RACE AND CLASS IN TEACHING THE BIBLE

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INTRODUCTION

The week that I went off to graduate school, a friend and mentor, Dr. Levi Miller, gave me some marching orders: Miller, an African American man, said "Go get the best education you can. Then go teach your people to stop messing over my people." Over the past several years, Miller's words have come to have for me the force of a commission. Liberation theologians from widely differing backgrounds (including many in this working group) have taught us that Biblical interpretation is inevitably culturally conditioned; that the models of Biblical interpretation which hold sway in most North American seminaries reflect and perpetuate the interests of their predominantly white, male, economically privileged authors. They have insisted that those of us who teach the Bible cannot do so in a politically or culturally neutral way. If we do not want to teach Bible in ways that unwittingly support white hegemony, we must learn to teach in ways that deliberately and explicitly confront it.

The question is "how?" Specifically, how is it possible -- and is it possible -- to teach Bible in ways that confront racism and classism and that introduce a multicultural perspective in a largely middle-class, overwhelmingly white context? These questions were sharply focused for me this past June as I taught a seminar entitled "Liberating Word: Race, Class, and Biblical Interpretation." I would like to use this paper to reflect on that seminar in order to raise issues and invite discussion about teaching Bible from a
multicultural, liberationist perspective. The paper will first sketch the context and presuppositions of the course, then briefly discuss the seminar and its outcome, and finally will set forth several issues and questions which arose out of the seminar.

GIVENS

The course was shaped by at least five sets of givens. (I use the term "given" with a double meaning: to refer to factors that were set before I began the course, but also to recognize that what I take as starting points has been given to me by the work of other faculty and other biblical interpreters.)

The first given is the seminary in which I teach. United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities is a United Church of Christ seminary located in New Brighton, Minnesota. Its student body is characterized by diversity of age, gender, class, sexual orientation, and denomination. There is some diversity of theological perspective; however, feminist and liberationist approaches are most prevalent. The racial/ethnic makeup of the school is overwhelmingly white. There are currently 10 students of color enrolled; all of the full-time faculty are white. Administration and faculty are committed to becoming more racially integrated.

A second "given" which defines the context of the course is the intense discussion about "globalization," "multicultural perspectives" or "contextualization" taking
place in North American theological education in general and at U. T. S. in particular. "Globalization" is a highly elastic term; U.T.S.' globalization program emphasizes the contextual nature of theologies, the importance of multicultural conversation, solidarity in struggles for justice, and the need to learn to interpret the Bible and traditions theologically in relationship to struggles for justice within various cultural contexts. This means that efforts to teach in ways that confront racism and classism are given concrete support by faculty colleagues and by the administration.³

The third set of givens has to do with my own social location and background. I am a white, middle class, feminist woman who has lived for many years in predominantly African American communities. I am new at teaching Biblical studies; I came to U.T.S. in 1990 and received my doctorate in 1991. Before attending seminary, I worked as a community organizer and taught community organizing at a small college, experience which can help in analyzing interpretive contexts.

A fourth set of "givens" consists of presuppositions which I have learned from feminist, womanist and other liberation theologians, and which undergirded the seminar. These include recognition that: (1) all interpretation is contextualized, shaped by the history, interests, and resources of the interpreter's race, gender, class, etc. (2) the contextualized nature of biblical interpretation has political consequences. The different groups from which the
Bible is interpreted are not equally powerful; to speak of "contextualized" "globalized" "multicultural" or "pluralistic" perspectives in Biblical studies obscures unjust power dynamics unless one addresses sexist, racist, classist, heterosexist, and other oppressive relationships. The universal claims of dominant scholarship must be challenged and its biases (which we may suspect support the interests of white, economically privileged North Americans) must be examined critically. (3) The political nature of biblical interpretation is intensified by the Bible's authoritative role in U.S. churches and culture.

Fifth, the format of the seminar and the students who participated in it shaped the course significantly. The seminar was offered as an interim course; it met four afternoons a week for three weeks. The format limited the amount of reading and writing that could be assigned and mitigated against integration of the material; it intensified the emotional impact of the seminar and contributed to the sense of community which developed among the participants. The students who enrolled in the course were a diverse group with a high level of interest in liberation theologies. The class included five women and seven men, three of whom are openly gay and working in gay ministries. The class included three persons with physical disabilities who explicitly engage in theology from that context. There was one black student; the rest were white.
DESCRIPTION OF THE SEMINAR

The course was organized around liberationist models of biblical interpretation from different racial/ethnic contexts. It would have been possible to have organized it around issues (racism, classism, sexism, etc.). The choice to structure the course around racial/ethnic communities represents a commitment as a liberationist/feminist interpreter to take concrete human experience of oppression struggle for liberation as a starting point for theological reflection. Racism and classism are neither perpetuated, experienced, nor resisted in the abstract. Moreover, the value of studying biblical interpretation from different cultural contexts is not limited to learning about racism and classism. There is richness and depth in encountering others' insights into the texts.

Goals

The goals of the course included:

(1) Recognizing the contextual nature of all Biblical interpretation. Fumitaka Matsuoka writes eloquently of our need to be liberated from universalism into particularity.4 I hoped that examining a variety of particular interpretations would help students to confront the contextually limited character of their own work.

(2) Familiarity with liberationist models of Biblical interpretation from different racial/ethnic contexts. This
includes analyzing not only how different models are informed by and respond to differing social contexts, but also how the interpreters' differing ways of construing the Bible and Biblical authority limit their interpretive options.

(3) Increased ability to choose liberating models of Biblical interpretation that are both appropriate to the participants' communities and informed by dialogue with interpreters from differing racial/ethnic communities.

Method

The seminar examined models of biblical interpretation from Black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian and White perspectives. Additionally, each student was required to investigate in more depth biblical interpretation within a Black, Hispanic, Native American or Asian church. The project was to include worship with the church and an interview with the church's pastor, as well as additional reading.

My role as instructor was different in this seminar than in my other courses. My teaching was clearly limited both by my own whiteness and by my lack of formal training in any but the dominant models of biblical hermeneutics. I relied heavily upon guest speakers and upon videotaped presentations to supply expertise which I lack and to represent perspectives other than my own. (See attached syllabus). I also explicitly acknowledged that I approached the course as a teacher/learner, and as a recovering racist.

Outcomes

For many students, this course was an intensely emotional
experience. Theoretical course goals were met. The primary impact of the seminar, however, was clearly at a more existential level. White students forcefully encountered their own white racism -- an encounter which was particularly difficult because it took place around the meaning and authority of the Bible which for many is holy ground. The African American male student grappled with his own sexism and heterosexism and with his need to become more closely tied to an African American community. For some students (especially the gay men and a woman with a physical disability), the primary outcome of the course was a firmer claim on the validity of interpreting the Bible from their own contexts and experience.

For many, the process was painful. Long-held assumptions were fundamentally challenged. I believe that the pain and struggle they experienced is an inevitable part of coming to a more just awareness of our particularity, our sin, and our potential for relationship. Matsuoka provides a theological basis for understanding the intensity of the emotions which the course generated. He writes that "globalization challenges us to make a shift in our fundamental perceptions and values toward those who are different and 'other' from us. The promises are not available to us or effective for us while we are people and institutions who cling to old organizations of reality...One needs to internalize the deep pain of human alienation, of which cross-cultural and cross-gender relationships are a part."
The seminar participants developed a remarkable degree of cohesion. Their trust of one another was vital to their being able to confront difficult issues. The students have formed a "liberating word support group" to help each other work out the implications of what they learned.

ISSUES

The course raised several issues for teaching Bible in ways that confront racism and classism in a largely white setting. I would like to focus our discussion around six of those issues.

First, how do we balance the cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions of such teaching? The two are clearly integrally related. I believe that theological education must be about the transformation of values as well as about the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. Yet the transformation of values can have lasting impact only as students develop a theoretical framework that allows them to integrate their new perspectives, and the practical skills that enable them to express them. However, I did experience some tension between attending to the theoretical content of the course and its non-cognitive dimensions. The pain of encountering one's own racism, classism, and sexism tended to interfere with more theoretical analysis.

Second, how do we teach about racism and classism in ways that meet the needs of students of color and of white students? I tried to address this issue by framing the
questions in terms of social location, and by stressing that all of us have multiple statuses. It is clear to me, however, that my seminar was geared towards white students who needed to confront their own white racism. This appears to be a built-in contradiction.

Third, what role should concrete, practical experience in cross-cultural settings play in our teaching of Scripture? I intend to offer this course again in a semester-long format, and to require participants to engage in a more sustained practical project in a church that is ethnically/racially different from themselves. The project will focus on examining the ways in which the Bible is interpreted in that community. Assigning such a project raises an array of questions including how to relate the practical experience to the readings, how to distinguish and relate professional, pastoral, and popular levels of biblical interpretation and how to structure the project so that it is not simply "day-tripping" and so that it serves the interests of the church community as well as the interests of the student.

Fourth, what skills and knowledge do we need to acquire in order to teach in ways that address white racism and classism? Leading this seminar pushed me to realize my need to become more familiar with the dynamics of racism and classism and with a range of scholars not included in my graduate training. It has also challenged me to reexamine my own hermeneutical framework. The impact of the course on the instructor and thereby on other courses I will teach may be
one of its more important outcomes.

Fifth, how do we deal with the limits inherent in our own social location as we teach? Is the "guest lecturer" model a legitimate one?

Sixth, it seems clear to me that a specialized course dealing with race, class and the Bible is legitimate and effective only within the context of a broader effort to introduce a multicultural perspective into our teaching. Attending to issues of race and class in the range of courses offered, and especially in the core introductory courses is equally important. Moreover, I question whether any efforts confront white dominance in theology can be effective in the long run apart from increasing the racial diversity of the student body and the faculty.
ENDNOTES

1 The seminar title (though not its content) is adapted from the title of a course offered by Katharine Sakenfeld and Frieda Gardner at Princeton Theological Seminary.

2 According to United's self-study document, its student body includes students ranging in age from the early twenties to the upper seventies and representing over twenty denominations. Approximately 64% of its students are women. While records are not kept, a significant number of its students are gay and lesbian. Course offerings at United reflect a strong commitment to theological and cultural pluralism.

3 United has instituted a globalization program which provides substantial support to faculty efforts to address related issues. During the past year, for example, United has provided me with funding to study in Nicaragua, has helped defray my travel costs to this conference, and has provided funds to bring guest speakers into my classes. In addition, the president, the acting dean and several faculty members have met with me to help me to develop or critique this seminar.


5 Matsuoka, 43-44. Matsuoka further argues that a new theological paradigm will emerge only as we experience and acknowledge the pain of pluralism. "The only source of such a paradigm is to trust our own pain and to trust the pain of our neighbors which surprisingly may be very like our own."

6 Leonardo and Clodovis Boff (*Introducing Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987, 13) have charted the distinctions between professional, pastoral and popular interpretation in a helpful way.

7 Robert Schreiter, ("Teaching Theology from an Intercultural Perspective," *Theological Education* 26 [1990]:14) accurately notes that "trying to take into account the wide range of data could easily turn into a National Geographic tour of exotic cultures rather than a real examination of the Christian faith."
GOALS OF THE COURSE

It is hoped that participants will develop:

A. Increased awareness of the political implications of biblical interpretation especially in relationship to issues of race and class.

B. Awareness of ways in which their own social location shapes their interpretation of Scriptures.

C. Familiarity with liberationist approaches to biblical interpretation from different racial/ethnic contexts.

D. Increased ability to choose liberating models of Biblical interpretation that are both appropriate to their own communities and informed by dialogue with interpreters from differing racial/ethnic communities.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE COURSE

A. Attendance, preparation and participation. Peer-learning is a vital part of this class. It is important that each class member contributes her or his informed perspective. Absence from three or more class sessions will jeopardize the student's ability to successfully complete the course.

B. Each student will keep a journal in which he or she reflects on the significance of the readings and class presentations for his or her own context. Journal entries should include: (1) an initial discussion of the student's own social location and goals for the course, (2) on-going reflection on the key issues/models for biblical interpretation from each of the contexts which the class examines, including ways in which the readings and discussions challenge or confront the student, ways in which they may contribute to liberating interpretations of the Scriptures in the student's own context, and the student's criticisms of the readings and discussions. (3) The journal should end with a brief discussion of ways the student expects to incorporate learnings from the course into future Biblical interpretation. Either the journal or a ten to twelve page paper synthesizing the student's reflections may be turned in.

C. The class will look at biblical interpretation within African American, African, Asian, Native American and Hispanic contexts. In addition, each student is required to write a brief (5-7 page) essay which examines issues and models for Biblical interpretation from one of these contexts in greater depth. This will involve visiting a
congregation and/or speaking with a pastor as well as additional reading. A list of pastors who have expressed their willingness to meet with students from this course is attached. Students may work on this project individually or in groups.

COURSE SCHEDULE

June 1  Introductions

June 2  Biblical Interpretation as a Political Act

Required Reading

Handouts

Recommended Reading

June 4  The Particularities of Oppression
Guest Speaker, Dr. Christine Smith

Required Reading

Recommended Reading

June 5  Biblical Interpretation within Black Communities: The Role of the Bible
Guest Speaker, Rev. Rufus Campbell

Required Reading

Recommended Reading
Cheryl Gilkes, "Mother to the Motherless, Father to the Fatherless," Semeia 47, 57-86.

June 8 Biblical Interpretation within Black Communities: Issues and Models

Required Reading
William R. McClain, Travelling Light, 71-82.
James Cone, "God Is Black," Lift Every Voice, 81-94.

Recommended Reading
Cain Felder, ed. Stony the Road We Trod.

June 9 Biblical Interpretation within Black Communities Issues and Models, cont.

Required Reading

Recommended Reading
Mosala, pp. 67-100.

June 10 Interpretive Issues and Native American Communities
Guest Speaker, Prof. Richard Grounds

Required Reading
Robert Allen Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," Christianity and Crisis 49, pp. 261-265. (Also found in Voices from the Margins, pp. 287-296.)
June 11 Asian Communities and Biblical Interpretation

Required Reading

Recommended Reading

June 16 Hispanic Communities and Biblical Interpretation:
The Use of the Bible in Base Christian Communities
Slide Presentation, Dr. Ed Martin

Required Reading
Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America and the Christian Communities of the Common People," in The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities, pp. 107-123.

Recommended Reading
The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities.

June 17 Hispanic Communities and Biblical Interpretation:
Guest Speaker: The Rev. Marcial Vasquez

Required Reading
Elsa Tamez, The Bible of the Oppressed (Intro. and Chapters 3-7 are required, Chapters 1 and 2 are recommended.)
Marcial Vasquez, An Introduction to a Theology of Immigration. Read pp. 5-6, several selections from pp. 7-53, and pp. 54-99.

Recommended Reading

June 18 Biblical Interpretation in a Context of Dominance
Required Reading

June 19 Our Conclusions

RESOURCE PERSONS

The Rev. Rufus Campbell
Camphor United Methodist Church
585 Fuller Avenue
Saint Paul, MN 55103
612-224-0341

The Rev. Virgil Foote
Mazakute Episcopal Church
838 Stellar Place
Saint Paul, MN 55117
612-488-9578

The Rev. Marcial Vasquez
La Puerta Abierda United Methodist Church
Mission House (Open Door)
1530 Oakland Avenue
Saint Paul, MN 55118
612-895-9093

The Rev. Her Yang
Hmong Community United Methodist Church
215 West George Street
Saint Paul, MN 55107
612-222-5358