



Reading for Theology Breakfast June 2009

“An Introduction to Liberation Theology”

1

Wikipedia Entry for Gustavo Gutierrez

Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino, O.P. (born 8 June 1928 in Lima) is a Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest regarded as the founder of Liberation Theology. He holds the John Cardinal O'Hara Professorship of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. He has been professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru and a visiting professor at many major universities in North America and Europe. He is a member of the Peruvian Academy of Language, and in 1993 he was awarded the Legion of Honour by the French government for his tireless work. He has also published in and been a member of the board of directors of the international journal, *Concilium*.

Gutierrez spent much of his life living and working among the poor of Lima. He has studied medicine and literature (Peru), psychology and philosophy (Leuven), and obtained a doctorate at the Institut Pastoral d'Etudes Religieuses (IPER), Université Catholique in Lyon.

Gutiérrez is of Native American heritage, being of mixed Quechua descent, and he is the most influential Peruvian scholar of all time. In September 1984, a special assembly of Peruvian bishops were summoned to Rome for the express purpose of condemning Gutiérrez, but the bishops held firm.

Gutiérrez's groundbreaking work, **A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation** (1971), explains his notion of Christian poverty as an act of loving solidarity with the poor as well as a liberatory protest against poverty.

2

Extracts from an Address given by James Cone: “The Cross and the Lynching Tree”

One has to have a powerful religious imagination to see redemption in the cross, to discover life in death and hope in tragedy.

"Christianity," Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "is a faith which takes us through tragedy to beyond tragedy, by way of the cross to victory in the cross."

What kind of salvation is that? To understand what the cross means in America, we need to take a good long look at the lynching tree in this nation's history -- "the bulging eyes and twisted mouth," that "strange fruit" that Billie Holiday sang about, "blood on the leaves and blood at the root." The lynched black victim experienced the same fate as the crucified Christ.

The cross and the lynching tree interpret each other. Both were public spectacles, usually reserved for hardened criminals, rebellious slaves, and rebels against the Roman state and falsely accused militant blacks who were often called "black beasts" and "monsters in human form" for their audacity to challenge white supremacy in America. Any genuine theology and any genuine preaching must be measured against the test of the scandal of the cross and the lynching tree.

"Jesus did not die a gentle death like Socrates, with his cup of hemlock.... Rather, he died like a [lynched black victim] or a common [black] criminal in torment, on the tree of shame" (Hengel). The crowd's shout, "Crucify him! (Mark 15:14), anticipated the white mob's shout, "Lynch him!" Jesus' agonizing final cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) was similar to the Georgia lynching victim Sam Hose's awful scream, as he drew his last breath, "Oh my God! Oh, Jesus."

In each case, it was a cruel, agonizing, and contemptible death.

The cross and the lynching tree need each other: the lynching tree can liberate the cross from the false pieties of well-meaning Christians.

The crucifixion was a first-century lynching.

The cross can redeem the lynching tree, and thereby bestow upon lynched black bodies an eschatological meaning for their ultimate existence.

The cross can also redeem white lynchers, and their descendants, too, but not without profound cost, not without the revelation of the wrath and justice of God, which executes divine judgment, with the demand for repentance and reparation, as a presupposition of divine mercy and forgiveness. Most whites want mercy and forgiveness, but not justice and reparations; they want reconciliation without liberation, the resurrection without the cross.

As preachers and theologians, we must demonstrate the truth of our proclamation and theological reflection in the face of the cross and the lynched black victims in America's past and present. When we encounter the crucified Christ today, he is a humiliated black Christ, a lynched black body.

Christ is black not because black theology said it. Christ is made black through God's loving solidarity with lynched black bodies and divine judgment against the demonic forces of white supremacy. Like a black naked body swinging on a lynching tree, the cross of Christ was "an utterly offensive affair," "obscene in the original sense of the word," "subjecting the victim to the utmost indignity."

In a penetrating essay, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote about "the terrible beauty of the cross."

"Only a tragic and a suffering love can be an adequate symbol of what we believe to be at the heart of reality itself." The cross prevents God's love from sinking into sentimentality and romanticism. "Life is too brutal and the cosmic facts are too indifferent to our moral ventures to make faith in any but a suffering God tenable."

The gospel of Jesus is not a beautiful Hollywood story. It is an ugly story, the story of God snatching victory out of defeat, finding life in death, transforming burning black bodies into transcendent windows for seeing the love and beauty of God.

The church's most vexing problem today is how to define itself by the gospel of Jesus' cross as revealed through lynched black bodies in American history. Where is the gospel of Jesus' cross revealed today? Where are black bodies being lynched today?

The lynching of black America is taking place in the criminal justice system where nearly one-third of black men between the ages of 18 and 28 are in prisons and jails, on parole, or waiting for their day in court. One-half of the two million people in prisons are black. That is one million black people behind bars, more than in colleges. Through private prisons, whites have turned the brutality of their racist legal system into a profit-making venture for dying white towns and cities throughout America. One can lynch a person without a rope or tree.

The civil rights movement did not end lynching. It struck a mighty blow to the most obvious brutalities, like the lynching of Emmett Till and the violence of the Ku Klux Klan.

But whenever society treats a people as if they have no rights or dignity or worth, as the government did to blacks during the Katrina storm, they are being lynched covertly.

Whenever people are denied jobs, health care, housing, and the basic necessities of life, they are being lynched. There are a lot of ways to lynch a people. Whenever a people cry out to be recognized as human beings and society ignores them, they are being lynched.

People who have never been lynched by another group usually find it difficult to understand why blacks want whites to remember lynching atrocities. Why bring that up? That was a long time ago! Is it not best forgotten? Absolutely not!

The lynching tree is a metaphor for race in America, a symbol of America's crucifixion of black people. It is the window that best reveals the theological meaning of the cross in this land. In this sense, black people are Christ-figures, not because we want to be but because we had no choice about being lynched, just as Jesus had no choice in his journey to Calvary. Jesus did not want to die on the cross, and blacks did not want to swing from the lynching tree. But the evil forces of the Roman State and white supremacy in America willed it.

Yet God took the evil of the cross and the lynching tree upon the divine self and transformed both into the triumphant beauty of the divine.

If America has the courage to confront the great sin and ongoing legacy of white supremacy, with repentance and reparation, there is hope beyond the tragedy -- hope for whites, blacks, and all humankind -- hope beyond the lynching tree.

3

Extracts from "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship" by *Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza given at the Society of Biblical Literature.*

Almost from its beginning women scholars have joined the procession of American biblical scholars.⁹ In 1889, not quite one hundred years ago, Anna Rhoads Ladd became the first female member of this Society. Ten years later in 1899, Mary Emma Woolley, since 1895 chair of the Department of Biblical History, Literature and Exegesis at Wellesley College, and from 1900 to 1937 President of Mount Holyoke College, is listed in attendance at the annual meeting. In 1913 Professor Louise Pettibone Smith, who also served later in 1950–1951 as secretary of the Society, was the first woman to publish an article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. Mary J. Hussy of Mount Holyoke College had held the post of treasurer already in 1924–1926. At the crest of the first wave of American feminism, women's membership in 1920 was around 10 percent. Afterwards it steadily declined until it achieved a low of 3.5 percent in 1970. Presently the Society does not have a data base sufficient to compute the percentage of its white women and minority members.

The second wave of the women's movement made itself felt at the annual meeting of 1971, when the Women's Caucus in Religious Studies was organized, whose first co-chairs were Professor Carol Christ of AAR and myself of SBL. A year later, at the International Congress of Learned Societies in Los Angeles, the Caucus called for representation of women on the various boards and committees of the Society, the anonymous submission and evaluation of manuscripts for *JBL*, and the establishment of a job registry through CSR. At the business meeting two women were elected to the council and one to the executive board. Fifteen years later, I am privileged to inaugurate what will, it is hoped, be a long line of women presidents, consisting not only of white women but also women of color, who are woefully under represented in the discipline. The historic character of this moment is cast into relief when one considers that in Germany not a single woman has achieved the rank of ordinary professor in one of the established Roman Catholic theological faculties. However, the mere admission of women into the ranks of scholarship and the various endeavors of the Society does not necessarily assure that biblical scholarship is done in the interest and from the perspective of women or others marginal to the academic enterprise. Historian Dorothy Bass, to whom we owe most of our information about women's historical participation in the SBL, has pointed to a critical difference between the women of the last century who, as scholars, joined the Society and those women who sought for a scientific investigation of the Bible in the interest of women.

Feminist biblical scholarship has its roots not in the academy but in the social movements for the emancipation of slaves and of freeborn women. Against the assertion that God has sanctioned the system of slavery and intended the subordination of women, the Grimké sisters, Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, and others distinguished between the oppressive anti-Christian traditions of men and the life-giving intentions of God. Many reformers of the nineteenth-century shared the conviction that women must learn the original languages of Greek and Hebrew in order to produce unbiased translations and interpretations faithful to the original divine intentions of the Bible.

Nineteenth century feminists were well aware that higher biblical criticism provided a scholarly grounding of their arguments. Women's rights leaders such as Frances Willard and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were the most explicit in calling on women to learn the methods of higher biblical criticism in order to critique patriarchal religion.

Although Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the editorial committee of the *Woman's Bible* sought to utilize the insights and methods of "higher criticism" for interpreting the biblical texts on women, no alliance between feminist biblical interpretation and historical-critical scholarship was forged in the nineteenth century. Cady Stanton had invited distinguished women scholars "versed in biblical criticism" to contribute to the *Woman's Bible* project. But her invitation was declined because—as she states—"they were afraid that their reputation and scholarly attainments might be compromised."

This situation continued well into the first half of the century. In the 1920s Rev. Lee Anna Starr and Dr. Katherine Bushnell, both outside the profession, used their knowledge of biblical languages and higher criticism to analyze the status of women in the Bible and the theological bases for women's role in scripture.

The androcentric character of biblical texts and interpretations was not addressed by a woman scholar until 1964 when Margaret Brackenbury Crook, a longstanding member of the SBL and professor of Biblical Literature at Smith College, published *Women and Religion*.

Although Brackenbury Crook repeatedly claimed that she did not advocate feminism or animosity toward men but that as a scholar she was simply stating the facts on the basis of evidence, she did so in order to insist that the masculine monopoly in biblical religions must be broken and that women must participate in shaping religious thought, symbols, and traditions. In the context of the women's movements in the seventies and eighties, women scholars have not only joined the procession of educated men but have also sought to do so in the interest of women. We no longer deny our feminist engagement for the sake of scholarly acceptance. Rather we celebrate tonight

the numerous feminist publications, papers, and monographs of SBL members that have not only enhanced our knowledge about women in the biblical worlds but have also sought to change our methods of reading and reconstruction, as well as our hermeneutical perspectives and scholarly assumptions.

The Women in the Biblical World Section has since 1981 consistently raised issues of method and hermeneutics that are of utmost importance for the wider Society. And yet, whether and how much our work has made serious inroads in biblical scholarship remain to be seen. The following anecdote can highlight what I mean. I am told that after I had been elected president of the Society a journalist asked one of the leading officers of the organization whether I had been nominated because the Society wanted to acknowledge not only my active participation in its ongoing work but also my theoretical contributions both to the reconstruction of Christian origins and to the exploration of a critical biblical hermeneutic and rhetoric.

He reacted with surprise at such a suggestion and assured her that I was elected because my work on the book of Revelation proved me to be a solid and serious scholar.

Interpretive communities such as SBL are not just scholarly investigative communities, but also authoritative communities. They possess the power to ostracize or to embrace, to foster or to restrict membership, to recognize and to define what "true scholarship" entails. The question today is no longer whether women should join the procession of educated men, but under what conditions we can do so. What kind of ethos, ethics, and politics of the community of biblical scholars would allow us to move our work done in "the interest of women" from the margins to the centre of biblical studies?