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Response

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tional USA. Schulz offers a pragmatic rationale for cooperating in the institutionalization of the international rule of law, shaping that law, and willingly subjecting ourselves to it:

The United States is a mighty power, but it is not omnipotent. If history is any guide, it will not remain even a mighty power forever. Wouldn't it be wiser, then, while we have the power, to enter wholeheartedly into the creation of international norms, be they legal or behavioral, that best reflect our values and then respect those norms and their attendant procedures even when we may be found in violation?¹³

Such initiatives are now being developed. There are international efforts to create regional conflict-prevention centers and a standing center for conflict mediation and prevention at the United Nations. Nations throughout the world are supporting the work of the International Criminal Court and are formulating proposals for international emergency peacekeeping services under the auspices of the UN. Although the Bush administration has rejected such efforts, there are many nongovernmental organizations and faith organizations that embrace them as the finest expression of who we are as citizens of the United States and as members of an international community.¹⁴ Can we learn to communicate this vision of national identity to others? Can we listen honestly and openly to critiques of our views, just as we urge others to hear our critiques? Developing a self-critical national identity will require the best of all that we are and know: the most profound ceremonies of openness and gratitude, the deepest political analyses, and the most creative aesthetic and strategic initiatives.

RESPONSE

María Pilar Aquino

A response to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's essay on feminism and nationalism was initially difficult for me to articulate. My difficulty was not due to its pertinence but rather to its density and its multiple points for entry into conversation. It is clear to me, on the one hand, that her essay bears epistemic pertinence in that it calls for a critical reflection on the historical conditions

¹³ William F. Schulz, *In Our Own Best Interests: How Defending Human Rights Benefits Us All* (Boston: Beacon, 2001), 190–91.

¹⁴ See, for example, the work being done by Global Action to Prevent War (<http://www.global-actionpw.org/>) and by the Friends Committee on National Legislation (<http://www.fcnl.org/>), including the booklet *Peaceful Prevention of Deadly Conflict* (Washington, DC: FCNL Education Fund, n.d.), http://www.fcnl.org/pdfs/ppdc_booklet.pdf.

that make possible and affect a feminist mode of knowing and interpreting the world from our plural locations, expressions, and commitments. Awareness of such conditions allows one to see more clearly not only what kind of conceptual instruments and categories of knowledge one needs for giving a responsible account of the realities and experiences that inform feminist theologies and studies in religion, but also what kind of feminist discourses one must continue to develop to confront the present historical circumstances in a relevant way.

In the context of this response, on the other hand, I think of myself primarily as a Mexican woman linked by background to the migrant-worker *bracero* tradition;¹ as a Latin American feminist scholar who lives and works in the United States but is linked by moral imperative and intellectual demand to the worldwide critical feminist theologies of liberation; and as a Roman Catholic Christian woman linked by hope to all those around the world who believe that another world of justice for the well-being of all is possible. Having this brief sketch in mind, for many days prior to writing the first word for this response my thought process became paralyzed by fear of any unconscious and unintended support that I might be lending to the tendency Schüssler Fiorenza mentions of those who “reinscribe” nationalistic rhetoric by constructing identity in terms of continents or of racial or ethnic labels (e.g., Latina, Asian, black womanist, white). She points out the dangers of doing this, especially that of contributing to feminist antagonisms and their debilitating effects on the struggles for change. With this warning I became troubled and irritated with myself because of my inability to stay away from that sketch of myself, which gives contours to my speech. I also became aware of how difficult, confusing, and muddled can be the walk through the unexplored territory of nationalist discourse in the broad arena of theological and religious studies. As it may be for any other feminist discourse affected by unquestioned nationalism, I just took for granted that my “Latina” label provided me with a protective shield against dominant U.S. monocultural assimilation and Eurocentric co-optation. This label has been helpful to a certain extent, but it can also be reductive, isolating, ostracizing, and excluding at the same time. In the face of the current and growing kyriarchal U.S. capitalist nationalism, I wonder about the capability of that label—and of any other label committed to justice for women—to challenge and change nationalist politics, ideology, symbolic representations, and traditions so that, overcoming fragmentation and territorialization marked by labels, we can move toward a transnational and an intercultural feminist theological and religious studies framework that continues to

¹ For more information on what a *bracero* is, on the U.S.-Mexican *bracero* program, and on the struggles of *braceros*, see the informative Farmworkers Web site, maintained by the Sin Fronteras Organizing Project, available at <http://www.farmworkers.org/benglish.html> (accessed January 3, 2005).

find its roots in *the peoples'* struggles for survival and emancipation.² After much thought about a way out of this paralyzing predicament, I was able to connect to three helpful insights.

The first insight is found in the inspiring theological autobiography *After the Locusts*, by Denise Ackermann. As a white feminist liberation theologian who experienced at the same time the privileges of power and the struggles against the iniquitous system of white apartheid in South Africa, Ackermann simply writes, "Most nationalisms are embraced uncritically. Ours certainly was."³ In telling her story of living through forty years of morbid white Nationalist Party rule (I picture her raising the question, Was that a "life"?), she exposes the unspeakable tragedy of her people under the state-based apartheid nationalist ideology. This ideology was transformed into a system that "gave power as malign dominance into the hands of a minority and justified doing so in the interest of everything from Christian values to resistance to communism."⁴ Today, U.S. kyriarchal nationalism appeals to fundamentalist Protestant-based Christian values but no longer needs the rhetoric against communism. The new rhetoric is that of defense of national security against terrorism. According to the leaders of U.S. kyriarchal nationalism, "The United States is the world's only superpower; combining preeminent military power, global technological leadership, and the world's largest economy. . . . At present the United States faces no global rival. America's grand strategy should aim to preserve and extend this advantageous position as far into the future as possible."⁵ This grand strategy includes both the strengthening of military dominance and the unilateral imposition of "American" interests, values, and ideals upon the vast world. Current U.S. leaders have the malign power to do so. With this, one cannot fail to see that U.S. security can occur only at the expense of both the devastation

² As distinct from the notions of "state," "nation," and "national state," I am talking here about *the people*, those social and ecclesial groups which have been silenced, excluded, and marginalized from the shaping of society and religion, and which struggle for change. In the words of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the feminist understanding of "the people" alludes to "fully entitled and responsible citizens." See *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 7 and 101. In similar terms, "the people" refers to "wo/men of all colors, religions, and nations [who] are without exception full self-determining citizens claiming equal rights, dignity, and power. This definition alludes to the radical democratic power of all people. . . . It evokes memories of struggles for dignity, full citizenship, and decision-making powers in society and religion not only in the U.S. but around the world." Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 56.

³ Denise M. Ackermann, *After the Locusts: Letters from a Landscape of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵ Thomas Donnelly, *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces, and Resources for a New Century* (Washington, DC: Project for the New American Century, September 2000), i; available at <http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf> (accessed January 20, 2005).

of humanity due to war and the insecurity of the whole world. No matter how obvious it may be, the point of this reflection is that power and nationalism are intrinsically connected, and this connection ought to be of central concern in feminist theological and religious studies scholarship. To me, leaving this connection unquestioned and unchallenged may well lead us to unintentionally practice what Schüssler Fiorenza calls “a rhetoric of affinity” with U.S. kyriarchal nationalism.

The second insight is found in Schüssler Fiorenza’s essay. I could not agree with her more when she notes that “it is more than troubling that feminist discourses in religion have for the most part not yet critically problematized American capitalist nationalism as a structure of domination.” Here my impression is that feminist theological and religious scholarship in the context of the United States, for the most part, has remained insensitive to the socioreligious causes and devastating consequences of American capitalist nationalism around the world. It is not difficult to think that when one’s social location is shaped by the often highly sanitized conditions in our U.S. academic environments, there is no pressure or need to seek the analytical vocabulary to name the what, the how, the why, and the who benefits of this situation. But it is also possible to think that most of U.S. feminist theological and religious scholarship may be trapped in the dynamics of ignorance, self-deception, and outright denial, characteristics of processes that bring together nationalist rhetoric and empire building.⁶

Schüssler Fiorenza further says that, for those who inhabit a “privileged kyriarchal position,” nationalist discourse “remains invisible and unconscious.” More likely than not, the large majority of U.S. feminist scholars are not located structurally at the top, alongside the kyriarchal power elites, but it is difficult to deny that we all enjoy the infrastructural benefits and comforts provided by the “number one” developed-world superpower. The simple facts that, arguably, the scholarly community is not anxious about or reaching for the basics of human survival such as water, electricity, food, and shelter and that we can attend large and increasingly expensive national and international scholarly conventions place us in a position of privilege. As much as I dislike saying this, I must say that we can do these things only at the expense of someone else—usually the vast majority of people around the world, who are forced to deal under very precarious circumstances with the consequences of U.S. capitalist nationalism. At this point no statistics are needed to prove the fact of the de-

⁶ See George Monbiot, “An Empire of Denial: The US Is Choosing to Ignore the Fact That It Is to Blame for the Stifling of Global Democracy,” Global Policy Forum, reprinted from the *Guardian*, June 1, 2004; available at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/empire/analysis/2004/0601monbiotdenial.htm> (accessed January 20, 2005). See also Ana Aliende Urtasun, *Para comprender las transformaciones en el mundo contemporáneo: Una aproximación desde la sociología* (Estella, Navarra, Spain: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2004), 131–54.

humanizing and overwhelming poverty that the U.S.-dominated, neoliberal global markets are inflicting upon people worldwide, including the poor and excluded in the United States. Also, much has been said about women, having a higher incidence of poverty than men, being more susceptible to abuse:

Poverty and marginalization are both causal factors leading to violence against women, and also consequences of violence. The negative effects of globalization are leaving more and more women trapped on the margins of society. It is extremely difficult for women living in poverty to escape abusive situations, to obtain protection and to access the criminal justice system to seek redress. Illiteracy and poverty severely restrict women's ability to organize to fight for change.⁷

To me, what affects women, in terms of poverty and violence, affects us all. What empowers women's ability to organize and fight for change is a central concern of feminist theological and religious studies scholarship. The point of this reflection is that neglect to problematize American capitalist nationalism as a structure of domination is a luxury that critical feminist theologians of liberation and scholars of religion can no longer afford today. What is involved here is fostering a more acute and transparent awareness of the ethical dimensions and social function of our feminist theological and religious frameworks. The call Schüssler Fiorenza makes in her courageous essay to critically engage in deliberation of the nature, ramifications, and consequences of U.S. kyriarchal capitalist nationalism offers a refreshing and a hopeful starting point for doing so.

The third insight is found in the journey I have made through the years with people like me who come from the so-called subaltern cultures and who have struggled against marginalization and stereotyping. In my nearly twelve years of teaching experience at the University of San Diego—a predominantly white, Euro-American university—and in spite of any scholarly accomplishment that I may have reached so far, it has become customary for me to see that every semester students take their time to submit my scholarly competence to scrutiny. A good number of them become discomfited and unsettled by the prospect of having a Mexican woman professor who speaks with an accent. Like many others, I am not a subject “made in the USA.” Right or not, because of my physical appearance and my accent, students question my scholarly competence to teach theology, which I suspect they would not do were they working with a white, male, Euro-American professor. Yes, I experience the struggle of identity politics and nationalism in the classroom. In time, as we engage in conversation and in critical reflection, my students come to learn

⁷ Amnesty International, *It's in Our Hands: Stop Violence against Women* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 2004), 7; available through <http://web.amnesty.org/actforwomen/reports-index-eng> (accessed September 26, 2004).

about their own prejudices, as well as my conflicts and deep disagreements with dehumanizing and unhealthy trends in Mexican culture.

I have always rejected the romanticization of “family values,” “the motherland,” and “motherhood” in the context of such a seemingly intractable patriarchal and sexist Mexican culture. This type of culture has been greatly instigated by dominant Roman Catholicism. Mexico is known for its historical allegiance to Roman Catholicism. In many respects, Mexico is neither a homogeneous nation nor a benign paradise. The millions of migrant workers in the United States who have sought to escape poverty by putting their lives at risk crossing the border in search for work know this too well. Mexico is a country that, in spite of being so wealthy in resources and in emancipatory traditions, is ravaged by extensive poverty due to social inequalities, institutional corruption, and unchecked impunity. Sexual violence against women and impunity go hand in hand, as we continue to see in the morbid situation of the massive killing of the “women of Juárez.”⁸ Also, as the marginalized people with whom I interact on a regular basis know only too well, the notions of “state,” “government,” “nation,” and “the people” must be distinguished carefully. At the present time, the meaning and the relationship of those notions are both highly conflicted. Furthermore, one could say that there is today an unclear and unhappy relationship among the state, the various self-identified nations within a country, and the people. To me, the great challenge that this situation poses for feminist theology and religious studies is that of a meaningful engagement with and intervention in this context of competing, conflicted, contested, disputed, and divisive interpretations. This engagement includes raising questions from the academic setting about the contribution and function of theology and religious studies programs in terms of identity politics and U.S. kyriarchal capitalist nationalism.

Finally, I believe that Schüssler Fiorenza by no means is endorsing in her essay the idea that people have to give up their historical, cultural, intellectual, and religious roots and memories. Rather, her point, as I see it, is an invitation for us to engage in critical examination of these issues, having in mind the fashioning of transnational and intercultural feminist frameworks that have the ability both to empower the struggles, interests, and visions of the people and to challenge the globalization of kyriarchal capitalist nationalism.

⁸ For more information on this, see Amnesty International, “Intolerable Killings: 10 Years of Abductions and Murders of Women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua,” August 11, 2003, available at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engAMR410262003?open&of=eng-MEX> (accessed January 4, 2005); and the Web site of the Comisión para Prevenir y Erradicar la Violencia contra las Mujeres en Ciudad Juárez, at <http://www.comisioncdjuarez.gob.mx/> (accessed January 4, 2005).