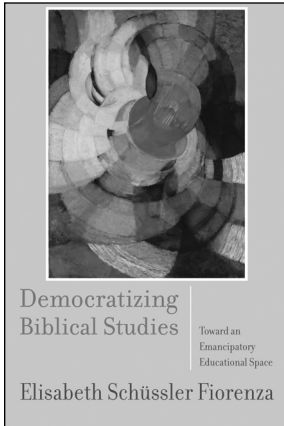


Biblical Studies and History



Democratizing Biblical Studies *Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

LEVEL: Graduate and professional

COURSES: Teaching the Bible; Pedagogy of the Bible

Schüssler Fiorenza continues her exploration of a radical democratic ethos in graduate biblical education. She argues that it is necessary to reframe the field of biblical studies and replace the competitive teaching models prevalent in graduate programs with an emancipatory, radical democratic pedagogical model that fosters collaboration, participation, and critical engagement. To achieve constructive engagement with the differences of social location and diversity of perspectives that exist both in the Bible and in our contexts, we must become aware of the pitfalls of one-dimensional thinking that seeks to use the Bible to find definite answers and to exclude different understandings.

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Schüssler Fiorenza addresses such questions as: What are the educational practices and procedures that are advocated by traditional educational models and how can they be changed? What educational and communicative practices do biblical studies need to develop to fashion an emancipatory democratizing rhetorical space and a forum of many voices? To envision, articulate, debate, and practice a radical democratic ethos of biblical studies, she identifies emerging didactic models that can foster such a radical democratic style of learning. Student feedback is also included.

An accompanying Web site, <http://www.wjkbooks.com/DemocratizingBiblicalStudies>, explores and expands key aspects of the book and includes student research papers and a discussion board allowing student readers to exchange thoughts and ideas.

Chapter I: The Rhetorical Space of Graduate Biblical Studies

I was prompted to start my research on how to change graduate education in the discipline of biblical studies by my experience of the continuing marginalization, trivialization, or total neglect of feminist, postcolonial, or other cultural and ideology critical studies by malestream scholarship. Reports on subfields of the discipline, introductory works, or commentaries still to this day have the tendency to avoid discussing such work as serious scholarship or to relegate it to discreet corners as if it were of interest only to so-called minority scholars.

Excerpt from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: Democratizing Biblical Studies

Moreover, such “minority” scholars also have often tended to remain in their little niches of identity politics, to “reinvent the wheel” instead of exploring theoretical commonalities, or to argue against each other rather than against mainstream hegemonic scholarship.

Discussing these issues with colleagues, I became more and more convinced that the full citizenship of women required a fundamental change in biblical studies. However, such a change could only be brought about if the ethos and practices of biblical studies, which are inculcated in graduate biblical education in general and doctoral education in particular, were changed. Since my Society of Biblical Literature presidential address more than twenty years ago, many changes have occurred in the field, but the basic structure and rhetoric of doctoral education seems to have remained the same.

Charting the Problem

In my article “Rethinking the Educational Practices of Biblical Doctoral Studies,” published in 2003, I argued that the current crisis in critical biblical studies is rooted in a dramatic change not only in disciplinary methods, but, more importantly, in social-geopolitical shifts. There are four identifiable problem areas that stand in tension with each other and need to be dynamically integrated.

Diverse Populations

In the last two decades, the population of divinity schools and religion departments—and therefore the character of the*logical¹ education in the United States as a whole—has radically changed. Non-denominational university divinity schools such as Harvard Divinity School have granted full citizenship to populations previously not included, such as Catholics, Evangelicals, or Jews. They have also begun to develop interreligious programs in which Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, or Muslim students are welcomed as equals. Populations from different socio-cultural locations and traditions, such as white women, African American, Native American, Asian, Latina/o, gay, lesbian, and transgendered people—those who have traditionally been excluded from theological discourse or from elite religious educational institutions—have been admitted although they and their concerns still are often not highly valued. In addition, second-career students seek the rich intellectual inquiry offered by theological and religious studies.

This change in population requires a change in the kind of knowledge taught and the pedagogy used to communicate it. It requires a complete reconception of an academic disciplinary culture that has been defined not only by false claims to value-neutrality, but also by the exclusion of the “other.” This change is usually

1. To indicate the brokenness and inadequacy of human language for naming the Divine . . . I have switched from the orthodox Jewish writing of G-d, . . . to avoid the conservative mainstream association that the writing of G-d provokes for Jewish feminists. . . . Consequently, I write the*logyl/the*logical which means speaking about the Divine in a similar way.

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more real in the student body than in the faculty, who understandably show some resistance to such change, since it throws into question professional expertise and traditional academic standards of excellence. It is an extremely serious problem with regard to faculty hiring and promotion.

Furthermore, student-participants from many different Christian denominations and different religious persuasions, cultural contexts, social locations, and international areas seek to be equipped for religious leadership both in religious communities (churches, mosques, synagogues, or temples) and in the academy, society, and culture (communications, law, medicine, or the arts) at large. . . .

In light of this overall situation, we need to find educational models that not only insist on difference and diversity as the *sine qua non* of academic excellence, but also stress collaboration rather than competition, allowing for the intellectual integration of such rich diversity.

Globalization of Knowledge

In the past two decades, knowledge—the intellectual capital of religious and academic institutions—has become globalized, or as I would prefer, internationalized and democratized. This has two implications for biblical graduate education and religious leadership: on the one hand, knowledge is no longer the property of male clergy but has become accessible through the communication revolution to anyone who seeks it. As a result, international inter-religious dialogue and collaboration has become not only a possibility but also a necessity.

On the other hand, the flood of available knowledge on the internet requires that students learn how to develop intellectual skills of investigation, to articulate ethical criteria of evaluation, and to analyze hermeneutical frameworks of interpretation. What is called for is not knowledge accumulation, but the critical evaluation of knowledge.² Hence, theological disciplines and religious studies can no longer prove their excellence simply by understanding themselves as depositories of knowledge and scholarship. Today, the computer is such a site of knowledge storage. It can provide knowledge of historical sources, literary parallels, philological data, or foreign-language translations in seconds—knowledge that our predecessors in biblical studies have spent years or a lifetime to find, record, and learn.

It has therefore become increasingly important that students be taught to discriminate between different kinds of knowledge, work collaboratively, recognize intellectual problems, and learn how to debate them with others who have

2. In his new book *Save the World on Your Own Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Stanley Fish insists that it is not the task of the academician to educate responsible citizens or to foster good moral character. Rather, in his view, the only legitimate goal appropriate to college and university teachers is the transmission and advancement of knowledge and the equipment of students with analytical skills and mastery in methods of knowledge production. They have to investigate problems but not to solve them (12–13). However, this pedagogical view overlooks that knowledge cannot be had “pure” but that it is always conditioned by its contexts, interests, and ideological frameworks. Hence, it needs to be critically evaluated and students have to be taught how to do so. Such ability of critical evaluation and assessment is also the task of citizens.

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different experiences, standpoints and belief systems. . . . The intellectual acuity and excellence of inquiry required today is much harder to achieve, to teach, and to certify than the traditional curriculum of packaged knowledge, competitive standards of evaluation, and skills acquisition that relies on memorization, repetition, and imitation of the great masters. . . .

The Dichotomy Between Religious and The*logical Studies

The academy also has not yet been successful in overcoming the artificial disciplinary dichotomy between religious and the*logical studies, a dichotomy that has been institutionalized both in departments of allegedly value-neutral studies of religion on the one hand, and religiously committed denominational the*logical schools on the other hand. This split goes very deep, as the American Academy of Religion's Hart Report indicates.³

This disciplinary split, however, obfuscates the fact that both religious and the*logical studies are not value-detached disciplines; instead they speak from a particular socio-religious location and position. . . . In the past, Christian divinity schools and denominational seminaries functioned to educate future ministers and priests. . . . Because of the restriction of the*logical studies to clergy education, religious studies has developed as a discipline that supposedly investigates biblical and other religions from a value-neutral, phenomenological, academic standpoint. However, hermeneutics, the sociology of knowledge, ideology critique, feminist critique, critical theory, and especially postcolonial studies have questioned this reifying conceptualization of religious studies.

Moreover, in the last decade or so the Western (Christian) study of other "alien" religions is slowly being transformed. The hegemony of the traditionally Protestant Christian curriculum has been broken and religious or the*logical studies have more and more felt the need for inter-religious and interdisciplinary inquiry. Moreover, scholars of other religions (Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus) articulate knowledge about their own religions and scriptures that is different from the knowledge produced by reifying Western religious studies. Hence, their scholarship often shows similarities with a the*logical studies approach, although they usually do not call their work the*logy because the*logy is a Christian-typed term.

Diana Eck has argued that the dialogue between religions has a sociopolitical location.⁴ Interreligious dialogue takes place not only in the academy but also on the local communal level and more and more also in public. Hence, future ministers and religious leaders need to be schooled in both ecumenical and interreligious Scripture study and communication. Future biblical scholars or

3. Ray L. Hart, "Religious and Theological Studies in American Higher Education: A Pilot Study," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 4 (1991): 715-782.

4. Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000).

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professionals need to acquire the ability to reason the*logically, religiously, and ethically, as well as to critically analyze power relations in the interest of justice for all. The question remains then, how biblical graduate studies can be so designed that they foster such intellectual capabilities. How can graduate study be shifted from an objectivist study of religions and scriptural or traditional texts to a study of the power of religion and the Bible to foster either violence or justice and well-being?

Political-Religious Fundamentalisms

In the past twenty years, forms of fundamentalism and religious extremism that are explicitly political have emerged in all major religions and in all societies around the globe. Studies of such fundamentalisms have shown that the term can be applied cross-culturally and cross-religiously. These studies have argued that the common denominator of such fundamentalisms is the opposition to modernism and secularism, the distrust of enlightenment values and institutions, and the contempt for all outsiders or Others whether within or outside their community.

For instance, Bruce Lawrence has pointed to several characteristics that fundamentalist movements have in common:

1. Such movements are comprised of secondary level male elites.
2. They utilize a technical vocabulary or discourse.
3. They profess totalistic and unquestioning allegiance to sacred scriptures or religious authority.
4. They privilege the authority of their own leaders, and subordinate democratic values and processes to this authority.⁵

Since traditional institutions of higher education often subscribe to a similar positivist understanding of facts and truth—albeit in more academic rather than religious terms—they are not able to articulate discourses and practices that would foster a different radical democratic imaginary that could engender a different form of religious imaginary. Research into the pedagogical procedures that reproduce such fundamentalist thinking in biblical studies is still lacking. . . .

. . . [S]uch a positivist disciplinary conceptualization of hegemonic biblical studies and their educational processes neglects the critical hermeneutical and epistemological insights of the past thirty years. Postmodern biblical studies in turn cultivates a great variety of theoretical methods, subfields, and perspectives, but also does not sufficiently reflect on its own pedagogy. Such a critical pedagogy, I argue, needs to communicate that the*logical and religious studies can be scientifically responsible today only if they become hermeneutically reflective, transdisciplinary, and interreligious.

5. Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

Excerpt from *Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: Democratizing Biblical Studies*

The Need to Transform the Discourses of Biblical Studies

In light of these four developments, it is necessary to re-envision the academic discipline of biblical studies and its pedagogies so that it can attend to a professional identity formation that is not exclusive and antidemocratic. Radical democratic rather than positivist or fundamentalist teaching-learning experiences, however, are generally not part and parcel of graduate education in general and doctoral education in particular. Though much creative teaching is done on the undergraduate level and some on the master's level, doctoral education is still very Eurocentric⁶ insofar as it is mostly focused on the classical German or British scientific research university and the master-disciple model of the graduate seminar. Moreover, the dominant ethos of graduate schools often does not appreciate the change in knowledge production and populations, but operates from an outdated model of top-down kyriarchal pedagogy.



Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is Krister Stendahl Professor of Divinity at Harvard University Divinity School. The list of her publications, both in English and German, is extensive. They include *In Memory of Her* (translated into 14 languages); *Bread Not Stone*; *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*; *Sharing Her Word*; *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*; *Wisdom Ways*; *Rhetoric and Ethic*; and *The Power of the Word*. She was the first woman scholar to serve as president of the Society of Biblical Literature, the nation's oldest and largest biblical society, and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2001. She also is cofounder and coeditor of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*.

“In this provocative text, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that an emancipatory paradigm shift in biblical studies must be accompanied by a radical democratic pedagogy and ethos. With examples from her teaching and practical pedagogical guides, this powerful book is a must-read for scholars and students of the Bible. No serious reader of the book will come away teaching the Bible in the same old way again.”

—Kwok Pui-lan, Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts

6. For more on the imbrication of Eurocentric American biblical scholarship with racism, see Shawn Kelley's book, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (New York: Routledge, 2002); as well as the forthcoming collection of essays *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies*, ed. Laura Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming 2009).