

Viðbrögð við fyrirlestri Susannah Heschel
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Christ in Context

First of all, many thanks to you, Professor Heschel, for a thought-provoking and stimulating lecture. Having worked within the field of Christology for years, listening to your lecture and reading your book on *The Aryan Jesus*, has reassured me of the importance of the historical context we work within. For much too long Christian theologians have been tempted to ignore the significance of the time and space they live in and how it influences their work. Part of the problem is the fact that some of the greatest theologians of the past were locked in their cell, literally or metaphorically speaking, as they wrote their magnum opus. They hoped (as maybe we all do, deep down within) to write something that would last, something that would make complete sense to future generations, regardless of their own time and space, as well as the historical context of the person reading it.

Surely there is no turning back after the historical critical method, which has made us acutely aware of the illusion of a possible objectivity. Everything written is truly historically dated in one way or another. We are who we are because of the time and space we live in. That is why our text is influenced by our historical context. Since the seventies, feminist theologians have been persistent in their emphasis on the role and meaning of experience within our theological tradition. It is the "conscious appeal" to women's experience, and not simply its use of human experience as a resource for doing theology, that is most distinctive for the feminist approach to theology. What is distinctive about the use of human experience in feminist

theology is that feminist theologians acknowledge the perspectival character of their work. According to Pamela Dickey Young, this is indeed what gives feminist theology

the opportunity to judge theologies that claim to have no particular point of view, that claim to be totally objective. Women's experience provides a shared authority, a communal criterion, not just an individualistic one, for judging Christian theology. This helps to guard against both individualism and elitism in theology.¹

By appealing to women's experience there is therefore a communal and not just an individualistic criterion of truth in theology.

Within the feminist theological discussion itself there has also been an important internal critique of how white feminists have falsely universalized their experience as representative of women's experience. Just as Mary Daly and other white feminists have criticized men for stealing the "power of naming their own experience away from women", nonwhite women have turned the same argument against white and privileged women. For example, in her book *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, Jacquelyn Grant shows the inadequacies of feminist theology's appeals to experience because of its Euro-centrism, Anglocentrism, and its racist ideology. Grant insists that even "if some individual feminists are not racists, the movement has been so structured, and therefore takes on a racist character." And Grant continues:

¹Young, Pamela Dickey. *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.S.67.

In a racist society, the oppressor assumes the power of definition and control while the oppressed is objectified and perceived as a thing. As such, White women have defined the movement and presumed to do so not only for themselves but also for non-White women.²

Therefore, Grant concludes, if white women's analyses were adequate, they would be more conscious about identifying the experience they are writing about as their own experience, instead of presuming to name or define the experience of others.

This harsh critique launched by Grant and other African-American womanist theologians in the late eighties and early nineties made a huge impact within the feminist theological discourse. In response to this critique, feminist theologians have made an effort to stress the diversity of women's experience. This has resulted in a widespread recognition among feminists theologians of the danger of absolutizing any particular set of experiences or any single interpretation as *the* experience of women.

In his book, *The Cross in Our Context. Jesus and the Suffering World*, the Canadian theologian, reminds us of the importance of the context, meaning both the time and place we live in. Contexts alter meanings, Hall argues, therefore we need to learn to take our own context seriously.³ Heschel's book about *The Aryan Jesus* is nothing less than a wake-up call to all of us, theologians and non-theologians.

² Grant, Jacquelyn. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989. S.199-200.

³ Hall, Douglas John. *The Cross in Our Context. Jesus and the Suffering World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.S.59,65.

Truly Jesus can, and has been made into a political tool. Heschel's book shows us how this was done in Nazi Germany, when German Protestant theologians redefined Jesus as an Aryan and Christianity as a religion at war with Judaism. But there are other examples. For centuries Passion-plays, where the story of Jesus' passion was put on stage during the holy week, were used all over Europe to fuel anti-semitic movements. More recent example is how Jesus' maleness has been used by the Roman Catholic Church to argue against women's ordination, which is a clear example how Christology, has been used to justify the status quo. Jacquelyn Grant's critique of the white women's Christ, is one more example.

Being aware of the abuses helps us understand why we need to take our context into account in all of our theological discourse. "Context alter meaning" Douglass John Hall reminds us, therefore it is always a "give and take" relationship between the text and the context. Thus I will argue that one of the main challenges of contemporary Christology, is to allow for

a critical correlation between the scriptural witness and our experience (the text and our context), between the Jesus we meet in the Gospels and our images and interpretations of him.⁴

⁴ Arnfríður Guðmundsdóttir. *Meeting God on the Cross. Christ, the Cross, and the Feminist Critique*. 2010. Oxford University Press, New York. S.135.