

## LIVING WORD OR DEAD(LY) LETTER

### *A Response to Sandra Schneiders*

It is a joy for me and a special honor to be able to respond to Prof. Sandra Schneider's fine paper. Schneiders takes up an issue of supreme importance to theology and to the life of the Church, namely, the encounter between the Scriptures and contemporary experience. She writes with passion and insight and I have learned a great deal from her thoughtful posing of the issues.

In my response let me first, as a reality check, restate what I consider to be the heart of her thesis, and then offer some reactions that I hope will be useful for our discussion.

#### *The Thesis*

Prof. Schneiders contends that contemporary experience challenges, perhaps with unprecedented urgency, both the relevance and authority of the Bible for the believing Christian. Relevance, in that some of the complex problems arising from modern experience are such that Scripture "not only does not deal explicitly" with them, but they are "not even implicitly or in principle handled in the sacred text." Some examples she cites are issues connected with medicine and genetics, weapons of mass destruction, the global economy, interfaith dialogue and the cosmological implications of the new physics.

Even more problematic is the conviction on the part of at least some modern Christians that the Scripture itself causes and/or legitimates "some of the worst developments in human history." Here she refers to such issues as apartheid, slavery, anti-semitism, homophobia, genocidal colonization in the name of evangelization, witch-hunts and the major problems of patriarchy and sexism.

Traditional Catholicism may have finessed such challenges to the relevance and authority of the Bible through its reliance on the normative role of the tradition and the magisterium. But with the modern biblical renewal reaffirming the proper role of the Scriptures at the center of the Church's life and thought such a refuge is no longer adequate or desirable.

How to cope with these profound challenges to the role of the Scriptures in Christian life? Schneiders suggests three resources that can provide a hermeneutical framework capable of maintaining the integrity of contemporary experience as well as the revelatory character of the biblical text.

(1) Gadamer's notion of "effective history" bonds present experience to past event, perceiving that history is not free standing or fixed but exists only as influencing and being influenced by the present.

(2) Ricoeur and others make us aware that the meaning of a text is not limited to the intent of its real author or its original audience or its original sociohistorical context. A text, including the biblical text, is capable of multiple meanings, ruled neither by past event nor past author but by the linguistic structures of the text itself and by the capacities of the contemporary reader.

(3) Professor Schneiders gives special attention to feminist hermeneutics for here the challenges to biblical authority are particularly acute. The Bible's, and in particular the New Testament's role in "legitimizing the oppression of women in family, society, and Church" and the fact that its androcentric and patriarchal bias is not limited to a few texts but "pervades the text from one end to the other" (p. 20) make the Scriptures problematic for many feminists, even to point of abandoning all hope that the Bible could ever serve as a norm for contemporary Christian life.

Schneiders is convinced that an adequate response can be developed not simply by dealing with individual problem passages but through the development of a comprehensive interpretive approach to the Bible as a whole. Therefore the significance of the approach to history and to the interpretation of texts supplied by Gadamer and Ricoeur. Neither a rigid positivistic approach which sees both historical events and text as having univocal meanings nor even a sophisticated historical-critical methodology is adequate. Understanding history as "effective history" and texts as generating multiple meanings allows room for contemporary experience.

#### *Evaluation*

Such, I believe, is the heart of Prof. Schneiders' thesis—although if my summary does not capture her auctorial intent, I can take refuge in the theory of multiple interpretations. . . . Allow me to interact with some aspects of this fine paper.

1. First of all, I think Prof. Schneiders is surely right that biblical interpretation cannot properly incorporate contemporary experience if it is wedded to a static view of history and an archaeological view of interpretation that digs down to find the lodestone of the original author's intention and context as the sole legitimate meaning of the text. More subtle views of history and theories of literary criticism have come as a storm through the biblical field in recent years, challenging not only naive historicism but also those who considered historical-critical methodologies to be the only serious approach. As Schneiders states, historical-critical methodologies should not be abandoned but neither should they have hegemony in the art of interpretation.

In fact, modern biblical criticism is having to relearn a lesson from the ancients whose views about the potential meaning of the biblical text always went beyond the merely historical or literal and thereby left room for their contemporary religious experience.

2. Secondly, I think Schneiders' paper ends up in the right place. It is

salutary that we find in the Scriptures, as in the history of the Christian community and the very structures of the Church, witness not only to transcendent religious truth but also to the salutary truth of our human limitations.

In fact, I think there is a symmetry between the more supple understanding of interpretation described here and the deepest and long held instincts of Catholic Christianity about the nature of the Bible. Even before Clarence Darrow went to work on William Jennings Bryan, classical Catholic thought had hesitated about claims of verbal inspiration and therefore comprehensive inerrancy for the Bible. Such a theology could not adequately take into account the evident human nature of the biblical text nor could it incorporate the essential role that the community and oral tradition play in the composition of the text. The subtleties of "instrumental causality," more recent theories of "social inspiration," and *Dei Verbum's* understanding of inerrancy as relating only to those truths necessary for salvation are symptoms in Catholic tradition of an attempt to take seriously the thoroughly human character of the Scriptures, including the ecclesial milieu of their formation, while not abandoning the conviction that the Bible is God's Word.

3. Allow me to turn now to some nuances I would add to Prof. Schneiders' paper. First of all, while I think I am prepared theologically and spiritually to concede that the Bible may not be relevant to every contemporary problem or even that it may have a destructive or legitimating role for some of them, I think the paper gives too much ground here.

Do we really want to concede that the Scriptures have nothing either explicitly or implicitly, not even "in principle," to say about such contemporary issues as medicine and genetics, nuclear weapons, the global economy, the encounter with the world religions, and the meaning of the cosmos? I realize that a biblical theology on any of these issues is not the responsibility of Schneiders' paper nor of my response. But I am firmly convinced that in each of these areas and many other contemporary issues of equal complexity, the biblical witness has much to say. Obviously the biblical world did not know about DNA or viruses, much less about neutron bombs, theories of relativity, or the brutalities of the modern world market place. But it does know about covenantal responsibilities of justice; it understands the sacredness of human flesh and human life; it appreciates, in a way modern technological medicine has yet to discover, the relational, communal and symbolic dynamics in healing and reconciliation; it has profound and challenging things to say about violence and peacemaking; and it wrestles repeatedly with the meaning of the cosmos in relationship to the transcendent reality of God and the destiny of humanity.

My protest on this point is not to defend the Bible but relates precisely to the issue of interpretation that concerns us in this session. Does not the assertion that the Bible is irrelevant concerning these contemporary issues, presumably because the text originated in a different time and culture and therefore has "nothing to say" on these modern realities, risk ending up precisely where Schneiders' paper warns us not to tread, namely, conceiving of the Bible in a

static and positivistic sense? Is not, for example, the contention that the Bible has nothing to say, explicitly or implicitly, on an issue such as nuclear weapons—since obviously such weapons did not exist in the first century—uncomfortably close to the interpretive position that women should not be ordained because they were not ordained by Jesus at the last supper?

A need for restraint or at least precision before conceding that the Bible is irrelevant for such key human and moral issues holds with equal or greater force, it seems to me, before conceding that the Scriptures cause or legitimate “some of the worst developments in human history.” The examples cited in the paper are instructive. Does the fact that the government of South Africa appeals to the Tower of Babel story in Gen 11:1-9 serve as an indictment of the Bible or of the government of South Africa? And few biblical interpreters today would want to say simply that Ephesians 6:5-6 could be used as a justification for the institution of slavery, or that John’s Gospel is simply “anti-semitic” or even “anti-Jewish,” or that some passages in Paul are a justification for “homophobia.” My litany could go on in reference to each of the issues cited in the paper.

In each instance, Schneiders notes, “all have appeal(ed) to biblical texts which do, in fact, support at least the attitudes and often the practices which Christians now rightly abhor.” That statement is true as far as it goes. But the verb “appeals to” is quite important: is it, therefore, the Bible itself that is both irrelevant and even destructive, or is it a case that some of the effective history a particular individual or community brings to the text and some among the multiple readings that a reader draws from the text may in fact be destructive?

I think the question is more properly framed in terms of the latter and the distinction is not unimportant. And in my view here we encounter one of the liabilities of putting emphasis too strongly on notions of “effective history” and literary critical conceptions of a text’s autonomy in trying to make room for contemporary experience. Dutch Reformed white South Africans, after all, could interpret their history of domination of the indigenous blacks, their contemporary experience as it were, as God’s will and view the biblical dramas of exodus and possession of the land as “effectively” linked to their own colonialization and chokehold on political power—just as immigrants did to Native Americans on this continent. And in the light of that history, some white South Africans could claim legitimacy for their reading of the Scriptures as sanctions for their oppression of blacks, at least in the sense that it was one among many legitimate readings of the text, if not the only or normative one—a reading quite different from those a Bishop Desmond Tutu or a Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. might choose to make, but a reading just the same.

Yet I dare say in the view of all us here, and more importantly in the view of most of the worldwide Christian community, such a reading not only is without legitimation as a Christian interpretation of the text but is a perversion of the biblical witness.

What other elements, therefore, are needed to assure the kind of adequate and comprehensive hermeneutic Prof. Schneiders rightly calls for? At this point

I think two other elements deserve greater prominence in the hermeneutical framework that she attempts to construct.

(a) First of all I think that historical-critical methodology and its ability to provide information about the originating context of the text and even the past behind the text has an important, albeit not dominant role to play. This is particularly true since biblical criticism in recent years has deepened and broadened its understanding of what constitutes a historical context through attention to cultural, social and economic systems in the ancient world. Not all readings of the biblical text are legitimate, not only because they might step outside of the deep literary structures or surface codes of the text itself, as Schneiders noted in her paper, but also because they may stray too far from the historical character of the originating personages and events behind the biblical text and the impact of those events and personages on the original real author and the real audience of the text, and therefore even on the contours and structures of the text as we know it. More recent biblical criticism is increasingly reluctant to accept the kind of autonomy claimed for a text by some schools of literary criticism. To legitimately read the encoded literary structure of an ancient text, some critics contend, requires at least some knowledge of the historical and cultural dynamics of its original context.

In other words, I believe that within the purview of a critical hermeneutics, the range of meanings prompted by contemporary experience should be brought into a dialectic with the historical and culturally bound range of meanings that surrounded the original contexts in which the biblical writings were composed.

The issue of slavery provides a quick and convenient illustration of the ancillary yet still crucial role historical critical methodology can play in discerning legitimate readings.

While many Christians from the first century on may have considered slavery to be supported by the the biblical witness, that is not the most accurate way of describing the New Testament witness itself. Paul, after all, would not tolerate class differences to rule within the Christian community and had some very strong things to say to the Corinthians about this (I Cor 11:17-34). A slave was, in effect, not a slave within the Christian community. On this point in his letter to Philemon Paul went to some elaborate lengths to defend the equality of Onesimus with his former master Philemon, even though it was a matter of a potentially mortal offense to Paul's benefactor and friend, and would entail a substantial change in the social network and even the economy of Philemon's household.

In fact no biblical text I am aware of makes a case *for* slavery but Paul and other New Testament writings do make a case for *tolerating* some pervasive social circumstances in view of the passing nature of the world. Outside of the community a slave could and should remain a slave because the time was short. That may seem a very subtle distinction to some (particularly, perhaps, a slave) but in fact there is a world of difference between making a case for slavery and making a case for tolerating conditions of slavery in structures one considers

inherently corrupt and transitory. Precisely that difference, easily detectable by a literal reading of the text and historical-critical methodology, helps undermine those who would claim that the Bible in fact encourages or even affirms apartheid.

(b) But the role of historical-critical methodology is, also, not enough and I want to cite one final element in the interpretative process, namely the Christian community's role in proper interpretation of the biblical text. While at a given period or a given place, individuals and groups may read the biblical text in a destructive manner, such readings must ultimately stand the test of the collective wisdom of the Christian community as a whole and over time, a wisdom fed ultimately by the life of the Spirit within the community and the full span of the Christian tradition. As Schneiders notes, some of the Catholic insistence on the role of tradition in relationship to Scripture has been prompted by a concern to uphold the authority of the magisterium. But I believe there is more at stake here than simply support for Church authority.

To turn to the same illustration, even without historical-critical methodology the teaching Church never attempted to make a sustained case in favor of slavery. In fact, strange as it may seem to us at this juncture, many grass roots Church leaders in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Catholicism in the United States attempted to make a case for slavery on biblical and theological grounds; however, the wisdom of the broader Catholic community articulated by Rome countered and even formally condemned such attempts as contrary to the Gospel.

I think similar cases can be made on other issues as well. As you know, historical evidence suggests that the early postbiblical community did not sit easily with such questions as the use of violence or joining the military or having private property. Even though later Christian readers of the biblical text would find ways not only to tolerate but to bless the worst aberrations of these positions, a more thoughtful and biblically authentic interpretation ultimately emerges. My point is, the full range of the community's reading of the biblical witness, a reading encoded in the deepest currents of the community's life and thought, provides an important control on what is a legitimate Christian interpretation of Scripture, over and beyond the contours of the text established through literary criticism and historical-critical assessments about the original context.

This brings me finally to the profound and important issue that Prof. Schneiders treated in some detail, namely, the contemporary experience of feminism. I believe it is true that for biblical interpretation as in many other aspects of Christian life and practice, feminism raises questions that are more penetrating, comprehensive and challenging than those raised by almost any other contemporary experience. I would also agree with her that the biblical texts, coming as they do from ancient traditional cultures, have a pervasive androcentric and patriarchal perspective.

Nevertheless here, too, I think it is important to state the issue with precision and to bring all of the necessary elements of interpretation into play. Is it, in fact,

accurate that "the androcentric and patriarchal bias of the New Testament . . . pervades the text *from one end to the other*"? (Emphasis mine.) Such a bias is "pervasive," from the focus on the male disciples, through the exhortations about limiting the role of women in the assembly or in the household, even to the fact that Jesus is a male—but is this bias "from one end to the other," that is, does this androcentric and patriarchal bias rule without constraint in the biblical text?

As overwhelming as the bias may seem, particularly for those who experience suffering on account of it, is it not important also to affirm at least in the context of theological discourse that there are important countervailing currents within the New Testament? Much of this data has become well known to us in recent years: the significant and often countercultural presence of women in the Gospel narratives; the substantial numbers of women coworkers cited by Paul; the strong current of inclusion that marks the teaching and ministry of Jesus as a whole; the modifications introduced into texts as difficult and patriarchal as the household codes of the Pauline and Petrine literature; not to mention significant parts and dimensions of the New Testament where neither patriarchy nor androcentrism are at the heart of the matter. These and other fundamental currents of biblical theology reflect a vision of equality before God that paradoxically was proclaimed by the New Testament writers even as they and the early Christian communities struggled with its social significance.

This, I believe, is precisely Schneiders' point in citing Paul's radical vision of eschatological unity across classes, cultures and gender in the text of Gal 3:27-29 or the fact that such mutuality and equality had made an impact on the structures of the early community as evidenced in Paul's nearly offhanded reference to the prophetic role that women took in the assembly (I Cor 11:5).

Historical-critical methodology and the community's role in the interpretation of the Bible are crucial here, too. Historical-critical methodology—even though not adequate for the entire task of interpretation—at least prevents the modern Church from asserting that the subordinate role of women experienced in the Church is fully supported by the historical character of the early community and the biblical authors themselves. This is why reports of pontifical commissions on this subject get buried. In short, proper use of historical-critical methodology makes not an obstacle but an ally in allowing room for contemporary experience in biblical interpretation.

And even though at this moment in time it may be far less apparent, particularly to women and men who suffer oppression in the Church, the discerning role of the teaching community may yet assure a proper interpretation of this issue. While currently some Church authorities may deny women their full role in the Church and may appeal to a reading of the biblical text as part of their warrant for doing so, it is by no means clear that such a reading will withstand the test of time and consensus within the Christian community as a whole. Already, in fact, I believe the signs are clear not only in North America but in Europe and the Southern hemisphere that such a reading is not uniformly accepted as a legitimate one from a Christian perspective because it is out of

character with the totality of the Christian witness. Indeed, neither the North American bishops nor Pope John Paul II himself would be able or want to affirm a totally subordinate role of women as a legitimate interpretation of Scripture or of Christian tradition.

When all is said and done, it is often the case that a convergence of circumstances, timing, the swirl of historical forces secular and religious, and the heroic and prophetic voices of a few stir the Christian community to be able to understand the full potential of the biblical witness for contemporary experience. It might be said that Paul and the Christians of the first century Roman Empire could not see the full implications of their own vision on the economic and social institution of slavery precisely because they were so deeply immersed in the assumptions of that system. A theology of the just war might have seemed fully compatible with the biblical witness until the savagery of technological warfare and the madness of nuclear weaponry began to call into question the entire assumption about the legitimacy of armed conflict between nation states. Only then could the contemporary Church begin to discover that nonviolence and pacifism form a powerful strand of biblical and early Christian tradition. Only after the nineteenth century development of the notion of "culture" and the breakdown of colonialization in the wake of two world wars did the Church become conscious of how much it had read its Scriptures and imposed a model of church and liturgy deeply stamped by the limited perspective of Western culture; only then did it begin to retrieve a biblical problematic as old as the first council of Jerusalem.

In all of these issues, and many more now in process of emerging, prophetic voices and small pockets of Christians guaranteed throughout the centuries that inadequate or aberrant readings of the biblical witness and its accompanying theology could not claim absolute hegemony. The same I believe, and hope, is becoming true for the issue of sexism.

In summary, I believe that a hermeneutical framework that enables the Christian to hold in balance the integrity of contemporary experience and the authority of the Scriptures requires not only a renewed sense of history and a recognition of the potential for multiple readings of a text, but also a rigorous historical-critical perspective and the moderating wisdom of the Christian community and its tradition.

In conclusion, I want to thank Prof. Schneiders for a most stimulating paper, one unafraid to tackle such challenging issues. My own comments, I hope, amplify the work she has done on our behalf. Thank you.

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