

Rhetoric and Transformation: The Feminist Theology of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

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Abstract: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza situates herself as a catholic wo/man within the broader biblical tradition of Western Christianity. She acknowledges her critical feminist theology of liberation is "indebted to historical-critical, critical-political and liberation theological analyses."¹ In an effort to transform her religious tradition, Schüssler Fiorenza seeks to systematically analyse and radically critique the various socio-economic and theo-political structures that oppress and disenfranchise wo/men and other non-persons. She maintains integrating wo/men into the existing frameworks of the academy and the church is futile and nothing short of the transformation of all academic disciplines and religious practices of Western culture is necessary.²

Key Words: Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; Catholic feminism; liberation theology; kyriarchy; *ekklēsia* of wo/men

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is committed to the transformation of the Christian tradition through a critical engagement between the social-political-historical context of contemporary Western life and the biblical promise of freedom, justice and well-being for all.³ She claims that since Western Christianity has been so clearly 'implicated in the continuing exploitation of wo/men and other non-persons' feminist studies must continually challenge its 'willingness to participate in social movements for change.'⁴ A key symbol in this critical work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is the creation of the '*ekklēsia* of wo/men' — a legitimate democratic, egalitarian space where the historical experience and religious agency of wo/men and other non-persons can be truly affirmed.⁵ She claims that this critical-rhetorical space is able to break open the complex Kyriarchal relationships of authority and power that underpin Western history and tradition and offer a place from which 'the voices from the margins (can) seek to destabilise the center.'⁶ The word kyriarchy literally translates as the 'rule of the lord, master, father, husband' and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza uses it as an:

¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "For Women in a Men's World: A critical Feminist Theology of Liberation" in *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 6.

² Ibid, 48

³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Introduction' in Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *The Power of Naming*, xxx.

⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 23.

⁵ Ibid, 73.

⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethics: Ethics: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 7.

analytic category in order to be able to articulate a more comprehensive systemic analysis, to underscore the complex interstructuring of domination, and to locate sexism and misogyny in the political matrix or, better, patrix of a broader range of oppressions.⁷

Thus, Schüssler Fiorenza affirms critical feminist theologies are not only theologies of resistance and hope but also their foci and tasks are inescapably contextual and fundamentally political.⁸

The work of Schüssler Fiorenza offers the Christian tradition a critical, practical, contemporary theology and her critical engagement with the transformative potential of the Christian tradition and message have enabled Western wo/men and other non-persons to forge new relationships between their historical reality and their religious traditions. Taking Hayden White's schema for examining the contemporary rhetoric of dialogue, this paper will briefly explore how the '*ekklēsia* of wo/men' can be read through the major tropes of a critical-rhetorical lens.⁹ When placed beside the Western political theology of Johann Baptist Metz it becomes clear that the feminist methodology of Schüssler Fiorenza does indeed offer a valuable contribution to the transformative potential of the Christian tradition.

A Critical-Rhetorical Reading of the Theology of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

In her essay 'Toward a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity,' Shawn Copeland challenges contemporary feminist theologies to develop a 'real concrete relationship between rhetoric and praxis.'¹⁰ Given that Western feminist theologies place much emphasis on the ability to engage difference — in particular the differences in relations among wo/men and those who oppress wo/men¹¹ — it would appear that this challenge is a timely one. The exploration of rhetoric through the elements of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony within the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza offers a useful framework within which to assess the transformative potential of her theological hermeneutics.

The Post-enlightenment imagination has tended to understand truth as prior to or independent of language and language as reflective rather than constitutive of reality. Here, rhetoric is defined in purely technical terms. If rhetoric is a technique of debate or argumentation then ultimately, 'one must reject it in favour of unrestrained, rational dialogue.'¹² This understanding strips rhetoric of its aesthetic connections and reduces it to the activity of describing the process of persuasion through language. So while rhetoric engages in an interesting, perhaps colourful, and even exaggerated oration it does not concern itself with reasonable evaluation.

However, this does not do justice to the literary potential of rhetoric because it does nothing to acknowledge the usefulness of rhetoric as a 'central subject of intellectual enquiry.'¹³ In his article 'Religious Rhetoric and the Language of Theological Foundations,'

⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 1-5.

¹⁰ Shawn M. Copeland, "Toward a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity," in *Women and Theology*, ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Phyllis H. Kaminski (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 9.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 568.

¹³ Gerard Hall, "Raimon Panikkar's Hermeneutics of Religious Pluralism" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1994), 300.

Happel maintains that a renewed understanding of rhetoric will redescribe the interaction of speaker and audience as:

mutual... - It will note the transformative character of language for the establishment of the grounds, values, and bases of community. It will recognise the intrinsic relationship between truth-claims and metaphors, between the authenticity of the speaker and the values preached. It will offer a critique of the biases of speaker and audience so that transforming social praxis might be appropriated.¹⁴

Authentic rhetoric then, is not a technical communicative device but a linguistic-symbolic activity. Authentic rhetoric engages texts, conversations, dialogues and discourses in order to explore their presentation as well as to assess the truth-claims of the message itself.¹⁵ This means rhetoric is fundamentally a critical hermeneutical task because it is essentially concerned with the understanding and interpretation of meaning and truth. Rhetoric possesses what Gadamer refers to as a positive ambiguity: it is not just concerned with the art of 'saying something well'; it is also interested in saying something true.¹⁶

In 'Toward a Rhetoric of Postmodern Theology' David Klemm categorises the movement of rhetoric through the four master tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony as follows:

The pattern moves from an initial (metaphorical) perspective on reality, through a reductive (metonymic) analysis of the situation, to a (synecdochic) reconstitution of the elements into a new figure, and finally to a reflexive or dialectical (ironic) comprehension of it.¹⁷

Most scholars agree that rhetorical dialogue follows this pattern. However, Klemm further maintains it is possible to discern a shift in the prime metaphor within which Western Christianity understands and interprets theology. Rather than being concerned with 'historical crisis' Klemm considers that Postmodern Western theology now operates out of an 'openness to the other'.¹⁸ He claims this change is not merely a shift of style. Rather, it reflects the contemporary hermeneutical consciousness or 'reflexive play of understanding': — an understanding that engages temporality, historical situatedness and the inevitability of encounter with otherness.¹⁹ Even while Klemm identifies three typical responses in this reflexive play of understanding — the confessional response, the deconstructive response and the hermeneutical response — the temporality, the historical situatedness and the inevitability of encounter with otherness remains present.

In light of the categorisation Klemm offers concerning the rhetoric of discourse — and keeping in mind that categorisation conceals as much as it reveals — it would appear Metz' theological rhetoric primarily responds to the metaphor of crisis.²⁰ In contrast, the

¹⁴ Stephen Happel, 'Religious Rhetoric and the Language of Theological Foundations' in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan*, (eds T. Fallan & P. Riley, Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 195.

¹⁵ Hall, "Raimon Panikkar's Hermeneutics," 301. 'As a "discourse on the margins of truth" rhetoric is concerned with the "space of mutuality" in which the subject-matter is brought to language'

¹⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 19-20.

¹⁷ David Klemm, "Toward a Rhetoric of Postmodern Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55.3 (1987): 446-447.

¹⁸ Ibid, 445.

¹⁹ Ibid., 455-465: 'First, historical consciousness, which initially gave rise to the crisis metaphor, has deepened its reflexive posture, and this, in turn, has unravelled that metaphor. Second, the same reflexive posture that dismantled the crisis metaphor brings otherness out of concealment.' Klemm discusses the three types in depth in 457-465.

²⁰ Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 32-46. Metz has made the anthropological turn and is hermeneutically

rhetoric in the theology of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza seeks the transformation of the Western Christian tradition through a Postmodern hermeneutical response that engages the metaphor of otherness.²¹

The first trope of rhetorical discourse is that of metaphor. Metaphor refers to the process of 'speaking about one thing in terms suggestive of another'.²² It serves to engage the meaning of discourse in the tension of the mutual space between the speaker and the audience. Accordingly, metaphor provides the prime symbol through which the dialogue of rhetoric is engaged and interpreted. This first movement towards understanding is experienced as a tensive and symbolic moment that is underpinned by either: crisis — as in the case of Metz — or otherness — as seen in the work of Schüssler Fiorenza. Metz does his theology with an acute awareness of the crisis of modernity: a crisis of tradition, a crisis of authority, a crisis of reason and, ultimately, a crisis of religion.²³ He considers the prime theological task is the struggle to become subjects before God in history. Metz plays out the tension of this crisis of identity through the privatisation of religion. He claims this has encouraged an apathy and a forgetfulness — particularly of suffering. In so doing Western Christianity has effectively turned its back on those who have suffered and died; those who history would forget. Metz reminds Western Christianity the most appropriate universal interest of Christian discipleship is the 'hunger and thirst for justice... for the living and the dead'²⁴ — the remembrance of which is historically preserved in the *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*.

Schüssler Fiorenza is also concerned with the history of human suffering. However, her theology is done as a critical response to 'otherness' so her prime metaphor does not focus on the crisis of identity, but on the struggle for identity by those who have been marginalised by diversity. Like Metz, Schüssler Fiorenza critiques any attempt to present a grand narrative. She clearly acknowledges that the movement to collapse or sublimate otherness into a universal theory or 'politics of othering' serves to re-inscribe the grand narrative of unequivocal single truth.²⁵ However, while Metz critiques grand narratives because they evoke a crisis of human identity and threaten humanity as subjects, Schüssler Fiorenza seeks to decentre grand narratives because they silence the legitimate voice and agency or identity of the other — particularly wo/men.

Accordingly, Schüssler Fiorenza directs her critical theological gaze towards the complex relational axis of power and domination that frame and support Western Christianity. She insists these kyriarchal relationships maintain structures and attitudes that mark difference as inferior in order to dominate and marginalise otherness. Schüssler Fiorenza claims only when the most marginalised others — those who have been relegated to the bottom of this kyriarchal structure — are positively affirmed can the

aware of the dangers of a mono-cultural, hegemonic, Eurocentric theology. However, even in the engagement of 'otherness' crisis is still the prime metaphor in his theology.

²¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word*, 13-21. Here, Schüssler Fiorenza discusses the critique of The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) that she is anti-Postmodern in her methodology. While Schüssler Fiorenza is not a deconstructive Postmodern thinker it seems clear that her focus on diversity and concentration on otherness marks her work as being hermeneutically responsive to the prime Postmodern metaphor of the other. Additionally, it is problematic to reduce the whole postmodern project to any one particular response, be it the deconstructive, the confessional or the hermeneutical response.

²² Klemm, "Toward a Rhetoric of Postmodern Theology," 447.

²³ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 32-48.

²⁴ Johannes Baptist Metz, "Theology in the Struggle" in *Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 52.

²⁵ Klemm, "Toward a Rhetoric of Postmodern Theology," 456.

biblical promise of freedom, justice and well-being for all be made concretely present.²⁶ In other words, the truth of otherness can only authentically be found and retained through its diversity.

The second movement in rhetorical dialogue is that of metonymy. Basically, metonymy takes the leading metaphor of the dialogue and disperses it back into its linked elements. It 'places some intangible state of being in tangible terms and therefore traces the abstract back into real life.'²⁷ Through the elements of self, other, world and time metonymy seeks to historically situate either the crisis or the diversity of the dialogue. This serves to reduce the more complex original metaphor 'to the less complex realm of specific manifestations of truth.'²⁸

While Metz speaks of the critical need to develop 'an option for others in their otherness,'²⁹ the crisis of threatened identity this otherness evokes remains his dominant theological metaphor. The metonymic movement in Metz' theology can be seen reflected through his emphasis on the crisis of forgetfulness of suffering and of the countless acts of inhumanity that mark Christian history. Metz disperses this forgetfulness of suffering through the specific symbol of Auschwitz. For Metz, Auschwitz becomes the prime symbol for the 'catastrophes' of Western history and the innocent suffering of victims. It is Auschwitz that moves us to ask the big human questions of justice, responsibility, freedom and guilt. He claims that 'if there is no God for us in Auschwitz, how can there be a God anywhere else?'³⁰ This means that our responsibility to God, our proper response to our faith, and therefore the measure of our humanity, is gauged by our ability to be responsive to — and consequently remember — this catastrophic suffering.

In her metonymic movement Schüssler Fiorenza further particularises and contextualises the situations of oppression and marginalisation of wo/men and other non-persons. She disperses her critique of the marginalising relationships of Western culture by way of a tensive symbolic focus adapted from the redstocking manifesto. This tensive symbol names the most marginal of others in Western culture as the 'poorest most despised wo/men on earth'.³¹ Given that wo/men — regardless of their social, racial, political, economic or religious positioning — are always the 'others' of Christian history, Schüssler Fiorenza claims that the lowest position of Western Christianity's kyriarchal structures will always be occupied by 'the poorest most despised woman.' If the Biblical promise of freedom, justice and well-being is to be made historically present with any authenticity it must first be made present in the lives of these wo/men.

This focus reminds Western Christianity that it is not merely the presence of these wo/men that is vital to the life of our tradition. Rather, it affirms that the theo-political and socio-religious commitment to the equality of the presence and voice of the 'poorest most despised woman' in the democratic space of the *ekklēsia* of wo/men is essential for the in breaking of the *basileia* of God. While this raises questions of the temporal and relative nature of historical relationships, this metonymic movement secures the possibility of

²⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word*, 28-36.

²⁷ Klemm, "Toward a Rhetoric of Postmodern Theology," 450.

²⁸ Hall, "Raimon Panikkar's Hermeneutics," 308.

²⁹ Metz, "Theology in the Struggle," 50.

³⁰ Ibid, 52.

³¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, "Patriarchal Structures and the discipleship of Equals" in Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Ekklesia-ology of Liberation, 231.

authentic dialogue between the self and other through this particular concrete contextualisation.³²

Synecdoche refers to the movement of re-integration. This integration is not a synthetic collapse of the dialectic tension. Rather it provides for a re-newed consciousness or reconfiguration. After the dispersal of the metonymic movement, synecdoche gathers the diversity of the original metaphor into a new reality. In effect, synecdoche is the site of transformation. It opens the historical moment up to new possibilities and so works to convey a 'redemptive dimension of reality'.³³ Through the previous metonymic encounter this new reality has been marked by a radical shift in understanding.³⁴ Synecdoche serves to refigure reality so that it remains the same yet changed.

The transformative moment in Metz can be located both in and through the dangerous memories of Christianity. In response to the crisis of forgetfulness Metz maintains that the *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi* serves to ground the redemptive promises of God. Accordingly, he maintains that there is 'no understanding of the joyousness of resurrection that is free of the shadows and threats of the human history of suffering'.³⁵ Metz considers that these memories shatter the apathy of forgetfulness and so nourish the imagination of the future. Consequently, the dangerous memories are both redemptive — for they historically ground God's vindication of Jesus' life and death, and eschatological — for they provide access to the future of Christianity.

The *ekklēsia* of wo/men is Schüssler Fiorenza's site of transformation. It is structured around the notion of the democratic and egalitarian assembly of members or 'congress of full citizens' and creates a 'critical rhetorical place' that operates as a transforming or redemptive space within the tradition.³⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza positions the *ekklēsia* of wo/men as an eschatological symbol or an alternative, radically open vision of Christian community. She understands it as a feminist reality, construct and vision that aims to make present a radical democracy that 'brings people together as citizens' and is 'realised again and again' in the struggle to 'change relations of domination, exploitation and marginalisation'.³⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza insists that because wo/men have both the authority and the right to interpret experience, tradition and religion from their own perspective and in their own interests, the biblical struggle for freedom, justice and well-being for all cannot be realised if wo/men's voices are silenced or ignored.³⁸

Irony is the final trope in Klemm's dialogue of rhetoric. The presence of irony serves to prevent the integrative moment of synecdoche from being a return to the original metaphorical position. This means irony dialectically reaffirms the tensive experience of the prime metaphor in such a way that the tension becomes radically inherent in the symbol itself. This movement amounts to the ongoing re-symbolisation of reality.³⁹

For Metz, the presence of the ironic element can be explored through his understanding of the justice that responds to suffering. Through the question of theodicy Metz strives to preserve the dangerous memories of Christianity and so prevent the dialectical tension between actual suffering and our response to that suffering from being

³² Hall, "Raimon Panikkar's Hermeneutics," 308-309.

³³ Klemm, "Toward a Rhetoric of Postmodern Theology," 453.

³⁴ Ibid, 312.

³⁵ Johannes Baptist Metz, "Future in the Memory of Suffering" in *Faith and the Future*, 11.

³⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word*, 132.

³⁷ Ibid, 112.

³⁸ Ibid, 76-87.

³⁹ Hall, "Raimon Panikkar's Hermeneutics," 311.

stripped of its eschatological power. This tension offers Christianity an ‘eschatological reminder’ that ‘God-talk is either the talk of the vision and the promise of a great justice, which also touches on past suffering, or it is empty and without promise.’⁴⁰

The ironic element in the rhetoric of Schüssler Fiorenza’s theology can be seen operating within the *ekklēsia* of wo/men. Here Schüssler Fiorenza responds to Shawn Copeland’s challenge to develop a ‘real concrete relationship between rhetoric and praxis’⁴¹ and creates a space in which the rhetoric and praxis of feminist goals and feminist commitments can come together and be concretely realised. Like Metz, Schüssler Fiorenza uses the ironic elements in her theological method as an eschatological symbol. Accordingly, the *ekklēsia* of wo/men breaks open the complex kyriarchal relationships of authority and power that underpin Western history and tradition and offer a place from which ‘the voices from the margins (can) seek to destabilise the center.’⁴² Schüssler Fiorenza holds up the biblical vision of the *ekklēsia* as a critical reminder to keep focused on the struggles of those who strive for the emancipatory practices of radical democracy. The practical redemptive element of this symbol is reflected in the emancipatory movements — including feminism — that have emerged as actions of resistance and hope because of the disparity between the radical democratic vision of the *ekklēsia* of wo/men and its actual socio-political and cultural-religious realisations.

In this final movement it is possible to discern the transformation of some of the traditional theo-political concepts of the Christian tradition. In giving diversity, difference, otherness and even identity a legitimate democratic and egalitarian space the historical experience and religious agency of wo/men and other non-persons can be concretely affirmed. In the words of Stephen Happel, Schüssler Fiorenza’s use of this symbol can be seen to ‘offer a critique of the biases of speaker and audience so that transforming social praxis might be appropriated.’⁴³

Conclusion

This brief critical-rhetorical comparison has provided a basic insight into the main metaphors behind some of the key elements in the work of Johannes Baptist Metz and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. In so doing, it shows how the feminist theological methodology of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza acts to deepen the transformative potential of Western theology. Her methodology critically engages the dominant hegemonic attitudes and structures of the Western Christian tradition; attitudes that have encouraged the suppression and structures that have supported the domination of the many ‘others’ in the tradition.

Gerard Hall claims the serious engagement in authentic theological rhetoric — and the attempt to reconnect this with religious experience — amounts to nothing less than ‘a “paradigm shift in the way theology is done... providing strategies for a radically pluralistic theology.”⁴⁴ In other words, within a strong critical-rhetorical engagement contemporary Western theology is able to affirm the universal human experience of diversity in relationship with God the world and each other in a way that authentically

⁴⁰ Johannes Baptist Metz, “Suffering from God: Theology as Theodicy,” *Pacifica* 5.3 (1992): 275.

⁴¹ Copeland, “Toward a Critical Christian Feminist Theology of Solidarity,” 9.

⁴² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1999), 7.

⁴³ Happel, “Religious Rhetoric and the Language of Theological Foundations,” 195.

⁴⁴ Hall, “Raimon Panikkar’s Hermeneutics,” 302.

engages the ‘other’ without either demonising or collapsing difference.⁴⁵ And one of the key insights that emerges from the feminist theological hermeneutic of Elisabeth S chussler Fiorenza is the place and understanding given to difference.

Accordingly, Schüssler Fioreuza responds to Klemm’s challenge of understanding ‘what is questionable and what is genuine in self and other while remaining open to self and other and allowing the other to remain other.’⁴⁶ As Klemm has demonstrated ‘despite our anxiety before a broken tradition, we continue to understand existence theologically.’⁴⁷ Accordingly, he considers that contemporary Western theology is in need of a new rhetoric, not so much because it lacks a subject matter but because it needs ‘new and persuasive ways of disclosing it.’⁴⁸

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⁴⁵ Marion Ronan, “Reclaiming Women’s Experience: A Reading of Selected Christian Feminist Theologies,” *Cross Currents* 48.2 (1998): 227-229.

⁴⁶ Klemm, “Toward a Rhetoric of Postmodern Theology,” 456.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 444.

⁴⁸ Ibid.