Twelfth Annual
Graduate Theological Union
Faculty Lecture

Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM

Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
Associate Professor of New Testament Studies and Spirituality

"Biblical Interpretation and Spirituality: Towards a New Testament Hermeneutics of Transformation"

This Lecture is dedicated to

Michael Blecker, OSB

Former President of the Graduate Theological Union,
in gratitude and recognition of his contribution to the GTU during his years as president,
and of his accomplishmentin seeing to the completion of the Library
and his work to fund faculty research.

Wednesday, November 18, 1987
7:30 p.m.
University Christian Church
2401 LeConte Avenue

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Introduction.....Judith A. Berling
Dean, GTU

Presentation..... Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM
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"Biblical Interpretation and Spirituality: Towards a New Testament Hermeneutics of Transformation"

Response..... William Herzog
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Questions from the Audience

Reception immediately following
(out the back door of the sanctuary and down the stairs to the left)

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BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND SPIRITUALITY
TOWARDS A NEW TESTAMENT HERMENEUTICS OF TRANSFORMATION

Address and Dedication

Dean Berling, esteemed colleagues, fellow students, and honored guests, I thank you for the honor you have bestowed on me by inviting me to give this twelfth annual Graduate Theological Union Faculty Lecture.

It is my privilege and joy to dedicate this Lecture to Michael Blecker, teacher, monk, colleague, friend, and former president of the Union, in grateful recognition of his achievements during the five years, just completed, that he served this institution. Of particular importance to those of us involved in scholarly research is President Blecker's work in bringing to a successful completion the building of the Flora Lamson Hewlett Library, a theological research facility which ranks among the best in the country, and a powerful expression and instrument of the ecumenical commitment which binds this Union together in the search for truth. I believe I speak for my colleagues as well as myself in expressing to you, Michael, our sincere gratitude, respect, and affection.

Introduction: Thesis

The question I wish to address in this Lecture began as a very personal one. It was the question that guided my choice of biblical studies as my own academic field, that dogged my steps through graduate school as I tried to combine biblical studies and the study of christian spirituality, that continues to surface in each research project I undertake, that becomes ever more urgent as I try to accompany younger fellow students in their work. The question is simply put: To what does the vocation to biblical scholarship call me? Where do I, as a professional student of Holy Scripture, fit in the great scheme of things? Plato has told us that the unexamined life is not worth living. Thus, my question concerns the meaning of what I am doing: What is the end, the ultimate purpose, of biblical interpretation? This question began as my own question, but I believe it is not merely a personal one. It must be the question of every biblical scholar who not only participates in the academy but also serves the Church and there is an analogous question addressed to every theological scholar similarly engaged. I can imagine no more appropriate context than this one, unless it be that of prayer, in which to wrestle with this question.

My answer to the question is the thesis I wish to explore with you tonight, namely, that New Testament interpretation (I limit myself to New Testament both because it is my field and because it will serve my purposes as illustration later on), as opposed to exegesis and criticism which are integral to but not synonymous or coterminous with it, is not instrumental, not a means to an end, but an end in itself. Biblical interpretation terminates not in speculative knowledge but in transformative understanding which is integral to and constitutive of the life praxis appropriately called spirituality.

In view of the pluralism, not to say confusion, which attends some of the terms in the title of this lecture I will begin by clarifying my use of "biblical," "interpretation," and "spirituality."

As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza aptly remarked in a recent lecture, biblical scholarship is, by nature, theological rather than purely historical or critical[1] because the Bible, as such, is the Holy Scripture of believing communities rather than simply an interesting resource for history of religions research. Therefore, what these communities believe about the Bible, about its nature and function, enters constitutively into the definition of the task of biblical interpretation as biblical.

What christian communities believe about the New Testament is summed up with maximum brevity and consummate ambiguity by the term "Word of God." It is the task of the New Testament scholar, then, to interpret the Word of God as such! Small wonder that both reason and humility tempt the biblical professional to take refuge in pure exegesis, leaving interpretation to the theologian and relevance to the preacher. If such a division of labor is not legitimate, and it is part of my thesis that it is not, we must get some clarity about the expression "Word of God."

As a linguistic expression "Word of God" is not a literal designation but a metaphor, that is, a figure of speech which derives its power from the linguistic tension between the absurdity of its literal meaning and the similarity of its referent to the literal referent which makes it suggestive in its context. As Sallie McFague explains, "[m]etaphor always has the character of 'is' and 'is not': an assertion is made but as a likely account rather than a definition."[2] Thus, to maintain that calling the New Testament the "Word of God" is a metaphor is to assert that it is not literally the written record of divine dictation that some fundamentalist theologies of inspiration propose. But it is somehow similar to human communication, to the human word, to which the metaphor is comparing it.

Wherein lies the similarity which grounds the choice of the metaphor "Word of God"? The similarity lies in the fact that, according to christian belief, the New Testament somehow mediates divine revelation as speech mediates the communication between human speakers. But the "is not" of the metaphor needs to be taken very seriously for two reasons. First, divine revelation is not a body of information but God's self-gift to humanity in the historical event of Jesus mediated to later generations in and through the Church. In other words, the human speech to which the metaphor compares Scripture is not informational, much less scientific, discourse but that interpersonal conversation composed not only of words but of an intimate and inclusive shared praxis by which people mutually reveal themselves, give themselves, to one another. Such language often conveys information but that is not its primary purpose nor the gauge of its effectiveness. Secondly, the mediation of divine revelation by the New Testament is indirect in the sense that God does not "speak" as human speakers do. Rather, those who experienced, that is, interpreted, the historical Jesus as the Christ bear witness in the text to their faith. The divine self-gift, insofar as it is speech at all, is wholly and only human speech

even though that human speech witnesses to divine revelation as event and that witness mediates the experience of revelation in and for later believers.[3] As the conclusion of John's Gospel testifies, "These things were written that you [the reader] may believe" (cf. Jn. 20:30).

In short, New Testament interpretation is an attempt to interpret the text as medium of revelation for contemporary believers. Whatever intermediate processes are necessary to establish the text, to ascertain what the text says, or to establish what and how the text means, interpretation is not complete until the text functions as Word of God, that is, until it engages the interpreter in the revelatory dynamic.

This leads directly to our second term, interpretation. Obviously, I am distinguishing interpretation from exegesis and from criticism even though it involves both. Although in the practice of biblical scholarship it is neither possible nor desirable to completely separate these tasks, it is necessary to distinguish among them. Exegesis aims at finding out what the text says, both what it says factually and what it says theologically. Since the New Testament is a document which comes to us from a chronologically, linguistically, and culturally distant setting, establishing what the text says is a laborious process of using all the available linguistic, literary, historical, and sociological tools to bridge the gap between first century Palestine and twentieth century cultures. Until we know what the text says it is impossible to know what it means.

Criticisms of various kinds try to uncover how the text does what it does, that is, how it means.[4] This involves both the effort to find out how the text functions to involve the reader in the construction of meaning and how well or badly the text does this. Thus, for example, rhetorical criticism reveals the way the writer guides the participation of the reader toward the author's ends; redaction criticism uncovers how the author shaped traditional materials to his or her theological purposes; and literary criticism in general concerns itself with the manner and quality of the evangelist's engagement of the reader. Criticism exists for interpretation and rarely stops short with the elucidation of how a text functions but criticism is not yet interpretation.

Interpretation, while depending on exegesis and criticism, goes beyond both in that it intends understanding by way of conversation between the text and the reader. By understanding I mean not merely knowledge of facts but a way of being in the world, the way of being characteristic of human beings for whom "world" is not merely a physical place but the complex situation in which we are involved as we relate to everything that exists for us.[5] Our colloquial expression, "My world fell apart when my friend died," aptly captures this philosophical meaning of world as the whole of reality as we participate in it and as it is structured by our participation. Understanding gives us a "place to stand", situates us as subject in relationship to all of reality in which we participate. Before we can "stand back" to objectify some element of reality so that we can analyze or study it we "stand in," i.e., we share world with it through initial understanding. Understanding is not only our actual relatedness

to reality, our participation in world, but also our openness to all that exists or can exist for us. In other words, understanding is the condition of possibility of change. Because we are in world by understanding, that is, by openness to what can come to stand in us, we can be changed by what we come to understand.

Understanding begins in feeling. Feeling is not emotion but the valuative apprehension of the other, the qualitative awareness of the other as other. Understanding proceeds from feeling through explicit and thematic knowledge to a reshaping by imagination of world, literally to a change of mind. By way of example, I may be uncomfortably aware, may feel, the presence in my world of people who are starving. This is a certain rudimentary kind of understanding. But if I allow myself to learn about these people, come to know in an explicit way who they are and why they are starving, my world image is affected in profound ways. All is not right with the world. My understanding has been modified; my world is different; my mind has been changed. When the imaginative modification of world has the quality of positive responsiveness to the truth claims that new understanding makes, the Gospel calls this change of mind metanoia, which we correctly (though not literally) translate, conversion. Understanding, in other words, terminates in praxis, a new way of being in the world. Whether I decide to try to ignore this new reality and thus harden myself against the challenge, or to do something about it, to act out of conversion, I am doing something, namely, being in the world in a different way. Praxis, in other words, is not just the behavioral application of new speculative knowledge but the complex new way of being in the world, for good or ill, that understanding inaugurates and constitutes. It involves not only new knowledge but a new image of self and world and new choices. For this reason the public face of genuine understanding is witness, self-implicating testimony to the truth of things as we now understand it.[6]

The path to understanding, and therefore the way of proceeding of interpretation, is interaction with the "other" as other and the paradigm of this interaction is conversation between persons. As David Tracy explains in Plurality and Ambiguity, the effort to understand a text, particularly a classical text which, because of its depth, beauty, and comprehensiveness remains contemporaneous with and relevant for succeeding generations,[7] is a kind of conversation between interpreter and text.[8] Like any conversation about serious matters it may very well include analysis, explanation, and even argument but these processes are in the service of the earnest exchange about the subject matter in the effort to come to the truth. In other words, the primary purpose of a conversation is not merely to understand what the other says or why he or she is saying it. The purpose is to understand the truth about the question under discussion. It is this single-minded orientation to the truth about the subject matter that characterizes interpretation as distinguished from exegesis or criticism. Interpretation terminates not in speculative knowledge of the facts but in understanding of the truth, an understanding which is praxis or an effective way of being in the world in terms of the truth. We will return shortly to the ques-

tion of how one can converse with a text which, it would seem, can not talk back.

Our final term is spirituality which might be simply defined as the ongoing effort to integrate one's life within the horizon of ultimate concern. No doubt everyone who does not disintegrate in schizophrenia is engaged, at least in a vague, unfocussed, and sporadic effort to put his or her life together in some way but the term spirituality more properly applies to the effort at self-transcending integration that is highly conscious, explicit about the character of the ultimate, and deliberate in the choice of means. In other words, spirituality captures the character of a religiously committed life as project. If the unexamined life is not worth living it is also true that the unlived life is not worth examining!

For the christian the horizon of ultimate concern is God revealed in Jesus through the power of the Spirit. The question we are raising in this lecture is how the New Testament as Word of God functions in the spirituality, in the self-transcending, life-integrating project and praxis of the christian. The answer I will suggest is that it functions by means of a hermeneutics of transformation. In other words, the New Testament is a conversation partner through which our minds are changed by a transformative understanding which expresses itself in world-transforming witness to the truth. The vocation of the biblical scholar is to interpret the text, that is, to facilitate that conversation for the members of the believing community in and through his or her own academically enriched participation in it.

Interpreting the New Testament

If, as I just suggested, interpretation has the character and structure of a conversation how can one interpret a text? The text, it would seem, is inert. It says what it says, once and always the same; it can repeat itself but it cannot change its mind. How can one converse with a partner who repeats, over and over, the same position but who cannot move with the play of thought to a new position or a new approach to the subject matter under discussion? This is the question which has lead some biblical scholars to define their task as something short of interpretation and others to understand that task as either surrender to, mastery of, or correction of the text.

The least traumatic approach is to define the task of the biblical scholar, not in terms of the character of scripture as Word of God for the believing community, but in terms of the technical methods available for the investigation of ancient documents. Thus, biblical scholarship is defined as critical exegesis. The exegete's work is to discover what the text says and how it works. The transformative understanding of the text, in this view, is beyond the scope of biblical studies and belongs properly to the theologian and the preacher.

But for those who realize that the biblical scholar, precisely because he or she is studying this text as Bible, must arrive at some transformative understanding of the text, the view of the text as inert and unchanging can result in surrendering to the text, supplementing the text, or correcting the text.

Surrender to the text is a more characteristically Protestant approach and, carried to extremes, becomes a fundamentalist identification of meaning with literal sense. Even a sophisticated version of this "supremacy of the text" approach, such as the hermeneutics of consent proposed by Peter Stuhlmacher[9] has aroused the suspicions of scholars like Schüssler Fiorenza who fear that it is insufficiently critical of the oppressive potential of a patriarchal document such as the New Testament.[10]

The more characteristically Catholic approach to the text viewed as unchanging and inert is to supplement it, or even to modify its meaning, by recourse to tradition. In its extreme form this approach becomes a magisterial literalism which identifies the meaning of the text with subsequent church teaching regardless of scientific evidence to the contrary provided by critical scholarship. Even the more sophisticated forms of this "subordination of the text" approach run the risk of so separating what the text meant from what the text means that the biblical message itself appears either unavailable to or irrelevant for the contemporary believer who is, in any case, safer relying on church teaching than trying to interpret such a mysterious, ancient, and baffling a document.

Surprisingly enough, the same view of the text as inert and unchanging underlies the radically critical approach of some feminist critics who feel obliged to repudiate as non-revelatory those texts which are oppressive of women.[11] Schüssler Fiorenza's criticism of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Letty Russell centers on their efforts to interact with the text in a way that affirms the text as a whole as source of liberation even as they criticize its patriarchal and androcentric language and content.[12] What all of these approaches, radically different as they are, have in common is the static, indeed substantialist, view of the text as a "fixed semantic quantity" which underlies a basically positivistic approach to interpretation.

A genuinely hermeneutical approach to the text as conversation partner demands a more dynamic understanding of the text as both modifiable and modifying. Even to suggest such a thing strikes the same terror in the heart of biblicists that process theology's conception of a changing God strikes in the heart of classicist theologians. But let us consider what it would mean to view the biblical text not as a closed and static "thing" but as an open and dynamic reality, open both because of the history of its effects[13] and because its meaning is not sealed within it as in a semantic container but is constituted by the interaction of text and reader.[14]

I think we have a very apt cultural analogy by which to explore both this double openness of the biblical text and the three-way relationship among the historical event of revelation in Jesus, the text which witnesses to that event, and the reader who is transformed by interaction with the open text through which he or she comes to understand the self-gift of God in Jesus. The analogy is the American experience of the Vietnam War.

At first sight the war in Southeast Asia seems to be a closed historical event which began and ended and which is now and forever what it was when the last shot was fired. But in fact

this is not the case. At first most of us tried to close the book on this horrible event. We repudiated the war as something we should never have waged, rejected the returning survivors, and built no monuments to remind ourselves of this national fiasco. But there were survivors: veterans who became street people and screamed in the night; children with blond hair and oriental eyes who lived in a no-children's land between two cultures; parents and spouses who lived with the hoping hopelessness of unburied loved ones who were listed only as "missing in action"; and all of us who just did not know how to think or talk about a war we did not win. This is what is meant by "effective history." It is the history that is generated by an historical event and becomes part of that event, keeping it open into the future and changing it even after it has seemingly ended.

And then, after awhile, some texts began to appear, interpreting the event. They were mainly films like "Coming Home," "Apocalypse Now," "Killing Fields," "The Deer Hunter," and "Platoon." Each text was a certain interpretation of the event, another understanding that raised new and often deeper questions about what that war really meant not only for relations between countries but for us as a people, for us as human beings, for us as a world community. A monument was eventually built but it was not a heroic statue like the Iwo Jima memorial to strong men raising the American flag against all odds. Vietnam had no heroes. But it had an endless succession of victims, some very brave and noble and some just tragic, whose names stretched on and on in black marble. We began to hold ceremonies at "the Wall" and to listen to the slow intoning of the names of the dead tolling, tolling, tolling like an endless funeral bell in the cavern of our national consciousness. In these texts and rituals we are encountering the reality of the War, the historical event, again and again and going ever more deeply into its meaning. We have not repudiated our first judgement that this was a senseless and evil war that should never have been fought. But we cannot escape some of the questions about why it was fought; we cannot evade the fact that somehow we, and not just the people in uniform, waged it; we cannot avoid recognizing that the motives that fueled that war are relentlessly driving other aspects of our national life and international conduct; we cannot finally deny the endless ambiguity and frightening presence of that war which will not go away.

The texts are generating their own effective history which corresponds to and is part of the effective history of the event itself. Both the event of the war and the texts through which we try to understand it and to witness to what we understand are open and changing.

But the texts are open in a second sense as well. The texts, i.e., the films and poems and books about the war, and the rituals and monument, are also open-ended because each effort at interpretation, each interaction between us and the texts, makes us see the event itself in new ways even as we see ourselves in new ways. In other words, the texts which seem to be a fixed and static historical quantity, are open and changing not only because of the history they are generating but also because their meaning is only constituted fully in the interaction between them

and us. And therefore, the texts which are the locus of our interaction with the historical event are open, taking on new meaning as we re-read them, as we see the films again, and as they enter into relationship with each other.

To the extent that we come, through the texts, to understand our national experience of a war we neither won nor lost, which has no heroes but which has new victims every day, which symbolizes the stalemate of our endless competition with other peoples and our ruthless sacrifice of the environment to the cause of domination, we will be transformed. A new praxis will have to be found, a way of being which does not turn veterans into heroes but which will stop turning victims into scapegoats to disguise our own guilt; a praxis which cannot make us not guilty but which will challenge us beyond guilt to responsibility for finding an alternative to war. In other words, we do not totally abandon our first interpretation but as our understanding deepens we move beyond the rigidity of simplistic judgements about good and evil and undergo the metanoia, the change of mind, the conversion that leads to spiritual maturity.

In this analogy we can see that both an historical event and the texts by which we try to interpret it are open and dynamic, changing as they generate an effective history which becomes part of their reality and as we, the interpreters, interact with the event through the texts and thereby help to constitute a surplus of meaning of the texts themselves. The texts become richer and deeper. They mean more and they mean differently than did when they were first filmed or sculpted. But although they now exceed the conscious intention of the artists who produced them their interpretation is still governed by that intention. A trajectory of interpretation has been inaugurated by the work itself and there is a limit to the shape if not to the richness of legitimate development.

Something very similar is at work in our encounter with the New Testament texts. The revelatory event of Jesus, which seemed to have ended with his death and departure, has generated a rich and densely ambiguous effective history, a history which is now part of the Jesus-event itself. Part of that effective history is the texts, especially the canonical Gospels, which have been written to interpret the event and these texts themselves have generated complex effective histories through the interaction of generations of readers with them. Thus, neither the Jesus-event as history nor the Gospels as texts can be considered closed or static. And it is precisely this open and dynamic quality which grounds the possibility of a conversation with the texts and through them a revelatory encounter which is not a mere mimicking of the experience of the first generation of christians but a transforming understanding, a contemporary praxis through which we pursue that life-project of integration which I have called our spirituality.

The hermeneutical conversation begins with a question, a question about which both text and reader are concerned. The question might be one addressed to us or raised for us by the text itself or one we bring to the text from our experience in our world. Usually, it arises from a complex interaction of text and experience. For example, we are especially exercised today

by the women's question: what is the place and role of women in family, society, and Church; how can the equality of women be understood and guaranteed; how can the long history of patriarchal oppression of women be ended and men and women reconciled? This question is coming to us from our world under the influence of the women's movement but it may well be that the women's movement itself is to some extent the result of the influence on western consciousness of Scripture with its message of equal human dignity for all and of God's preferential love for the oppressed.

The hermeneutical conversation, inaugurated by a question, now proceeds in a back and forth play between interpreter and text, a process in which both the text and the interpreter are both modifying and modified by reciprocal interaction. The woman reader, for example, long accustomed to inferiority in family and Church but newly sensitized by the feminist movement, may begin by noting joyfully the liberating praxis of Jesus, his respectful attitude and egalitarian behavior toward women as it is recorded in the Gospels. Changed and empowered by this understanding she presents herself for service in the local christian community only to be degraded and rejected in the name of a patriarchal God who insists that "his" ministers resemble "him" and "his Son". Angrily, the reader returns to the text and, in the light of this experience, now is able to see that, indeed, the text does present God in overwhelmingly masculine language and imagery. The text has become the enemy. Alienated, she turns to a feminist worship group where she hears proclaimed passages like Mt. 13:33 in which God is imaged as a Bakerwoman and Jn. 3:3-6 in which God is imaged as the mother Spirit who gives birth to the believer. She begins to suspect that just as these passages have passed unnoticed or been distorted by masculinizing interpretation perhaps others have been also and so she returns to the text with new eyes. No longer are metaphors of God, whether masculine or feminine, mistaken for dogmatic descriptions; no longer are male God-images assumed to be more significant than female ones. The text, in other words, has changed as the reader has changed. It is not the words of the text that have been altered but the effective history of the text which is part of its reality is different and its meaning, which is constituted in and through interaction with the reader, has deepened and expanded.

The conversation, especially when it is about very sensitive and significant questions like that of women's equality and dignity, will go on for a long time. In the process issues of textual criticism, exegesis, history, sociology, theology, ideology and the like will have to be raised, investigated, and adjudicated. Explanation and argument are essential to the understanding of difficult questions. But the hermeneutical question is not essentially one of facts. The search does not terminate in knowledge of what the text says about women or even in the knowledge of what that which the text says about women means, although such knowledge plays an indispensable role in the conversation. The search continues, through the conversation between text and interpreter, until we come to an understanding of the truth about the question, a truth which will seldom be a propositional answer from the text but which will be generated in the interaction of

text and interpreter and will then judge both. Arriving at the truth about the question means achieving a transforming understanding by which our mind is changed (metanoia) so that we exist differently through a transformative praxis which witnesses to the truth at which we have arrived. In short, interpretation terminates in spirituality.

Applying Hermeneutical Theory to the Question of Jesus

At this point I would like, very briefly, to raise the question of what such an approach to biblical interpretation might suggest about the central question of the New Testament: Who is Jesus? I will focus on the Gospel of John because it is this Gospel, more than any other New Testament document, which makes this question central. In John's Gospel, as our colleague William Countryman points out in his new book, we have to do with a christian community "which has staked its identity on the belief that the individual historical person Jesus is of decisive importance for human relationship with God."[15] Jesus, according to this Gospel, is the unique and absolute manifestation of God in this world, God's very incarnation, and therefore the exclusive way to God for every human being. Nowhere in the New Testament does the scandal of particularity appear so starkly. Indeed, we might even speak of a scandal of exclusivism.

It is difficult to trace the origin of the question of Jesus-centrism which has become so acute in our own time. No doubt the claim that Jesus is the unique, absolute, and exclusive savior of humanity was less problematic in the context of medieval Europe coextensive with christendom than it is today. But could anyone ever have dealt seriously with John's Gospel without wondering how its universalist dynamic rooted in the claim that the sending of the Son was motivated by God's intense love for the world (Jn. 3:16) and God's intention to draw into unity not only the nation of Israel but all the children of God scattered abroad (Jn. 11:51-52) could be reconciled not only with the apparent exclusion from salvation of all who never heard of Jesus but also with the virulent animosity toward "the Jews" that comes to expression repeatedly in this Gospel?

But if the text itself raises the question of how God, ruler of the universe and redeemer of every creature, could be so identified with one human being that that person becomes the unique and absolute point of access to God, the question is even more acutely raised by the effective history of the text. It is a tragic fact that the Gospel of John has played a significant role, by its historically understandable intra-Jewish anti-Judaism, in the development of post-New Testament anti-Semitism which culminated in the unspeakable evil of the Holocaust. Furthermore, Christian imperialism from the Crusades to the colonization of this continent was rooted in the conviction that christianity was the only true religion, absolutely necessary for the salvation of every human being.

If the text, both as it stands and in the negative effective history it has generated, raises the question of christian exclusivism and superiority, so does our experience in the world. In recent times, as our inter-cultural experience has broadened and

deepened, we have had further cause to be uncomfortable about judging as inferior, indeed outside the pale of salvation, the adherents of those great eastern traditions which have graced humanity with such religious wisdom and with such intellectual, artistic, and moral beauty.

Furthermore, few adults have not met, at least on occasion, non-believers or even professed atheists whose lives of integrity and selfless service to their fellow human beings make it very difficult to believe that only card-carrying christians will sit down at the eschatological banquet.

Finally, the feminist analysis of patriarchy has helped us to see that there is an intrinsic connection among all hierarchical claims based on dichotomous dualisms. Anti-semitism, racism, colonialism, clericalism, sexism, and classism share a common root with claims to cultural and religious superiority.

In short, the exclusivist claims of christianity which come to particularly explicit formulation in the Gospel of John have raised a serious question for those of us who, on the one hand experience and hope for salvation in the Name of Jesus and on the other cannot subscribe with integrity either to the theology which excludes from hope some of our brothers and sisters or to the dominative praxis that such an understanding of the Gospel supports.[16]

It is in the face of just such a question that the approach to biblical interpretation as a hermeneutics of transformation can offer both hope and challenge. We will look in vain in the New Testament for either an explicit textual endorsement of non-christian religions as paths to salvation or for an answer to the question of how an infinitely merciful God can will the salvation of so few of God's creatures. If our scholarship terminates in critical exegesis, in the establishment of what the text says and what it meant when it was written, we are condemned at least to division if not to violence.

However, if the text is truly open and opens us to an historical event of revelation in Jesus which is also open, then we can engage this question as well as others in the confident hope that we will find an answer. As we bring to the conversation <u>our experience</u> of fruitful interreligious dialogue, our shame and remorse over the violence and oppression in our religious history, our conviction that the unity of the human family is rooted in the oneness of God we will elicit from the text <u>its</u> <u>witness</u> to God's universal salvific will somehow expressed in the particularity of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus' own inclusive praxis toward Samaritans and Gentiles and his own Jewishness which he never foreswore, and the tentative reaching toward inclusiveness of the early christian community which could hardly have dreamed that such a question as ours would ever arise but which felt and witnessed to the stirrings of a universalism it could not interpret.

The biblical text alone cannot give us the answer to this question upon which hangs, in some measure, the future of the race. But the text, understood not as static semantic container but as dynamic conversation partner in the quest for understanding, also does not limit our search for an answer to what first century authors were able to understand of the revelatory experi-

ence in Jesus to which they bore witness in the New Testament texts. In the course of our conversation with the text we will allow it to correct itself and to correct us. But we will also recognize its limitations as the fully human word that it is even as it bears witness to the divine. We will take seriously those limitations, including its errors for there are some, by insisting on the validity of our own best insights from other sources and by pursuing with single-minded passion the truth about the questions upon which the integrity of our lives depend.

Conclusion

I return to my starting point, the question: To what does the vocation to biblical scholarship call one? What is the end, the goal of biblical interpretation? My answer is that biblical interpretation is essentially a hermeneutics of transformation. Through the laborious process, involving the responsible use of all the critical tools and methods at our disposal, of interacting with the biblical text about those questions which really matter to us as human beings we intend to facilitate for others what we hope for ourselves, that transformative understanding of the truth which is the world-transforming praxis of an adult spirituality. It is our task and our privilege to continue in the Word until we come to know the truth that sets us free.

Sandra M. Schneiders
Graduate Theological Union
Berkeley, California

Notes

1. Cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Contemporary Biblical Scholarship: Its Roots, Present Understandings, and Future Directions," Modern Biblical Scholarship: Its Impact on Theology and Proclamation, [Proceedings of the Theology Institute of Villanova University, vol. XVI], ed. F. A. Eigo (Villanova: Villanova University, 1984), pp. 2-3.

2. Sallie McFague, Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 33. For an extended treatment of this subject, see McFague's Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), esp. pp.31-42.

3. On the subject of witness see Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," Essays on Biblical Interpretation, ed. by L. S. Mudge (Philadephia: Fortress, 1980) 119-154.

4. I borrow this description from Terence J. Keegan, Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics (New York: Paulist, 1985), esp. pp. 3-8.

5. For a good explanation of this conception of the world-understanding relationship, derived from Martin Heidegger's Being and Time, see Richard E. Palmer, Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1969), pp. 132-134.

6. On this subject see Nicholas Lash, "What Might Martyrdom Mean?" Ex Auditu 1 (1985) pp. 22-24.

7. Tracy relies for his notion of the classical on Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 253-258.

8. David Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), esp. pp. 1-27.

9. Peter Stuhlmacher, Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent, tr. R. A. Harrisville (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

10. Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Contemporary Biblical Scholarship," pp. 15-18. I do not think that Schüssler Fiorenza properly understands the approach of Gadamer, Stuhlmacher and others in the stream of thought she calls "consensual hermeneutics" (including myself) but she raises an important caution which is similar to that of Jürgen Habermas about "systematically distorted communication." For a brief treatment of the Gadamer-Habermas "hermeneutic dispute", see Josef Bleicher, Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 152-164.

11. See, for example, E. Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of

Her: A Feminist Theological REconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p. 33, and Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation (Boston: Beacon, 1984), p. 60, and elsewhere.

12. Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, pp. 14-21. For their own presentations of their theories, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation," and Letty M. Russell, "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," in Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, ed. L. M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), pp. 111-124 and 137-146 respectively. For critical summaries of feminist hermeneutical positions, see Mary Ann Tolbert, "Defining the Problem: The bible and Feminist Hermeneutics," The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics [Semeia 28], ed. M. A. Tolbert (Chico: Scholars, 1983) 113-126 and Carolyn Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship, ed. A. Y. Collins (Chico: Scholars, 1985) 93-106.

13. The theory of effective historical consciousness or wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstsein was developed by Gadamer in Truth and Method, pp. 305-341. For an readable explanation of the concept, see Palmer, Hermeneutics, pp. 191-193.

14. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976), pp. 31-32.

15. L. William Countryman, The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel: Crossing Over into God (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 11.

16. For a comprehensive treatment of this issue, see Paul F. Knitter, No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions [American Society of Missiology Series, No. 7] (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986).