

THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS AND CRITICAL THEORIES—  
INTEREST GROUP

Convener: Bradford Hinze, Fordham University  
Moderator: Anthony Godzieba, Villanova University  
Presenters: Sandra Schneiders, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara  
University  
Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Harvard Divinity School  
Robert Schreiter, Catholic Theological Union

Sandra Schneiders, in “Biblical Hermeneutics Since Vatican II,” began by describing how Pius XII’s *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) legitimated historical critical methods, how *la nouvelle théologie* affirmed the centrality of the Bible as Scripture in the church, and how postconciliar theologians relocated biblical scholarship into the secular academy with new ecumenical, interreligious, and interdisciplinary outlooks and with the participation of women and other marginalized populations. These provoked biblical studies’ engagement with philosophical hermeneutics, which she described using three frameworks: (1) the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world in front of the text; (2) exegesis, criticism, and interpretation; and (3) a hermeneutical theory that can explain critical choices, exegetical practices, or even interpretive successes using diverse biblical methodologies, and can serve as a bridge to a third area in which scripture and the results of biblical scholarship fit into a coherent theology of revelation, preaching, theology, spirituality, and social commitment. At present Catholic biblical scholarship is polarized between “a literalism that leans toward magisterial fundamentalism and...a fascination with methodological experimentation for its own sake...In between are most serious biblical scholars who are doing yeoman service in the Church in the service of learning and faith who would be more effective if we risked deeper forays into hermeneutics.”

Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, in “Hermeneutics and Critical Theory: Between Mountain Peaks and a Crumpled Handkerchief,” sought to avoid broad generalities and narrow specificities that overlook significant topics and debates. He began by treating the classic German debate between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas over the role of tradition. Next he explored the North American debate between William E. Connolly (a “theorist of a more critical bent”) and the hermeneutical position of Charles Taylor. These two debates indicate the shifting character of the field of inquiry today. The German debate might be summarized by the metaphor of “mountain peaks” (symbolizing ascent to a single unified point), whereas Connolly’s position can be characterized in terms of his metaphor of the “crumpled handkerchief” (with multiple folds and peaks). The third section of his paper reflected on how these discussions pertain to the interpretation of Vatican II by acknowledging, first, the inadequacy of a translation model of hermeneutics, second, that any attempt to consider a world church in terms of a fusion of horizons with a Western church tradition fails to address the more radical challenges raised by postcolonialism, critical theory, and a topography of diverse points of view; and third, experience in terms of a “crumpled handkerchief,” which provides a way to consider non-linear changes and the overlapping of past(s) and present.

Robert Schreiter, in “Emerging Forms of Intercultural Hermeneutics,” considered this changing area of inquiry since the 1980s in relation to the larger field of intercultural studies. First, he noted that intercultural theological hermeneutics and intercultural studies attend to the prefix “inter-” insofar as they invoke border-crossing between two distinct cultures and elicit the multiple dimensions of intercultural engagements, and with them the shifting views of culture. Second, he explored the regions where intercultural hermeneutics emerged: first in communication in the fields of business and education, in humanities in reading and translation, and in comparative studies; in philosophy; and in intercultural theological hermeneutics attentive to inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and comparative theology. Third, he considered three philosophical hermeneutical approaches as applied to intercultural studies: a hermeneutics of commonality; a hermeneutics of difference; and a hermeneutics of globality that seeks to move beyond the limitations of these other two approaches by accentuating catholicity, paradox, resilience alongside of resistance, aesthetics, and conversion. A coda considered the theological justification for such a hermeneutics of globality: not only Trinity, Incarnation, and Holy Spirit, but also the need to revisit nature and grace and the relation of the natural and the supernatural.

In the ensuing discussion two major issues were raised. One concerned the prominence given to reality (*realidad*) by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt and its bearing on the issues raised regarding intercultural hermeneutics. Schreiter pointed out that to speak of “reality” is not the same thing as epistemological realism. Another question, which provoked much discussion, dealt with how the three papers were interrelated and whether the modern distinction of subjectivity and objectivity was emphasized by Schneiders and treated as problematic in the papers of Fiorenza and Schreiter.

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