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## Response

Mary E. Hunt

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## RESPONSE

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Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza adds another building block to her insightful feminist analysis of kyriarchal culture and power structures with her challenge to feminists to problematize nationalism. The discussion began when we proposed “women, religion, and nationalism in a globalized world” as the focus of the November 2004 Feminist Liberation Theologians’ Network gathering in San Antonio, Texas. Not even our programmatically suspicious minds could have conjured the postelection rethinking necessary to counter the current administration’s agenda to control the world politically, to dominate it economically, and to shape it in its image religiously. We had the benefit in that conversation of the voices of women from many parts of the world whose comments confirmed that this is a complex, multivalent, and urgent aspect of a feminist agenda.

Schüssler Fiorenza argues her persuasive case for understanding and rejecting nationalism that is, according to the third definition she cites, of the “excessive devotion to nation” sort. I agree. Moreover, I see in the American mythos that has brought us to this situation, at least in the minds of those who are schooled in the cultural mainstream, a historical progression through the first two definitions: a “desire for political independence” and then, having won it, “patriotism.” From the uncritical tales of “Columbus discovering America” and people crossing the ocean in pursuit of religious liberty, to the jingoism of postwar euphoria in the mid-twentieth century, the U.S. megamachine is built on false foundations.

The mythos reads as if the achievement of independence led to patriotism and, inexorably, to the kind of exportable nationalism that is now in vogue. But native peoples distinguish conquest from discovery. The existence of Americans United for Separation of Church and State attests to the partial nature of religious liberty. A steady increase in military funding and spending, from Korea to Vietnam, from Haiti to Iraq, makes war a permanent part of American life. Still, the myth endures, thanks largely to corporate interests and massive media reinforcement.

Under other circumstances I would worry about exaggeration and hyperbole, but I think the 2004 elections prove that, if anything, progressive people in the United States have *underestimated* the extent and sophistication of the conservative theopolitical agenda. Progressives have been largely unprepared to counter the economic and human resources that corporations and the groups they fund enjoy. The Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Institute on Religion and Democracy, and other right-wing think tanks lead the intellectual way by providing the ideological frameworks for conservative politics. Although we cannot expect to compete on a level playing

field with such institutions, feminist scholars can at least direct conversations, dissertations, and classes toward a critical evaluation of the dynamics of nationalism in order to dismantle them.

Two of Schüssler Fiorenza's points highlight important aspects of the feminist theological work ahead. I take up her invitation to build on them. The first is her assertion that religion in modernity was feminized, whereas in post-modernity religious fundamentalism has become a male preserve once again. The Christian case in the United States illustrates the subtle, sinister nature of kyriarchy. Women increasingly make up the ranks of the ordained ministers in many Protestant Christian denominations, but there is virtually no woman who can be pointed to as a national-level religious leader of the status of Jerry Falwell (Far Right), Robert Edgar (middle), or Jim Wallis (evangelical Left). Yet none of these so-called religious leaders actually spends most of his time ministering in a church. Women do that now. So men can engage in theopolitical discourse in the name of religion without having to do the day-to-day work of attending to people in crisis and planning worship services that is, once again, women's work.

In Catholic circles the same dynamic applies, in that most of the ministry is now done by women in parishes, yet the dwindling numbers of male clergy continue to make the majority of decisions. Sister Joan Chittister is often cited as a Catholic woman religious leader, but she would be the first to point out that within her own denomination neither she nor any other woman has an official juridical position or decision-making power. Scholars in other religious traditions will need to assess the particulars in their communities, but unmasking this postmodern transgenderization of religion, as I think of it, is a feminist task that builds on earlier critical work in the field.

A second issue that Schüssler Fiorenza raises is the chilling comparison of contemporary American nationalism to that of Nazi Germany. A similar claim was made by Davidson Loehr in a sermon, "Living under Fascism," delivered November 7, 2004, at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, Texas. He stated that "the style of governing into which America has slid is most accurately described as fascism."<sup>1</sup> Many of the signs Schüssler Fiorenza and Loehr both point to have worsened since Bush's reelection: antiabortion efforts; anti-lesbian/gay organizing; faith-based initiatives replacing government funding; and the attempted stifling of dissenters, for example, in the form of strict control over their access to the January 2005 presidential inaugural parade, an event that used to be open to the public.

I was stunned into recognition by Schüssler Fiorenza's comment that she

<sup>1</sup> Davidson Loehr, "Living under Fascism" (sermon delivered November 7, 2004, at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, Texas, available at <http://austinuu.org/sermons/2004/2004-11-07-LivingUnderFascism.html> [accessed January 22, 2005]).

is only now able to understand her German elders when they said that they could not stop Hitler. I, too, have had my moments of despair over the seemingly unstoppable Bush-Cheney machine that has eroded civil and human rights in the United States and around the world. Feminist discussion of nationalism must begin in the United States, where the negative implications are of worldwide proportions. I take heart and instruction from feminist colleagues in other countries who struggle to find their way, for example, Australian resident aliens in New Zealand or Irish residents in Australia, since nationalism is by no means confined to one country.

Xenophobia is a key ingredient in nationalism. I couple nationalism and xenophobia not because I wish to psychologize political issues but because I think emotions and feelings are involved in the practice of inspiring nationalism. To leave aside this human dimension is to miss a powerful part of the process. In the United States, cheap patriotic fervor and fear of those who are different are cultivated through symbols, lack of political education, and the media's massive dumping of information with little wisdom. It is hard to avoid the contamination, whether in schools, at sporting events, or even in religious institutions, where the separation of church and state—more accurately, that of religion and politics—shrinks daily.

In the United States, a country of large geographic size and with a population rooted in a variety of ethnic and racial groups, the push toward homogenization to achieve some semblance of national identity is real, if largely unnoticed by most people. Americans are manipulated to swallow the nationalist rhetoric best summed up by the ubiquitous political tagline and de facto national anthem "God Bless America," a song written by Irving Berlin, a Russian Jew who came to the United States as a child. Ironically, the politic this song has come to reflect spells an end to immigration lest more strangers reach these shores, lest newcomers slip under the radar of antiterrorist efforts and have the same opportunity as those who came before them. It casts aspersions on those who do not fit the blond-haired, blue-eyed, athletic (read Euro-Christian) mold. And it leaves poor and uneducated people to aspire to an American dream that will never come true for them, whereas the Halliburton and Enron executives live it with impunity. However pernicious, the strategy works, in part because the kyriarchal religious force that undergirds it is seemingly sacrosanct. Here is where feminist deconstruction of religion begins and can play an important role.

The rhetoric of nationalism in Schüssler Fiorenza's first sense, the "desire for political independence," may be necessary and useful in some developing countries. Lois West's anthology *Feminist Nationalism* includes many perspectives on this phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> But, as a U.S. feminist born and raised in a coun-

<sup>2</sup> Lois A. West, ed., *Feminist Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

try that now threatens global survival as well as the integrity of many countries, that claims for its own use a widely disproportionate share of the earth's natural resources, and that has set its sights on economic hegemony, I recoil at any suggestion that we in the United States need and/or are entitled to any patriotic indulgence in the name of nationalism. Rather, I think we need to examine the close ties between rightist religious rhetoric and nationalistic, xenophobic rejection of difference. Doing so reveals how kyriarchal religions lay a foundation for oppression and how feminist moves toward inclusion are bolstered by religious language and imagery that reflect all of creation.

Although I am convinced that Americans need less nationalism and more of a sense of ourselves as global citizens, the depth of the problem is revealed by the uniquely difficult task of being a global citizen while also a U.S. citizen. Economic globalization has made much of the world coincident with or imitative of our own context. With notable exceptions, even in the effort to move beyond nationalistic thinking and acting, Americans—even progressive feminists—tend to universalize when we ought to restrict our claims. We use our resources in ways that, however unintentionally, obscure real difference, for example, functioning in English without making efforts to learn other languages. We act often without thought to privilege. I raise this not in a confessional mode but in an analytic effort to imagine strategies that might move us ahead without reinscribing U.S. hegemony in our very efforts to overcome it. This is not an easy task, but it must start at home.

Given a feminist disciplinary commitment to religion, it makes sense to bring this nationalist critique, as we have done with critiques of gender and race, to the role of religion and religious language and imagery. There are many ways to do this: through exegesis, systematic treatments, and historical and comparative work. Another way is to approach the problem liturgically, evaluating the words we say and sing in this country that reinforce an oppressive political system. Millions more people meet religion in liturgy than will ever read theology. I am not suggesting we belt out “God Damn America” from the stadium bleachers, though it might be fun in certain situations. However, new liturgical efforts are useful in an iconoclastic way, if only for stimulating discussion.

For example, some groups have begun to sing new lyrics to “God Bless America”: “God bless the world we love, Stranger and Friend! Go before us, restore us, with a hope that despair cannot end.” Imagine if American people actually began to think in such a way, and then began to resist the rhetoric that only allegedly binds us, if they literally refused to speak or sing words that reinforce militaristic and capitalistic actions, that choke off life instead of genuinely linking us. Of course there is a danger that such formulations can simply throw a blanket over the universe and proclaim it (implicitly or anonymously) “American.” But I think the intention is quite other and that such experiments are worth trying, given their potential to decenter kyriarchal discourse.

Feminists in religion have experience deconstructing racist and sexist language and imagery that can be applied to the deconstruction of nationalism as Schüssler Fiorenza suggests. We also have scars to prove that the claim, “It is just words” is false. In this deconstruction of nationalism, and in the reconstruction that is the logical next step in the process, I propose that we train our feminist attention on the nationality of the Divine just as we did on her gender and race, proving that she has none finally. Then we can begin to consider global citizenship, the impact of living in particular national situations, and ways that feminist theology can foster transnational struggle and solidarity. Until then we are left to denounce the false claims that undergird the false promises that result in destruction of all that is not red, white, and blue.

#### RESPONSE

*Sharon D. Welch*

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As citizens of the United States, it is extremely important that we critically and creatively evaluate, in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s words, the “political and cultural impact of Americanness and U.S. nationalism.” Many, and quite possibly all, of the readers of the *JFSR* are well aware of the costs in the past and present of U.S. imperialism. We know the horrors of the genocide of Native American peoples, as well as the continued treaty violations and the despoliation and theft of their land. We are equally aware of the terrible cost of an economic system based on slavery and on the exploitation of millions of workers all over the world. Many of us have protested U.S. militarism in the past, and we tried, along with millions of people throughout the world, to prevent the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

It is extremely important that we address the dangers of U.S. nationalism, predicated as it is on a conviction of absolute superiority to other nations, unabashed certainty in being the bearer of a divine mandate, and a resolute inability to see the negative consequences of our actions. As we take up this task, there is much to be gained if we follow Schüssler Fiorenza’s challenge and undertake this work from a transnational perspective. From such a perspective we can find alternatives to our form of national identity, see more clearly the global impact of that identity, and, most important, learn other processes of identity formation and social critique and engagement.<sup>1</sup>

What is most needed in our current situation, however, is not simply further critiques and analyses of U.S. nationalism. What is most needed is some-

<sup>1</sup> I take up this task in my recent book, *After Empire: The Art and Ethos of Enduring Peace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).