oppression throughout the history of Christianity to the present (1984a:35).

She warns women against disowning androcentric biblical texts, because:

Regardless of how androcentric texts may erase women from historiography, they do not prove the actual absence of women from the center of patriarchal history and biblical revelation ... Androcentric texts and linguistic reality constructions must not be mistaken as trustworthy evidence of human history, culture, and religion. The text *may* be the message, but the message *is not* coterminous with human reality and history. A feminist critical hermeneutics must therefore move from androcentric texts to their social-historical contexts ... Such a feminist reconstitution of the world requires a feminist hermeneutics that shares in the critical methods and impulses of historical scholarship on the one hand and in the theological goals of liberating theologies on the other hand (Fiorenza 1984a:29).

Commenting on Fiorenza's method, Waetjen (1987) observes that she appropriates a sociological-theological model of social interaction and religious transformation for the reconstruction of the early Christian movement in order, in her own words,

... to break the silence of the text and to derive meaning from androcentric historiography and theology (Fiorenza 1984a:41).

Unlike Ruether, Fiorenza does not see the goal of feminist hermeneutics as 'women's full humanity', since humanity as we know it is male-defined. She finds her hermeneutical centre of feminist biblical interpretation in the concept of 'women-church',

... the movement of self-identified women and women-identified men in biblical religion (1985:126).<sup>2</sup>

This concept makes room for

... women's religious self-affirmation, power, and liberation from all patriarchal alienation, marginalization, and oppression (1985:126).

In various writings,<sup>3</sup> Fiorenza has set out her critical feminist interpretative model in great detail, insisting that such a model must be both feminist-critical and historical-concrete. The following are key elements of such a model: suspicion rather than acceptance of biblical authority, critical evaluation

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2. Fiorenza (1985:127) explains that when she uses the term 'women-church' as a Christian, it is not exclusionary but a political-oppositional term to patriarchy.

3. See Fiorenza (1984a) and (1984b).

rather than correlation, interpretation through proclamation, remembrance and historical reconstruction and interpretation through celebration.

To summarize: Fiorenza finds that it is not some special canon or divine truth which offers resources for liberation from patriarchy and for models of transformation of the patriarchal church in the biblical texts. It is on the contrary the experience of women themselves struggling for liberation. She suggests that the Bible be understood as

... a structuring prototype of women-church rather than as a definitive archetype; as an open-ended paradigm that sets experiences in motion and invites transformations (1985:125).

Such an approach opens the way for the exploration of models and traditions of liberating praxis as well as patriarchal repression. It is based on an approach which is both empirical-analytical and historical-hermeneutical.

There are similarities between the approaches of Russell and Ruether. Their more theological interpretation of the Bible differs from Fiorenza's historical-critical reconstruction. Their reflection tends to take place within the larger context of liberation theology in which God's liberating act in Jesus Christ is foundational. Such an approach finds a wide range of biblical texts which are appropriate, from the exodus and the jubilee, to the Word made Flesh and Paul's writings on freedom.

Katherine Sakenfeld locates the strength of Russell's and Ruether's approach in its ability to look beyond the reactive side of feminism as anti-patriarchalism to the constructive emphasis on *shalom* and wholeness in the deepest sense (1985:60):

Because this *shalom* encompasses all people, both women and men, in all conditions of life (race, ethnicity, class), this option puts feminist use of the biblical materials concretely in touch with the concerns and quests of other oppressed groups.

The limitation of this approach lies in the fact that most people's encounter with the Christian message is general and vague 'by comparison to [their] encounter with specific texts' (Sakenfeld 1985:61). As this approach considers specific texts, namely those dealing with the liberation theme, for many the link between these texts and the condition of women may still be experienced as tenuous.

Fiorenza discusses Russell's and Ruether's approaches under the heading of 'the Neo-Orthodox Model of Feminist Interpretation' (1984a:14-21). As liberation theology seeks to enlist the Bible on the side of the poor, Fiorenza finds it in danger of aligning itself too easily with the neo-orthodox doctrinal model and thus failing to explore sufficiently the function of the Bible itself in the oppression of both the poor and of women. Furthermore, by distinguishing between the content of biblical tradition (Christ) and its form or packaging (androcentric and patriarchal language and imagery), it is possible to separate form and content and in so doing to develop a feminist hermeneutic

which acknowledges patriarchal language without conceding that the content is necessarily patriarchal. Another limitation, according to Fiorenza, lies in the claim that there exists some eternal or timeless truth in scripture (the prophetic-messianic theme) while actual biblical writing falls short of this truth. Quite clearly the critical prophetic tradition does not explicitly apply to the oppression of women either in the history of Israel or in Christianity and it is marred by androcentric images and sexist metaphors. <sup>4</sup>

In reply to Fiorenza's criticism, one may ask whether form and content can in fact be separated quite so easily. To place Ruether's theology in the camp of neo-orthodoxy would also, in my view, be far-fetched, as she stands squarely in the liberation tradition. While this tradition admittedly does not address the cause of women directly, it is one which can with justification be claimed by all who are oppressed and marginalized.

Fiorenza's critical hermeneutic can be commended for

... facing the pervasive androcentrism of the biblical material head-on, without excuse or evasion (Sakenfeld 1985:63).

By focusing on the reconstructed ministry of Jesus and of women in the early church, Fiorenza offers all women the opportunity of identifying with biblical women in both their oppression and their exercise of freedom. Fiorenza criticizes neo-orthodox hermeneutics, as an attempt, in the words of Peter Berger, 'to absorb the full impact of the relativizing perspective but nevertheless to posit an "Archimedean point" in a sphere immune to relativization' (1984a:15). <sup>5</sup> This is a perceptive insight. It also raises the question of the extent to which the concept of 'women-church' is in itself an 'Archimedean point'.

### 3. Critical principles for feminist hermeneutics

Developing a critical feminist hermeneutic raises, in the first instance, the question as to the meaning of biblical witness as a whole. Does the Bible witness to what is life-giving and liberating for both women and men? Does it enable humanity to make choices in regard to its deepest needs that are good, liberating and just for the whole human community? Seeking answers to these questions immediately raises the thorny problem of the authority of scripture.

In the first place, my point of departure is that the Bible's authority and its meaning are vested in the fact that it makes sense of human experience in our contexts in the light of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Scripture, which affirms the values of the reign of God for all humanity, and therefore also for women, is viewed as authoritative and ethically redemptive. These values are tested and affirmed in the life and teachings of Jesus.

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4. See T Drorah Setel, 'The prophets and Pornography: Female sexual imagery in Hosea', in Russell (1985), pp 86-95.

5. See Berger (1967:183).



Secondly, a critical feminist hermeneutic which is in line with the recent view on hermeneutical theory influenced by movements such as the sociology of knowledge, depth psychology and post-structuralism, <sup>6</sup> accepts that the interpreter's own biases shape the interpretation of the text.

My commitment is to feminism as a critique of existing oppressive cultural structures and patriarchal ideologies which distort all facets of our existence. This commitment finds expression within the Christian tradition, in which the Bible plays its role as the source document of the Christian faith. The ethical demands of my feminist perspective impel me to risk discovering that both my tradition <sup>7</sup> and my source book have oppressive aspects. Yet I maintain my Christian stance, while being critical of these very traditions and attitudes, because it is my faith-conviction that the person and teachings of Jesus offer me a means of shaping my identity and a life view that is whole, healing, loving and just.

There is no one feminist perspective, as feminist views represent a rich variety of contexts and experiences and therefore of interpretations. When seeking to establish principles for a critical feminist hermeneutic, I shall endeavour to draw on those central convictions which are shared by most feminists and which emanate from feminist anthropology.

Thus the underlying principle for a critical feminist hermeneutic is that women are fully human and are to be valued as such. This principle has two closely related principles: firstly, the principle of equality (women and men are fully equal and should be treated as such) and secondly, the principle of mutuality (humans are viewed as embodied subjects, essentially related and essentially free) (Farley 1985:45). <sup>8</sup> Women asserting the principle of equality are alert to the fact that inequalities flourish despite such slogans as 'equal treatment for equals'. Striving for meaningful equality takes cognizance of class, race, sex, age or any other divisive category which impairs people's freedom to choose and to act. There is no real equality possible for women if they claim it only for themselves. Women claiming the principle of mutuality know from experience that the view of humanity which sees individuals in isolation is inadequate. Individualism is stressed at the cost of the common good of people in relation to one another.

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6. According to Eagleton (1983:132), 'deconstruction' as a method of post-structuralism, can be defined as the critical operation by which 'binary oppositions' (for instance men being the founding principle and woman being the excluded opposite of this) are 'partly undermined, or by which they can be shown partly to undermine each other in the process of textual meaning'.

7. For insight into the problems surrounding the concept 'tradition', see Eagleton's critique of Gadamer's use of 'tradition' (1983:71-73). In my text 'tradition' is used as a general descriptive-historical term simply denoting beliefs and customs that are handed down.

8. Equality does not mean that women want to be equal in the sense of sharing the privileged status of white middle-class men or men as 'head of the family'. It means that all people, women and men, are to be equal. For real equality, structural change is a prerequisite.

Feminist consciousness stands as a corrective to a liberal philosophy that fails to understand human solidarity and the importance and need for mutuality. But it also stands as a corrective to theories of sociality that fail to incorporate a requirement for basic human equality ... (Farley 1985:47).

These claims are viewed as truth claims and as such contain a profound appeal which gives rise to a moral imperative.

They function, then, as interpretative principles but also as normative ethical principles in a feminist theory of justice (Farley 1985:45).

Quite obviously feminists are not the first or the only persons to have argued for the equality and mutuality of humanity. Yet feminist arguments cannot simply be equated with those already articulated. Although feminists have learnt from the traditions of modern liberal philosophers and social theorists, they know that no other tradition or movement has adequately addressed the unique historical oppression of women. Margaret Farley (1985:45) comments that

This is not just a failure of extension. Rather, it represents a fundamental need for deeper analysis of the contexts of human life, concepts of the human self, categories of human relation. It makes clear the urgency for taking account of the experience of all groups of human persons.

This leads to the second important principle for feminist hermeneutics: women's experience as a way to understanding. Theologies which pay attention to the problems associated with racism, sexism and classism as well as the relationship between political ideologies and practices, have been enriched by a normative appeal to the self-articulated concrete social experience of the victimized group. The emphasis on the collective and social character of these subjective experiences has been socialized and politicized with the helping hand of critical theory (Westhelle 1986:194).

A feminist hermeneutic, like all hermeneutics, is grounded in experience, and more particularly in women's experience of oppression.

Thus, the disjunctive, anomalous experience of women in an androcentric culture where they must both literally and symbolically deviate from the male norm is the bedrock on which feminism and feminist hermeneutic is built (Tolbert 1982:120).

It is essential to acknowledge that experience itself is interpreted and filtered through our cultural matrix, which in turn is formed by the race, class, time and histories of our lives. There is no universal experience for all people or even for all women. Yet, while accepting the particularity of experience as a hermeneutical category, we must acknowledge the universal fact of discrimination against and oppression of women. It is the admission of this dialectic that cautions us. To rescue women's experience from devaluation in the hands of patriarchy and to revalue it in terms of Western bourgeois

society (West 1983:72), is a trap into which feminists can no longer afford to fall.

According to Mary Ann Tolbert (1982:120), feminist hermeneutics is, therefore, profoundly paradoxical:

... one must struggle against God as enemy assisted by God as helper, or one must defeat the Bible as patriarchal authority by using the Bible as liberator.

Although this is a tension which is difficult to maintain, it appears to be the only honest course open to Christian feminists who want to work out of the biblical paradigm.

The feminist emphasis on lived experience can be criticized on the ground that the affirmation and celebration of women's experience as important for women and our social history, in fact reinforces and confirms the very gender dualisms against which we have protested. This criticism is valid in terms of certain types of feminist theory which claim that woman's experience and spirituality are different from that of men because of an ontic distinction between femaleness and maleness.<sup>9</sup> In my view evidence for such claims is insufficient and it appears to me that the historical-cultural differences in male and female socialization provide adequate ground to justify the concept 'woman's experience'. I would agree with Beverly Harrison (1985:31) that in analyzing women's situations it is extremely difficult not to perpetuate gender dualism. In her words:

We are attempting to find language that affirms the reality of our being, our experience, our stories, in ways that avoid reinforcing the power dynamics already in the history of the world created and construed by patriarchy. Even so, finding our way beyond discourse that reinforces the dualistic social construction created by patriarchal power relations is no easy matter.

In summary, a critical feminist hermeneutic cannot jettison the universal by absolutizing one social structure or one particular experience of oppression. While acknowledging the validity of all human experience, it draws on women's concrete experience of oppression as valid praxis to read the source documents of faith. The principles of equality and mutuality are based on the ethical imperative for a praxis of justice. A critical feminist hermeneutic strives to be open-ended and as such is always provisional, a stance which involves taking hermeneutical risks in order to probe more and more deeply into the meaning of the text for our lives.

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9. See the work of Mary Daly (1973, 1978 & 1985) and Penelope Washbourn (1982).

### 3.2 Hermeneutical methodology

Reflection on hermeneutical praxis is a process known as hermeneutical methodology. Certain steps or rules are followed which aim at understanding the developing significance of the text for our lived praxis.

Juan Luis Segundo calls his hermeneutical methodology the hermeneutic circle.

Here is a preliminary definition of the hermeneutic circle: it is the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by continuing change in our present-day reality, both individual and societal. 'Hermeneutic' means 'having to do with interpretation'. And circular nature of this interpretation stems from the fact that each new reality obliges us to interpret the word of God afresh, to change reality accordingly, and then to go back and interpret the word of God again, and so on (Segundo 1976:8).

Segundo details four points in his hermeneutic circle. Firstly, our way of experiencing reality leads to ideological suspicion; the reality of oppression and human need is the starting point. Secondly, this ideological suspicion is applied to the whole ideological superstructure and to theology in particular; this involves the process of social analysis. Thirdly, a new way of experiencing theological reality leads to new exegetical suspicion about prevailing hermeneutical models of scripture; the power of the Spirit 'has broken into consciousness, specifically the consciousness of those identified with the oppressed and committed to change and improve the world' (Wells 1981:29). Lastly, a new hermeneutic for interpreting scripture emerges; the theme of liberation as a basic refrain throughout scripture is discovered.

Fiorenza comments that Segundo, rather than viewing faith as *depositum fidei*, sees it as an educational process throughout biblical and Christian history. Segundo further does not understand ideology as 'false consciousness', but rather as an historical-societal expression. To him liberation and meaning are found in the process of learning rather than in the content of scripture. According to Fiorenza he fails to consider that both scripture and this learning process can be distorted. His model does not allow for a critical evaluation of biblical 'ideologies' as 'false consciousness' (Fiorenza 1984b:51).

Fiorenza proceeds to contrast the interpretative model of Elizabeth Cady Stanton with that of Segundo's. Cady Stanton maintained that the Bible is not a 'neutral' book, but rather a political weapon used against women struggling for liberation, and that this abuse was possible because the Bible bears the imprint of men who never saw or talked to God (Fiorenza 1984b:54). Here Cady Stanton and Segundo would part company; Cady Stanton cannot confirm the God who is on the side of the oppressed, because her experience of the use of the Bible as a political weapon against women tells her otherwise.

Fiorenza's own hermeneutical methodology contains four structural elements. Firstly, she proposes a hermeneutics of suspicion<sup>10</sup> which does not

... presuppose the feminist authority and truth of the Bible, but takes as its starting point the assumption that biblical texts and their interpretations are androcentric and serve patriarchal functions (1984b:15).

This enables women to engage in critical scholarship in search of lost traditions, clearing away 'androcentric mistranslations, patriarchal interpretations, and one-sided reconstruction' and questioning and challenging contemporary biblical interpretation as well as androcentric language (1984b:17).

The second step is a hermeneutics of proclamation which

... assesses the Bible's theological significance and power for the contemporary community of faith (1984b:18).

This step combines an historical-critical view of texts and traditions in terms of their oppressive patriarchal biases with a political-critical feminist assessment of how these texts interact with contemporary culture. Thus culture, bolstered by biblical texts, which has socialized women into accepting submissive roles, can be subjected to critical examination.

To balance this process, the next step, a critical hermeneutics of remembrance,

... recovers *all* biblical traditions through a historical-critical reconstruction of biblical history from a feminist perspective (1984b:19).

Rather than discard oppressive biblical texts, Fiorenza uses them to reconstruct the sufferings and struggles of our forefathers through the power that comes from dangerous memories. Thus women claim their theology and their history from early Christian times, as the community of women of faith.

Fiorenza's last step in her hermeneutical method takes place because the

... historical reconstructions of women's biblical history need to be supplemented by a *hermeneutics of creative actualization* (1984b:20).

Women can now enter into the biblical story with the help of historical imagination and creative acts of celebration, and can retell the stories from a feminist perspective which lays emphasis on human worth and equality. Here the role of liturgy, particularly of drama, song, dance and new images, is important as an expression of both the struggle and the freedom sought from oppressive structures.

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10. A 'critical' hermeneutic would indicate a generally critical approach consonant with any academic exercise. A hermeneutic of 'suspicion', however, encounters scripture with the conviction that the world is not the way it should be and expects this encounter to lead to transformative activity, see Brown (1978:80-85).

Hermeneutics, based on principles of equality and mutuality in the search for justice, are well informed by Fiorenza's four elements. Building on these four steps as the foundation for a critical feminist hermeneutical procedure, the following modifications are suggested in a series of spiralling steps: <sup>11</sup>

\* the hermeneutical process commences with conscientization, that is, with the growing awareness that all is not well, or with an 'ah ha' experience of new realization, which serves to move one from alienation to the search for affirmation, and as such, is ongoing:

\* the next step is prompted by a need for change followed by a commitment to this newly articulated awareness;

\* this leads to a hermeneutic of suspicion based on new perceptions that change is necessary because the traditions, texts, symbols and practices of Christianity are androcentric and patriarchal;

\* now a hermeneutics of proclamation takes place as both scripture and context are analyzed and assessed in terms of women's struggle for liberation;

\* remembrance, in the form of *Phantasie* and reclamation follows in which

... 'subversive memory' not only keeps alive the suffering and hopes of women in the biblical past, but also allows for a universal solidarity among women of the past, present, and future (Fiorenza 1984b:19); <sup>12</sup>

\* the hermeneutical spiral now enters a time of struggle and risk as memories, traditions and texts dialogue with the present context;

\* from this struggle emerges the actualizing of women's engagement with the biblical story of liberation, in the form of new moments, literary creativity and celebration:

\* this new-found actualization becomes the touchstone for all liberation praxis, a hermeneutic which will speak to all women, indeed to all oppressed people. Liberative praxis achieved through struggle and risk contains an auto-critical moment in which self-critique prompts the search for new understanding and is effective in engendering a new reality, which serves to further raise consciousness so that the spiralling process may commence again.

In conclusion, it has been stated that the underlying principle for feminist hermeneutics is that women are fully human and are to be valued as such and that this encompasses the principles of equality and mutuality based on a

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11. I am indebted to Carter Heywood and the doctoral seminar class at the Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, for discussions on hermeneutics which informed the steps outlined here. Fiorenza's four steps, outlined above, remain at the core of this spiral.

12. The use of the concept *Phantasie* is derived from Dorothee Sölle (1970:10). The word in German has a more positive value than 'phantasy' in English, as it incorporates dimensions of imagination, inspiration, inventiveness, flexibility, freedom and creativity. Sölle defines it as 'the free play of creative imagination as it affects perception and productivity: it is closer to Shelley's definition: "The creative faculty to imagine that which we know".'

search for justice. The theological norm which informs these principles is Jesus Christ's injunction

You must love your neighbour as yourself (Mk 12:31).

This injunction is seen as laying the foundation for equality and mutuality based on justice, because love is the praxis of right relation and love is justice.

Justice is the moral act of love (Heyward 1982:18).

#### 4. Conclusion

Feminist hermeneutics embraces a variety of methodologies and disciplines. Christian feminist theologians, knowing that biblical interpretations that reinforce patriarchal domination need to be challenged, have sought to do so in two areas of research: inclusive language and inclusive interpretation. According to Russell (1985:13) these areas have one thing in common:

They are carried forward by cooperating groups of women and men who see their work not only as a scholarly enterprise but also as a collective effort to bring about change in the thoughts, values and actions of religious groups ...

This raises questions about biblical interpretation in this country. The scarcity of feminist biblical scholarship and the resultant male hegemony of biblical interpretation, contribute to pervasive androcentric interpretations of our scriptures. Male scholars here are challenged to take note of the views of certain of their colleagues in North America. In a recent round table discussion entitled 'The influence of feminist theory on my theological work', Francis Schüssler Fiorenza<sup>13</sup> (1991:97) observes:

Although feminist theory and hermeneutical theory coincide in their criticism of theological appeals to experience as unmediated, feminist theology also offers a critique of hermeneutical theory that is equally important for theology. It checks any attempt to understand the task of theology primarily as a hermeneutical task and to define this task as the retrieval of the meaning and significance of the religious classic. The contribution of feminist theology to hermeneutical discussions affects the relationship between hermeneutical retrieval and the critique of ideology.

At the same round table discussion at which a number of male theologians respond to Fiorenza's article, David Tracy (1991:124) affirms that the realities of sexism have been exposed in

... every major symbol of the tradition by feminist hermeneutics of suspicion.

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13. He is the Charles Chauncey Stillman Professor of Roman Catholic Theological Studies at Harvard Divinity School.

He continues to point out that

... a new, explicitly feminist hermeneutics of suspicion has been forged by feminist thought to spot and answer not only the errors, but the systemic, unconscious distortions likely to be present in all our traditions and theologies (1991:124).

Letty Russell (1985:17) asks the question:

What would it mean for the Bible to be a liberated word?

She concludes that liberation from patriarchal view is never a finished task as the stories continue to be shaped by that view. Is it therefore realistic for women to hope for a liberated word?

This is the challenge and task for feminist hermeneutics, the liberation of the word in the knowledge that the Word of God is not identical with the biblical texts. In an ongoing process, feminist theologians will have to struggle critically with the texts. At the same time we will have to take cognisance of the contexts both of the word and of the hearer. Our task will need to take place within the community of women and women-identified men as an act of commitment to our common humanity and to justice, love and freedom.

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