

Looking Back, Looking Around, Looking Ahead

An Interview with Fernando F. Segovia

Interviews are a conversation in which memory comes alive. I have chosen this first interview,¹ with Professor Fernando Segovia, to open the present volume not only because of its title, “Looking Back, Looking Around, Looking Ahead,” which aptly characterizes the undertakings of this volume, but also because this conversation brings into focus my persistent border-crossings: the crossing of national borders, the crossing of borders of gender and class, as well as the crossing of disciplinary, methodological, and theoretical boundaries. The interview was conducted in Cambridge, at the Divinity School of Harvard University on April 10, 2002 over several hours; it has been edited for publication.

Fernando F. Segovia (FFS): *Elisabeth, let us begin, shall we, with the biographical material: place of birth, background, family—things of that nature.*

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ESF): I was born in Romania, into a family of ethnic Germans, in an area called the Banat. There had been German communities in Romania since the time of Maria Theresia.² I was born in 1938, right before the start of the Second World War, in a town close to the

1. First published as “Looking Back, Looking Around, Looking Ahead: An Interview with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,” in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, edited by Fernando F. Segovia, 1–32. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003.

2. Empress Maria Theresia (1717–1780), Archduchess of Austria and Queen of Hungary and Bohemia, was the wife of Emperor Francis I and the mother of Marie Antoinette (1755–1793), Queen of France and wife of Louis XVI. Her succession as ruler of the Hapsburg Empire led to the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748) and the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763).

Hungarian border. In the course of the war, Romania first signed a pact with Germany and then, later on, rejected this pact and sided with the Russians. At the end of the war, in the fall of 1944, the Russian army moved in and the Germans fled when the German army moved out.³ Most of the men were gone because of the war. The people that remained, mostly women and children, fled because of the heavy fighting that broke out everywhere. My family moved from one village to the next; eventually, we went on through Hungary to Austria. We remained in Austria for a year or so; from there we moved to upper Bavaria, where we again stayed for another year or so; finally, we settled in central Germany, around eighty kilometers away from Frankfurt, Heidelberg, and Würzburg.

FFS: *I take it, then, that the Germans were not expelled from Romania as was the case in Czechoslovakia?*

ESF: Unlike Hungary or Yugoslavia, Romania did not expel its German population. It was the actual fighting in the streets that made the people flee from place to place, with nowhere to live.

FFS: *Your family had been in Romania for a long time?*

ESF: Yes, since the time of Maria Theresia. The Banat had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and under the rule of the Hapsburgs. After the First World War, with the collapse of the empire, nation-states replaced the empire throughout the region, including the Balkans.⁴ In the 1700s, Germans

3. Romania was a kingdom from 1881 to 1947; see n. 4 below. In 1938, King Carol II—who had succeeded his father, Ferdinand I, on the throne—declared a royal dictatorship, dissolving all political parties. Dominant among these at the time was the fascist Iron Guard or Legion of the Archangel Michael, under the leadership of Corneliu Codreanu. In the process, Codreanu and other leaders were assassinated. In 1940, widespread popular demonstrations arose as a result of two territorial developments: Bessarabia was occupied by the U.S.S.R., and Transylvania was ceded to Hungary by order of Germany and Italy. The king called in Marshall Ion Antonescu to put down the protests. Antonescu subsequently forced the king to abdicate in favor of his son, Michael, imposed a fascist dictatorship on the country, and declared himself *conducator* or leader. In 1941, he joined Germany in the war against the Soviet Union; in 1944, as the Soviet forces approached the borders, he switched sides. After the war, the Soviet Union arranged for the return of Transylvania to Romania, opening the way for a Communist victory in the elections of 1946. In 1947, King Michael was forced to abdicate, leading to the formation of a Romanian People's Republic.

4. Historically, three Romanian principalities emerged out of the former province of Dacia in the Roman Empire: Moldavia, Transylvania, and Wallachia. All were affected by the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. In the sixteenth century, Transylvania came under Turkish control, while Moldavia and Wallachia became a Turkish suzerainty, preserving their autonomy but having to pay tribute. In 1600 the three states came together, when their princes, under the leadership of the Wallachian leader, joined forces against the Turks. Such unity, however, was quite brief: a year later, a joint Hapsburg-Transylvanian army defeated this alliance and placed Transylvania under Hapsburg rule. Turkish

were sought to settle there. The area was flat and mostly swamp land. As was the case in the United States, Germans settled in separate communities. By imperial edict, Protestants and Catholics were settled separately. Siebenbürgen, for example, was an area where only Protestants lived and the Banat was another area where only Catholics settled. I was born in Tschanad, one of the oldest towns in the region and at one time the seat of the bishop.

FFS: *Do you recall those days when you left your hometown?*

ESF: Since I was only six years old, I recall the flight as a time of great adventure. I had no real idea of the dangers present everywhere. I recall when I saw my first mountain. Everything where I had grown up was flat, and I had this traditional view of the earth as flat, as a plate. I thought that, when one reached the edge, one would come to the end of the world. Sometime after leaving our village, I recall, we came across a range of mountains, and suddenly I realized that I would never get to the edge of the world, that the horizon was not the end of the world. That, I think, was my beginning as a theologian; you could say that the landscape and its changing horizons had a hermeneutical effect on me.

FFS: *That I find most interesting, a point of departure, as it were.*

ESF: Yes, it is, but I was very lucky. I was only a child then. If I had been five or ten years older at the time, the experience would have been quite different, quite traumatic, I am sure. As it was, when I was young, I dreamt for years about shootings and explosions with fire everywhere.

FFS: *How would you describe your family?*

ESF: They were farmers; they had their own farm. I know from my grandmother that my grandparents had emigrated to the United States sometime around the turn of the twentieth century, probably because of financial problems with the farm. They lived in Philadelphia around 1905. There my grandmother worked, given the language barrier, in a restaurant,

suzerainty, meanwhile, continued in Moldavia and Wallachia. In the course of the next two centuries, Moldavia underwent territorial disintegration: first, in 1775, Bucovina, its northern part, was annexed by Austria-Hungary; then, in 1812, Bessarabia, its eastern part, was annexed by Russia. Ottoman control came to an end with the Russo-Turkish War of 1828–1829. After 1848, then, important territorial developments took place that would endure through the First World War: Transylvania came under the direct rule of Austria-Hungary from Budapest; Moldavia and Wallachia became a national state in 1859, which was given the name of Romania in 1862 and was declared a kingdom, with Carol I as king, in 1881. At the outbreak of the First World War, Romania, under King Ferdinand I (who had succeeded his uncle, Carol I, as king upon the latter's death in 1916), entered the war on the side of the Triple Entente with the aim of liberating Transylvania from Austria-Hungary. After the war, Romania regained not only Transylvania but also Bucovina and Bessarabia.

in the kitchen, as a cook. In fact, I recall that my first words in English were “scrambled eggs,” because this was the order she used to fill. My grandparents returned to Romania once they had saved some money. When they came back, they continued with the family farm. I do not know who ran the farm while they were away in America. My grandmother would always say that they had to come back because of ill health, because she could not stand the air where they lived. I think that she was homesick. Not long after they had returned and before my father was born, my grandfather was killed in the very beginning of the First World War. The family struggled to keep the farm; it was not a big farm.

FFS: *These were your paternal grandparents, then.*

ESF: Yes, my paternal grandparents. My mother’s parents also had a farm, but her father was a tailor. Actually, it is hard to call where we lived a village; it was rather large, more like a town, made up of farm people. Ethnically, it was very diverse. There were five groups in all, Germans, Romanians, Hungarians, Serbs, and Roma (gypsies). It was one town, but each nationality lived in its own separate domain, with separate schools, separate administrations, and so forth.

FFS: *What about language, then?*

ESF: It varied. My grandmother had grown up and had lived under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, so she spoke some Hungarian as well as German. My parents had to learn Romanian in school, but on principle they never spoke it; they spoke only German. This I have always regretted, because Romanian is a romance language, and it would have been nice to have learned it as a child.

FFS: *So you grew up speaking German.*

ESF: Right, I grew up speaking only German; that was all my parents would speak at home. Actually, it was a dialect of German, almost a different language.

FFS: *Do you have recollections of the war?*

ESF: I do not recall the war as such. I do recall the fighting in the streets in our town. It was 1944. I remember the women talking among themselves, but I never quite knew what they were talking about. I remember how they had to go into hiding, in basements or attics, and how they disguised themselves, especially when the Russians moved in. This was a wine-growing area, and I remember how the women were always afraid that the Russians would turn to wine, get drunk, and begin raping. There were many gruesome stories in this regard. I have never known whether to believe them or not, whether they were real or hearsay, since it was all hush-hush in terms of the children. I remember

one incident quite clearly from when we fled from our town in the fall of 1944. I was fascinated by a dead Russian soldier who had lots of wristwatches on one arm. I was fascinated and would not move on because I wanted to investigate; I had never seen so many watches on one arm—and all that ticking—I wanted to investigate whether they were grown on. My family had to pull me away and push me on because shots were fired all around us. For whatever reason I remember such an event, maybe because the grown-ups talked about them afterwards. I was but a curious little girl; I had nothing better to do. I just wanted to investigate. I remember such events as a sort of adventure really.

FFS: *Do you remember the privations, the lack of food and so forth?*

ESF: Very much so. We fled the town with my uncle, who still had horses and a wagon. The children would sit on the wagon while the grown-ups walked. There was no food. On the way, we had to beg for food everywhere. Years later, my grandmother would always recall how—and this I remember as well—it was she who had to get food for the family, because my mother, who was twenty-four years old at the time, could never go and beg for food. Once, in Hungary, I recall, my grandmother managed to bring us a big strudel cake. The children ate first. In my family the grown-ups would never eat until the children had done so. The grown-ups—my aunts, my grandmother, my mother (there were no men around)—all sat around and cried, while my younger brother, who is two years younger, and I ate. We could not understand what was going on; we were just so happy to get this great strudel cake! Meanwhile, the grown-ups were all crying and saying how we poor children would never get to eat such good cake again. I have to say, I loved that cake! Eating sweets, I am afraid, has always been a compulsion in my life. Things like that I remember, but not the war as such.

FFS: *Do you remember the devastation?*

ESF: Yes and no. There was no bombing where we lived, in Romania, but I do remember the devastation as we moved from place to place. I do remember, around 1947 or so, visiting Würzburg and seeing the results of the bombing there. Würzburg, like Dresden, had been completely bombed by the Americans, and for no rhyme or reason. When I see pictures from this period, I very much remember having seen such devastation myself. However, this was not part of my own experience. For example, I have a friend who lived in Köln during the war. She is my age, maybe a little younger, and she lived through the bombardment of the city. As a child, because of the horror of the bombing, her hair turned gray overnight. I did not live through that. I do, however, remember that the times after the war were rough. You could not buy anything. I recall that American soldiers would drive by and throw chocolates

to the children. I was never quick enough; I did not have enough elbow power. I also remember worrying about whether it was right or not to steal, meaning simply picking up some apples from somebody's orchard.

In those days people were forced to open their houses and take in displaced persons. Thus, when we first came to Weilbach, where I grew up, we lived with an older couple for a short time. I remember that we children could only go up and down the stairs once or twice a day, to avoid wear-and-tear on the stairs. We also were not allowed to have light, because candles were dangerous. I remember sitting in the dark, always praying for a care package from America. Many of my friends had gotten packages from relatives, but mine never came, of course because I did not know anybody. Food was very scarce. I remember people standing in long lines for food. It was rough for everyone in the family. Since I was a child, I did not starve. Again, in my family no one would eat until the children had eaten. Later on, we moved to a little house, more like a barracks, really. It was very small—a kitchen-living room and two tiny bedrooms, and that was it.

FFS: *Was it there that you began your education, then? You never went to school in Romania, I take it?*

ESF: No, I was too young. Actually, I went to first grade three times: in Austria, where we settled first; in Bavaria, where we lived next; and in Weilbach, the place in Unterfranken where I grew up. In Germany, after the first four years of grammar school, one had to decide on the type of schooling and pass an entrance examination in order to go on to higher education. There were three school types: one had to choose between going to grammar school for eight or nine years, attending grammar school for seven years and then professional school for three years, or going to the Gymnasium and then on to university. I went to the Gymnasium. Actually, I always say that I am, so to speak, a “statistical miracle” in this regard. I was a Catholic coming from a rural area, and Catholics as a group received less formal education. I was also from a working-class family. My father had lost a leg in the war, so he worked, like my maternal grandfather, as a tailor, first in a factory and then at home. And I was a girl living in a village. Only 5 to 7 percent of people from each of these social locations managed to get a university degree.

FFS: *How were you able to do so?*

ESF: I had a pastor as well as a teacher who persuaded my parents to send me to the Gymnasium, but I had no idea what a Gymnasium really was. When I was eleven I took the entrance examination and passed it. The course of studies took nine years to complete. There were two tracks: a classical track and a scientific track. I chose the classical track because of a schoolmate from

the village whose father wanted her to be a doctor, so she went for the classical track, and I just followed along. This track required nine years of Latin, every day of the week; six years of Greek, every day as well; and four years of English, every other day. The other track required nine years of English, every day. If I had done the scientific track instead, I would speak English not only with greater ease than I do, but also with a British accent. Most of the students in the classical track were in minor seminary, studying for the priesthood. For the most part, Catholics came from rural areas, and minor seminaries gave Catholic boys the opportunity to become educated. When we started out we were four girls in a class of forty-six; then, for most of the time, there were but two girls; by the end, out of the forty-six who had started, only twelve or thirteen finished and went to university.

FFS: *And then you went on to university?*

ESF: I actually did not plan to go to the university, but I wanted to go to the Seelsorgehelferinnenseminar in Freiburg. Through Hedwig Meyer, I came to know of the pastoral assistants' seminary program. She was one of the first generation in the program, which had started in Germany in the 1920s. This program was designed for women who were to work as ministers in parishes; it was an independent program and required seminary training for two years. In practice, the women, however, often ended up as parish secretaries. The preparation for this program, which was looked upon as a professional ministry program, was run by a diocesan office. I looked into it and entered into negotiation with the monsignor in charge. I asked to be placed, during the summer before entering the seminary, not in the diocesan office for charities but in a parish, so that I could learn whether or not I wanted to do such work at all. I knew that I would not be a very good parish secretary. He could not assign me the whole summer to a parish, he said, but he did promise that I could do half of the practicum in the charities office and the other half in a parish. More than half of the summer went by, and I still found myself working in the charities office. Now, I was very shy at the time and I did not dream of going to his office. However, one day, I met this monsignor on the street, I gathered up all my courage, and I pointed out to him, that he had promised me that I would get into parish work, but I was still in the charities office. He looked at me and said, "Elisabeth, if you want to work for the church, you have to learn that we will promise you things that we will not keep."

FFS: *Well, that was a good lesson, was it not?*

ESF: I did not think so. Even as a little kid, I could not stand that kind of attitude on the part of grown-ups. So, I responded, "I don't think I will ever learn that." It was then that I decided to enroll in the university, for German

literature, history, and theology. At the same time, I did continue to work in the diocesan youth office.

FFS: *Where was this?*

ESF: In Würzburg. However, in my work at the youth office I learnt that so-called lay theologians were still seen as not “real” theologians because we were not required to take the full course of theological studies that the priesthood candidates had to complete. Hence, I debated whether to enroll for the full course of theology. This was just before the Second Vatican Council.⁵ At that time, there was a rumor that Karl Rahner was going to be silenced. I decided that, if Rahner were silenced, I would have nothing to do with theology, since it would show that there was no intellectual freedom in the church. I probably would have studied sociology instead. In the end, Rahner was not silenced, and then the Council came. I decided to do the full course of theological studies and I was the first woman in Würzburg to do so.

FFS: *Do you recall the years in question?*

ESF: I graduated from the Gymnasium in 1958, began my university studies in the fall of 1958, switched to full theology (the equivalent of the M. Div.) in 1959–60, and finished my studies in 1962 and my licentiate in 1963. Throughout my studies, I had received a scholarship from the German government, and this scholarship was extended for another year. I had a year left after completing the licentiate and decided to begin a doctorate in theology.⁶

FFS: *Also at Würzburg?*

ESF: Yes. After my Theologicum, I talked to the dean about doing a dissertation, and he told me that since I was the first woman they were not sure whether I could do it and that I should thus pursue a licentiate first. So I did. The two men who started the licentiate with me that year were encouraged to submit their work as doctoral dissertations. I did my thesis in pastoral theology, on the topic of ministries of women in the church.⁷ The woman who typed it worked for another professor. This professor read it, became interested in the topic, and gave it to a publisher. The thesis was thus published in 1964.⁸ Afterwards, I was told that, if I had applied, I would have

5. The Second Vatican Council, convoked by Pope John XXIII (1958–1963), met in four sessions, from 1962 through 1965.

6. The academic training in question was as follows: 1958–60, studies in Theology and German Literature and History; 1960–62, studies in Theology, leading to the Theologicum degree (M. Div.) in 1962; 1962–63, graduate studies in Pastoral Theology, leading to the licentiate (Lic. Theol.) in 1963; 1964–70, doctoral studies in New Testament, leading to the doctorate (Dr. Theol.) in 1970.

7. The thesis, “Die Mitarbeit der Frau in der Heilssorge der Kirche,” was directed by Prof. Dr. H. Fleckenstein and was awarded the distinction of *summa cum laude*.

been given a doctorate for this work. Subsequently, I started my doctoral work in Würzburg with Rudolf Schnackenburg, who actually chose the topic of my dissertation. Because of the Council, he wanted me to work on “the priesthood of all believers.”

FFS: *Were you the only woman there as well?*

ESF: Yes. I was the first woman studying the full course of theology, writing a licentiate, and beginning a doctorate in Würzburg. I remember in my first semester wearing this red sweater that my mother had knit for me and finding myself in class surrounded by this sea of black, with some Franciscan brown in the middle. It was a large class, about one hundred and twenty to one hundred and fifty people in the room. The professor came in and said, “Meine Dame und Herren” (Lady and Gentlemen) and everyone turned and looked at me in my red pullover. After that, I never wore this pullover again! After running out of scholarship money, I asked Schnackenburg to recommend me for a doctoral scholarship. I knew that he had three scholarships in all, and I was sure that I would get one. I had finished my Theologicum summa cum laude; I had done my licentiate summa cum laude and had published a book. I was obviously qualified, and I thought for sure that one of the scholarships would go to me. Instead, he told me, “Look, I only have three scholarships, and I need to give them to those who have a future in theology, and as a woman you have no future in theology.”

FFS: *You must have been devastated.*

ESF: Very much so. Later on, I ran into one of my other professors on the street, Josef Schreiner, who had just gotten an appointment at Münster University. He asked how I was going to finish my dissertation, and I responded that I had no idea. He then offered me a position as a research assistant in Münster. Now, he himself was an expert in Old Testament studies, but his chair at Münster was in Intertestamental Studies, so he had an assistant in Old Testament and a research assistant in N^{*}T. That is how I moved from Würzburg to Münster, and it was there that I met Francis. Francis always jokes that we were lucky that I did not receive that scholarship, for otherwise we would have never met.

FFS: *Your degree, then, is from Münster, even though Schnackenburg was your dissertation director.*

ESF: Yes. I stayed at Münster from 1964 through 1970. I knew that if I returned to Würzburg, as I normally should have done, I was going to have

8. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Der vergessene Partner: Grundlagen, Tatsachen und Möglichkeiten der beruflichen Mitarbeit der Frau in der Heilssorge der Kirche* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1964).

problems with my second reader, whose name I have completely erased from memory. I was sure that he was not going to like my thesis. Let me explain. I had argued with Schnackenburg. I thought that the priesthood of all believers was a dogmatic concept. Moreover, John Elliott's dissertation came out at this time.⁹ I had no choice but to switch, therefore, and I proposed to do so from 1 Peter to Revelation—that is how I got into Revelation. Given this switch, I thought, a focus on priesthood no longer made any sense but Schnackenburg insisted that I deal with the priesthood of believers. Consequently, I ended up writing in the first part of the dissertation a review and evaluation of the discussion on “the priesthood of all believers,” while focusing on Revelation in the second part. It was the first part on the priesthood of all believers that I knew the second reader would not like. Fortunately Walter Kasper, who then was dean of the faculty and now is a Vatican Cardinal, suggested that I finish in Münster in order to avoid a long period of separation. He made it possible for me to finish in Münster while having Schnackenburg as my first reader. That is why I finished my doctorate at Münster rather than Würzburg.¹⁰ Actually, the faculty at Münster was very supportive. Every year, they awarded the faculty prize for the best dissertation, which assured publication, since it covered the publishing costs. I received this prize together with one from the Westphalian government in 1970 for the best dissertation of the year.¹¹

FFS: *Before we go on, I should like to ask you about the 1960s. This was, of course, the decade of the Second Vatican Council as well as of many social and political upheavals throughout the world. What are your recollections of these times and these events?*

ESF: I recall the conflicts, of course. A bit of context: I had grown up as very pro-American. Since I grew up in the American-occupied zone of Germany, our education was very pro U.S. If I had come to the States in my twenties, I would have probably become a citizen right away; I was a strong supporter of American democracy, which we idealized. I also have grown up as strongly anti-nationalist. As a product of the postwar era, my experience

9. J. H. Elliott, *The Elect and the Holy: An Exegetical Examination of 1 Peter 2:4-10 and the Phrase “Basileion ierateuma”* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 12; Leiden: Brill, 1966). This was a revision of the author's thesis at Wilhelms-Universität, Münster (1963).

10. The thesis, “Zum Herrschafts- und Priestermotiv in der Apokalypse,” was directed by Prof. Dr. Rudolf Schnackenburg, of the University of Würzburg, and Prof. Dr. Joachim Gnilka, of the University of Münster, and was awarded the distinction of *summa cum laude*.

11. The dissertation received both the Award of the Theological Faculty of the University of Münster for the best dissertation of the 1969–70 academic year as well as the award of the Minister of Education of Nordrhein Westfalen for the best theological dissertation of the 1969–70 academic year.

was different from that of many other German youngsters. I had a pastor who, as were many of the lower clergy, had been very critical of the Nazi system. He talked about the Holocaust and the hierarchy's involvement with the regime. As part of my pro-American education, I also have grown up strongly anti-Communist. This was the Cold War, and we Germans were in the middle of it, fighting the battle against Communism. At the same time, my education involved a lot of ancient history but not much about modern history. We got up to the Weimar Republic, but nothing much beyond that. Much of this pro-American democratic idealism was shattered for me as a result of the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement in the 1960s. I had never heard about American racism and imperialism before. No doubt we had been taught something about slavery at some point, but it never registered. In high school, I remember the discussion about re-militarization and whether Germany should rearm or not. I also remember the student protests in 1968. However, I was not involved directly in them because at this point my focus was on finishing my dissertation. In 1968 Francis had gotten a very distinguished scholarship, and he insisted that I stop my work as a research assistant and concentrate on finishing the dissertation, which I did in the beginning of 1970.

FFS: *What about the Council? Did you keep a close watch?*

ESF: Without the Council, as I said, I would not have become a theologian. We followed the sessions closely. I remember I had a friend from America who was in Würzburg at the time and we would talk about the Council. I was fascinated by what was going on, while she kept telling me not to expect too much from a bunch of old men. The Council not only allowed for intellectual freedom in theology, since no one was censured any more, but also opened windows and doors in terms of the general research climate. Our professors would tell us how their teachers had been silenced. We understood what was happening as making possible a new sort of theology. From conversations with friends in Germany, I hear that not many interesting people are now going into theology. I can understand this, given the present situation in the church. If I were twenty or twenty-five now, I would not want to get into theology either. I got excited about theology because of the Council. On the one hand, the Council can be remembered as a bunch of old churchmen making policy. On the other hand, the Council can also be remembered for advancing a different kind of theological vision of the church's engagement with the world. This was intellectually decisive for me. Years later, I ran into Karl Rahner in New York—it was 1974. I was teaching at Union Theological Seminary that year, and he visited the States for lectures. I had gotten to know

him while at Münster because Francis worked with him. In New York City I told him the story that I had become a theologian because he was not silenced. I did so because a Jesuit—I no longer recall his name—had just been censured, because he had baptized the baby of a woman who advocated abortion rights and he had been dismissed from his job. So, I asked Rahner what he would have done, if he had been silenced, as the rumor had had it. He looked at me and said, “I just would have been obedient and done whatever I would have been told to do.” I realized at that point that my generation was different. Rahner’s generation—and even that of Johann Baptist Metz, the theological generation before mine—had internalized obedience. They were church-men! I had never done so.

FFS: *Let us turn to your coming to the United States. It is the beginning of the 1970s. Your view of the country had changed by then, as you say, as a result of the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement.*

ESF: Yes, I had become critical. You know, I have met Jürgen Habermas only once during the Reagan years and we got into a big argument over the topic of America. He still held on to this sort of glorified understanding of America as the mother of democracy, while I expressed my critique of American capitalism and its antisocial policies.

FFS: *So you arrive in the country. How did you look upon the move itself?*

ESF: I never thought of it in terms of immigration or diaspora. I was a migrant worker. I came because there was no possibility of work in Germany for me as a theologian. Actually, there would probably have been at the Seelsorgehelferinnen Seminar in Freiburg, if I had not gotten married, or at a teacher’s training school. At the time, in 1970, only clergy were allowed to teach at universities in Germany because of the Concordat, a treaty made by the Vatican with Hitler. I remember visiting Schnackenburg in 1976, after I had been on sabbatical at Union Theological Seminary and had received tenure from Notre Dame, asking him whether a woman was now a professor at one of the German universities. He responded that now, in Germany laymen were allowed to teach at theological faculties. I pointed out that I had not asked him whether there were laymen on the faculties but whether there were any women at all as theology professors. In response he turned around to his housekeeper and said, “Frau So-and-so, do you want to become my successor?” That was the mentality at the time and he was not the exception in this regard.

FFS: *In effect, therefore, you were coming to work in a foreign country.*

ESF: Yes, I came to the U.S.A. because I could work as a university theologian here. For me emigration or exile is a political concept. Emigration

requires a national kind of identity, that one is forced to leave one's native country for political reasons. Although my German accent always reveals who I am, I have never understood myself as "Germanic" because of my anti-nationalist socialization. Hence, I prefer to think of myself as a migrant worker, no doubt also as a result of all my childhood wanderings given our displacement from Romania. To be sure, in the case of the States, it was not a case of displacement. Francis and I looked carefully at the situation. Francis liked Germany, and he would have loved to stay in Germany, but there was no chance for employment as theologians at the university level there. That is why we came to the United States.

FFS: *How did this come about?*

ESF: Before we came, we went through a long process of negotiation. I had published my book on women in the ministry of the church, but I did not know much English and the American educational system. It was really a struggle for us. When we met we had agreed that we both wanted to work as theologians. I got married with the understanding that I wanted to be a theologian and not a wife and mother. If Francis wanted to get married under these conditions, that was fine. Finding employment for the two of us in the same place, however, was not easy.

FFS: *You knew what you wanted.*

ESF: Exactly. I understood myself in light of my work and not in terms of marriage. I was first of all a theologian. At the same time, Francis's fellowship opened up a number of possibilities for employment. One was at Duke University. Frederick Herzog, a liberation theologian, was there. He tried to convince Francis to come to Duke. His wife also was a German academic. He proposed that, like her, I should come along and get to know the educational system, the language, the country, and so on. Then, they would try to find something for me. Given my work on women's position, however, I was very much aware that if I would agree to such a strategy that my career would always remain professionally an appendix to Francis's career, with part-time employment here and there. Consequently, we discussed at length where we would locate in the States, given the fact that I was a woman and a foreigner and that we would want to teach in the same place. Francis let it be known that he would take only a position where I would get an equal graduate teaching position. That is how we ended up at the University of Notre Dame.

FFS: *How did this double appointment come about?*

ESF: Notre Dame did not respond in the same way as other institutions, but came through with an offer of two equal positions. At the time, a new administration was in the process of eliminating the old CSC [Congregation

of the Holy Cross] faculty who lacked doctoral degrees in order to build a new department. So, they offered us two equal graduate-level positions. Our subsequent problems at Notre Dame, as I see it, arose directly out of this original offer. James T. Burtchaell, who was the chair of the Department of Theology at that time, had told us that the two positions were of equal status. Now, I came to Notre Dame a semester earlier than Francis, for he still had to finish his work at Münster. When I showed up on campus, I was informed by colleagues that I would teach primarily undergraduates, while Francis would teach in both the graduate and undergraduate programs. We protested against this arrangement. We tried to convince the department that this was not a very good idea, since I had no concept of undergraduate education. That had not been part of my experience in Germany. I had dealt with seminary students and with graduate students, but not with undergraduate students. That was the beginning of our struggle at Notre Dame. We had been promised equal positions from the start, but there was never really any intention on the part of the department to deliver on this commitment. We also were not told that they had a nepotism rule on the books.

FFS: *I take it that this arrangement was not on paper.*

ESF: To the contrary, it was on paper. That is why they could never get rid of me. I always taught graduate courses at Notre Dame. It was a major struggle, however. It was because of such difficulties that I decided to apply early for tenure, which I did after having spent a year at Union Theological Seminary in New York City as a visiting professor,¹² because that would have given us two years to look for new positions if I were turned down for tenure.

FFS: *As a woman, your position as a tenure-track faculty member was quite unusual at the time, was it not?*

ESF: Very much so. In fact, not long after coming to the States, I attended the AAR-SBL Annual Meeting for the first time; it was 1971. Carol Christ had called together, for the first time ever, the Woman's Caucus-Religious Studies and I went to the meeting. There were around thirty women in the room. As far as I remember, I, a foreigner, only recently arrived in the country, was the only married woman with a full-time position. Sallie McFague was also there, but she was only part-time at the time. This indicates how unusual my position was at that time.

FFS: *These were heady times for the country, were they not, the early 1970s? What are your recollections?*

12. This was a named position: the Harry Emerson Fosdick Visiting Professorship for the academic year 1974-75.

ESF: I started teaching in September of 1970, that is, in the fall semester of the 1970–71 academic year. I have often been asked whether or not I had a culture shock; I did not. Well, in a sense I did. Let me explain. Notre Dame was not at all unlike the village in which I grew up—the Catholic presence; the church; the grotto. In my first graduate course, a course on the Gospel of Luke as I recall, I had a run-in with a priest over whether or not the Gospel was a transcript of Mary’s remembrances. I also recall a big to-do over a visit to the campus by Ti-Grace Atkinson, a radical feminist, who had made certain statements about Mary and sexuality.¹³ So, right after my arrival, rosaries were organized at the grotto for atonement. So, for me, Notre Dame was not a cultural shock. All this could have happened in my village. It was Catholic culture, with Irish tinges, in a small town. No culture shock in this regard. However, I had always wanted to live in a city, and here I had left the city for a small town. That was indeed a culture shock.

FFS: *Do you recall the political climate of the times?*

ESF: These were heady times, as you said earlier. I recall my first undergraduate course in the spring semester of 1971. At the time, Notre Dame required four courses in theology for all undergraduates. Thus, all students in the class—and they were all men—were there because of this requirement. All had postponed their fourth and final religion requirement to the end. They all had to be there, and they all resented it. Many of them were also trying to avoid the Vietnam War at all cost—some trying to starve themselves, others having nervous breakdowns, all sorts of things. There were protests against the war. There was also, of course, sentiment for the country. Once, I remember, everybody was aghast because I had prayed at a public gathering (Now, I do not often pray publicly; this was one of the few times that I have done so) for Angela Davis, who was in prison at the time.¹⁴ At another time, I also recall, I made a public statement about the war in class itself, and these two

13. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a variety of perspectives could be found within feminism: liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism. Radical feminism called into question the politics of reform at the heart of liberal feminism: the integration of women into mainstream society through changes in laws and attitudes. In 1967, during the meeting of the National Organization for Women—a central organization for liberal feminism founded by Betty Friedan in 1966—a group of women left to establish a new radical feminist organization, initially called “The October 17th Movement” but subsequently changed to “The Feminists.” Radical feminism advocated broad institutional and cultural change. For the movement, it was society that produced the differences between the genders, so that men and women were socialized into unequal gender roles, with a view of the male as superior to the female. In opposition, the movement emphasized the similarities between the genders—social, physical, psychological. Ti-Grace Atkinson was one of its voices; others included Shulamith Firestone, Robin Morgan, and Jill Johnston.

big football players took me aside and told me that I could not criticize the country since I was not an American citizen. This first class of mine could not have cared less about what I had to teach about the Bible. That was my introduction to undergraduate teaching, but I understood—not only was the class an unwanted requirement, but also the Vietnam War was on their minds. Basically, I just struggled to survive. I wrote out every class completely. I had wonderful graduate students! In fact, the dean called me in and told me that, despite the fact that this was a new experience for me as a foreigner and that I was dealing with a new language, I had received the highest student ratings.

FFS: *Let us talk about the profession. You were trained, I take it, in historical criticism?*

ESF: Yes and no. I was trained in the German version of historical criticism. Before the Vatican Council, by the early 1960s, Catholic exegesis had already become freer. By then, Pius XII's instruction on biblical studies had opened up space for serious work.¹⁵ With the Council, Catholic exegesis was affirmed. Such exegesis, however, was understood in a very different way in Germany. I am still shocked by the division to be found in this country, even today, between exegesis or historical criticism and theology. That did not exist

14. Angela Davis (b. 1944), the daughter of Alabama schoolteachers, was a militant black activist in the 1960s. From 1960 to 1962, she studied at the Frankfurt School with Theodor Adorno; from 1963 to 1964, she was at the University of Paris; in 1964 and 1965, she attended Brandeis University, where she received her B.A. degree; thereupon, he did graduate research in Germany in 1965 and then enrolled at the University of California, San Diego, where she worked under the direction of Herbert Marcuse. In 1968, Davis joined both the Communist Party and the Black Panthers. She was hired as Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Los Angeles, but her contract was not renewed by the Board of Regents in 1970 because of her political associations and positions. This very same year Davis appeared on the FBI's Most Wanted List. A champion of black prisoners, Davis had developed a relationship with a young revolutionary, George Jackson, one of the Soledad Prison Brothers. In August, while they were on trial at the Marin County courthouse, an escape and kidnapping attempt failed, leaving four dead behind, including Jackson's brother and the trial judge. Eventually, Davis was charged with conspiracy, and a warrant was issued for her arrest. After managing to evade the authorities for a couple of weeks, Davis was caught in New York City in October. She was returned to California for trial on charges of kidnapping, murder, and conspiracy, spent sixteen months in jail, and was finally acquitted of all charges in 1972 by an all-white jury. Subsequently, Davis began publishing and eventually resumed her academic career, presently at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

15. It was in 1943 that Pius XII (1939–1958) issued the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* on biblical studies in the Roman Catholic Church. Its recommendations for proper interpretation followed the basic tenets of historical criticism: study of the texts in their original languages, interpretation on the basis of the original ancient texts, proper attention to the literary forms employed by the human authors, reading the texts in the light of modern discoveries. The encyclical opened the way, therefore, for a freer pursuit of historical criticism in the Catholic study of the Bible.

during my studies in Germany. Schnackenburg, for example, would always engage in theological reflection. There was no lecture in which he would not elaborate on the ramifications of exegesis for theology and for today. By way of contrast, I remember early on, in the first year or so after my arrival in the States, meeting a distinguished Jesuit colleague and getting into a serious argument with him because he insisted that he was not a theologian. In the German Catholic context, theology was considered to be the whole discipline. It was not just dogmatic or systematic theology, which was just a sub-discipline, but all subfields constituted the whole discipline of theology. For me, therefore, it was very hard to understand that biblical studies was not a part of the discipline of theology. I would really like to see some comparative research done on this question. To complicate matters further, *Hermeneutik*, *Sachkritik*, and *Theologiekritik* were integral parts of biblical studies. Thus, the first thing I had to learn, upon coming to this country, was the presence of this division between scientific exegesis and theology. So, yes, I was trained in historical criticism, but in the German hermeneutical model.

FFS: *Such training was in scientific exegesis—objectivist, empirical, and so forth?*

ESF: The training was scientific; its emphasis was hermeneutical. Exegesis was an academic discipline, in the same way that, say, systematic theology or fundamental theology, ethics, and practical theology were academic subfields. The division was not between the so-called hard sciences, biblical studies or historical studies, and the others; rather, the division was in terms of academic, scientific disciplines, such as biblical studies, history, systematic theology or ethics, on the one hand, and practical theology, on the other, although in Germany practical theology is a well-established academic field. That is not the case in this country. This, I believe, has great ramifications for postcolonial, feminist, and other such angles of inquiry, insofar as there is, in contrast to Germany, no academic theological or religious studies discipline explicitly concerned with society and the church or society and religion. However, there was still some academic prejudice against practical theology. As I mentioned earlier, when my book on women in the ministry of the church appeared, a work that I had pursued in practical theology, Schnackenburg told me that, if I had applied, I would have received the doctorate for this work. He did add, however, that it was better this way, because now I would be able to do “real” academic work for the doctorate—that is, work not focused on praxis. Hence, indirectly there was still a negative attitude toward the practical.

FFS: *When did you begin to think about a shift in method in your own work or first turn to feminism as a framework?*

ESF: Let me begin by saying that it made little sense for me as a woman to choose theology as a profession when I started my theological studies. In Germany, admission to doctoral studies involves a different process than in the U.S. It is a member of the faculty and not a committee or institution that grants admission. At the time, when I asked Schnackenburg if I could write a dissertation with him, there were still many professors who would not take women as doctoral students at all. From the beginning there was no doubt in my mind that I was entering a difficult situation, both in terms of education and employment, a situation where I would always be the only woman around. For example, in my first work on women in ministry, I received no help whatever from my director. I had to provide the theoretical-theological framework for it myself. His foreword to the book, however, indicates how nervous Fleckenstein was because of it. The book was controverted, for instance, because I had suggested that, if seminarians were to be educated in such way as to be able to function like normal people, the presence of women was a necessity. In doing this first work, therefore, I was not only experientially but also theoretically aware of being an outsider. I recall while working on the thesis reading Simone de Beauvoir, but I did not use her much in my work because of her anti-Catholicism. I was desperately looking for a theoretical framework other than that of “the eternal feminine” or “self-sacrificing motherhood,” but I could find no such different theoretical framework in the theological and most of the literature of the time. Hence, I would call this work pre-feminist because it was not fully articulated in critical feminist terms.

FFS: *Such, then, I take it, was your frame of mind when you came to the United States?*

ESF: I was quite aware of the women’s movement when I came to the United States, and I was very lucky to arrive when I did. In the early 1970s, the women’s movement was still at the beginning, especially in the churches, whereas in Germany no women’s movement in religion existed at the time. At the same time, I was even in feminist groups often considered an outsider, an alien. I never quite fit in theoretically. In the early stages of the movement, women’s “essentialism” and anti-intellectualism were widespread in feminist theological discussions and I had a hard time being heard since I came from a very different theoretical background. Yet the movement was important for me insofar as I came to realize that I was not alone in questioning the structures of domination and prejudice against women, that I was not crazy. After all, that had been my experience during all of my years of study: always, wherever I was, I was the only woman. Such isolation had theoretical ramifications. At the same time, I was well aware that the traditional study and theology of woman

was unsatisfactory. I remember being approached, early on, by Paulist Press for a volume on “Women in the New Testament,” and I responded that I could not think of anything more boring to do. You see, I had done all this stuff on “women in the Bible” already. For me, the most important impact of feminism was a theoretical one. All you have to do is look at the first three chapters of *In Memory of Her*, where you will find an attempt to work out a different sort of hermeneutic and historiography.¹⁶ Such an attempt to develop a different way of writing the history of early Christianity owes its inspiration to feminist studies. It was only through access to such scholarship that I came to see the possibility of reading the Bible differently and of writing early Christian history as feminist—not just as wo/men’s—history. It was, for all practical purposes, the beginning of a new field of research. *In Memory of Her* was written to get away from the “women-in-the-Bible” approach and the topical research about women—the literature was full of such books—although this approach seems to be getting stronger again today in biblical gender studies.

FFS: *It was that type of work that came to be known as gynocriticism, was it not, with its concern for the recovery and representation of women?*

ESF: Right. It focused on the recovery and representation of women, but it was also about women in the literature and history of men. All these books, which I had gone through in the course of my own early work, had been written by men; it was men writing about women. As Virginia Woolf pointed out, there was a whole library of men writing about women. Even today, despite the critiques, there are many still engaged in this type of work; everywhere you look, it is “women in” this or “women in” that, women in Mark or women in early Christianity. In effect, this traditional type of framework is still very strong, although I sought to provide a different framework.

FFS: *How did you come to it?*

ESF: Very important for me in this regard was an article that I wrote for *Concilium* in the mid-1970s.¹⁷ This was a very primitive attempt on my part, but it did reflect a first shift in my thinking. Where I really was able to work it out somewhat more was in what would have been my contribution

16. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983). The three chapters in question constitute part 1 of the volume, entitled “Seeing–Naming–Reconstituting.” They are as follows: chapter 1, “Toward a Feminist Critical Hermeneutics”; chapter 2, “Toward a Feminist Critical Method”; chapter 3, “Toward a Feminist Model of Historical Reconstruction.”

17. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, “Die Rolle der Frau in der urchristlichen Bewegung,” *Konzilium* 7 (1976): 3–9.