

Emerging Questions: Fernando F. Segovia and the Challenges of Cultural Interpretation

It is an honor to be part of this panel; to look back as we look forward to the future of cultural interpretation. It has given me the opportunity to browse through Professor Segovia texts on my bookshelves, and encounter my own notes and questions on the margins of those texts—running through my entire academic career. Surely my debt to his work exceeds what my brief remarks can suggest.

On this occasion, we were asked to address the trajectory of Segovia's work especially as it pertains to the futures of biblical scholarship. Through the years, Segovia has kept drawing for us, carefully and systematically, the contours of biblical studies. These descriptions, he would agree, are interpretations. By describing the field of which he is part, he takes a critical look at what is taken for granted in its self-definitions and thus what could be done differently. Others in the panel can speak with more authority about its impact biblical studies proper.

Given that I am not a biblical scholar, but rather a theologian shaped by and hopelessly attracted to the biblical narratives and poetics, I will share some of the ways in which Segovia's work has helped me think about the relationship between theological and biblical scholarship. Having learned from Segovia's insistence on clarifying the terms used for any analysis, let me say from the start that what I mean by theology is not limited to religious commitments based on beliefs and rules.

Instead I understand theological work as encompassing broad visions of the world. Segovia often describes it as visions of this world, the other world, and the relationship between them. I would only add that the “other world” is not necessarily outside this one, but alternatives beyond the current realities and possibilities. Thus described, theology is inextricable from other forms of cultural production.

Segovia has insisted in engaging critically on-going readings and interpretations of the bible—not only those that strive to represent its ancient reception, but also current ones; not only academic interpretations, but broader cultural reception of the text. This implies questioning the assumed boundaries between theoretical approaches to reading the bible and those for reading any other text. Thus Segovia has asked us to engage a variety of theoretical perspectives, but to do so systematically and critically. I have particularly benefited from Segovia’s mappings (or blueprints) of Racial-Ethnic Studies and Postcolonial Studies. His warnings against the use of racial-ethnic categories that “remain at a thoroughly undertheorized and impressionistic level,” bears repetition. The goal of rigorously theorizing racial-ethnic categories is linked to the efforts to place the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion in the context of broad geopolitics—rather than staying within the boundaries of the nation and its categories of difference. The engagement with these theoretical lenses foster readings attentive to dynamics of power that affect biblical texts *and* their interpretation—that affect, I add, theological texts *and* their interpretation. And the relationship is not in only one direction; we can also inquire about the

theological and ontological assumptions that ground secular theories about power, reading, etc. Reading strategies informed by Racial-ethnic and postcolonial studies push against the bifurcation between “the world, the text, and the critic,” to adopt the title of Edward Said’s (1983) book.

The same is true for strategies that engage critically the implicit and explicit theological dimensions of reading. In “A Theological Reading of Scripture?” Segovia argues that such optics is important, first, because “Theological Studies views Scripture as a *foundational* source for its work and reveals a long-standing tradition of *activating* and deploying the biblical texts in such work.” Second, “Biblical Studies encounters and addresses religious-theological terms and concepts in its analysis of the biblical texts and possesses a long-standing tradition of theological reading as part of its critical repertoire.”¹ In that article, Segovia traces the second trajectory, that of theological readings in Biblical studies. I will address the first.

I agree with Segovia that, in principle, theological studies is inextricably linked to biblical readings. And yet the history of the field has left us worried about the implications of engaging biblical texts and uncertain about how to do it. As is the case in Biblical Studies, the field of theological studies sees itself as no longer guided by “confessional relevance and concordance.”² Given that references to scripture had served to prove orthodoxy—whatever that might be—engagement with biblical texts leaves the theologian open to the suspicion of

confessionalism. [That can be as bad as heresy used to be.] In this context we must explain *in what sense is it the Bible foundational for theology?* And the alternatives are not simply confessionalism or dismissal. *What kind of relationship does the bible have in ongoing theological work that understands itself as a form of cultural criticism?* Historicizing theological uses of biblical texts helps illuminate the constructive elements of interpretation, of course. But Segovia's work encourages us to transgress the boundaries of the field—not only by methodological and theoretical amplification within the field, but also a “sustained and rigorous analysis of other traditions of interpretation,” including secular ones.³ I am interested, for instance, in the legacy of Christianity in Western philosophical traditions—even when that the philosophers assume to have liberated themselves from it. The recent proliferation of texts by renown secular philosophers engaging the letters of Paul and other biblical texts suggests that others are moving into spaces that critical theological studies has been reluctant to occupy—perhaps daunted by the chasm between past and present.

But the relationship between biblical interpretation and theological studies is not limited to the analysis of histories and ideas. It includes the ways in which biblical poetics shapes theological and theoretical imaginaries. And of course Segovia has also pointed us in that direction. His essay “Poetics of Minority Biblical Criticism,” not only describes the distinctive features of existing scholarship, but also envisions paths of future work in this area. Poetics names for Segovia the rhetorical dynamics of writing. In the particular case of minority scholars, he

observes a desire for self-assertion and self-introjection, manifested in attempts to “conjure-up alternative visions of the (nation)state,” to move beyond ways of thinking and doing established by societies and cultures.⁴ Segovia goes on to identify strategies and tactics found in these works, all of which embody challenges to dominant scholarship and its undergirding assumptions.

Attending to poetics challenges additional sets of boundaries assumed in our scholarly fields: between the affective and the rational, aesthetics and ethics. The work of Martinican writer Édouard Glissant illuminates the significance of this orientation. For Glissant, poetics refers not only to styles of writing, but also to modes of knowing, being, and acting in the world. He relates his approach to displacement and irrecoverable loss—to histories such as those of Caribbean peoples, whose very existence emerged from the obliteration of African and indigenous cultures, religions, and languages. An intellectual practice that does not ignore such events calls into question the privilege of genealogies and the totalizing impulses of ontological systems. (Intellectual genealogies are precious in many of our academic disciplines.) Instead it values processes of creation from “shattered histories,” “shards of vocabularies” and re-imagined rituals—respecting interruption and silence.⁵ The poetic approach is thus more than a stylistic choice; it is a mode of response attuned to specific ethical commitments.⁶

The aims that Segovia identifies in the poetics of minority criticism are consonant with Glissant’s poetics: sensing, joining, and contributing to

broader worldly relations. The strategies respond to ethical commitments, but also reflect aesthetic aims, motivated and sustained by a search for beauty that is not the opposite of ethics, but its underside. This type of writing relies on affective sensibilities that might not be made explicit—and possibly cannot be turned into direct explanations—but are nonetheless dimensions of knowledge influencing readings and inscribed in writing. These traits surface most clearly in Segovia's essay "Forty Years Later." His starting point is loss and silence—unsettled by an almost imperceptible call to return to the native land—to invoke another Martinican poet. The narrative of return is framed by an account of the shattered histories of Cuba in its worldwide relations.

The return was "haunted by spirits," Segovia writes. "Spirits of the past...but also spirits of the present and the future...insistent spirits, forcing their way upon me, claiming my attention, pointing the way."⁷ Readers of Latin American literatures would not be surprised by this invocation of spirits, particularly when addressing a past experienced as ambiguously present, histories at once collective and irreducibly personal. In the spirits, memories touch and call us, without dispelling the mysteries of their absence or the uncertainties of path ahead. Perhaps we should also see here Segovia's *activation* of biblical texts. Can we be surprised that the same author is also a reader of the gospel of John, where Jesus who announces: "I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me." Those who witness his odd return would understand and are sent forth.

Segovia was sent back to the island and sent forth. He admits the future of the island is uncertain. But there is just a “hopeless hope”—a hope for what is *still* impossible. That future cannot be seen, but we must imagined.⁸

So what about the future of our fields? I will not risk a prediction, but the trajectory of Segovia’s work seems to point toward an ever more expansive view of the role and responsibilities of the critic, seeking the hidden relationships within and between the world, the text, and the critic, between the critical analysis and theological visions, between aesthetics and ethics.

Glissant, Édouard *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Segovia, Fernando F. "Poetics of Minority Biblical Criticism: Identification and Theorization." In *Prejudice and Early Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies*, edited by Laura Nasrallah and Elizabeth Shüssler Fiorenza. 279-311. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

———. "A Theological Reading of Scripture? Critical Problematic and Prophetic Vision in the Aftermath and Crossroads of Disciplinary Transformation." *CTS Proceedings* 65 (2010): 1-18.

¹ Fernando F. Segovia, "A Theological Reading of Scripture? Critical Problematic and Prophetic Vision in the Aftermath and Crossroads of Disciplinary Transformation," *CTS Proceedings* 65(2010): 2.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

³ Fernando F. Segovia, "Poetics of Minority Biblical Criticism: Identification and Theorization," in *Prejudice and Early Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies*, ed. Laura Nasrallah and Elizabeth Shüssler Fiorenza (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁵ Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory." Glissant's work is significantly influenced by Walcott's poetry—as Glissant explains in *Poetics of Relation*.

⁶ Glissant argues, for instance, that "the thought of the Other is sterile without the Other of thought," a self-transformation that leads to an ethical response (Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997). 154f.)

⁷ "Forty Years Later: Reflections on Going Home"

⁸ Role of the critic, "a voice for freedom and justice, dignity, and well-being, in religion and theology as well as society and culture" ("The Future of the Biblical Past," 336).