

Introduction

Francis Schüssler Fiorenza's writings on a wide range of historical and current matters reflect deeply thought-out responses to the challenges that confront contemporary theological thinking, and a willingness to engage the complexity of the underlying issues. The extent of his grasp of critical concerns in theology and theology's engagement with philosophical, political and socioethical modes of thought, coupled with an insight into the dynamics of their historical development, indicate a theologian who is a valuable resource for anyone interested in exploring complex issues in contemporary theology. His distinctive theological vision is the outcome of a creative engagement with a broad range of thinking in contemporary hermeneutical theory, transcendental theology, critical theory, feminist theology and political theology. This vision and its underlying intuition is to be found in his critical reflection on discourses as diverse as theological methodology, political-ethical theology, theological education and theology's dialogue with pressing issues in modern and postmodern thought.

Fiorenza is probably best known for his extensive contribution to theological handbooks and encyclopaedias, and lesser known for his theological vision and its pragmatic articulation in a reconstructive hermeneutics for foundational theology. Also, as past president of the Catholic Theological Society and currently Professor of Roman Catholic Theological Studies at Harvard University's Divinity School, Fiorenza has not only influenced the theological consciousness of American theology but contributed to the formation of theological thought around sociopolitical and ethical issues in much of contemporary theology. This volume hopes to present Fiorenza's distinctive theological thought, particularly as a vision that underpins and drives a critically mobile theological method. However, it will also present his thinking on four interrelated but distinct discussions taking place in theology today. This will not only demonstrate how his theological approach engages these discussions, but also give insight into his understanding of the complexity entailed in the arguments from diverse and contrasting perspectives. Fiorenza's unique approach to theological methodology and to advancing a particular "way of doing theology" that genuinely engages the inherent complexity of many of its critical discourses has much to offer the contemporary theological milieu.

At the heart of Fiorenza's theological project is his reconstructive hermeneutics, which is the methodological articulation of a vision for theology. A central methodological problem in contemporary systematic theology is securing a conceptual framework that maintains the tension between the conflicting claims of contemporary thought characterised by radical historicity, plurality and particularity, and the perduring truth claims of religion. This framework must be able to absorb, mediate and hold in tension the legitimate demands of postmodern concerns and the truth and meaning of Christian identity, and not succumb to either relativism or ahistorical foundationalism. Fiorenza's theological project, predicated on the critique of foundationalism, undercuts any attempts to place truth on an Archimedean lever of given certainty, but rather proposes a search for truth and meaning under the conditions of contemporary epistemological principles and subject to diverse methodological criteria. Fiorenza's approach is not so much a *via media* between these tensions as it is a holding the legitimate claims of these positions in tension through a critically reflective methodology that employs a reconstructive hermeneutics in conjunction with the guiding strategy of a wide reflective equilibrium. This strategy reflects across and between the criteria of a *hermeneutical reconstruction, background theories, retroductive warrants* and the *plurality of voices within the community of faith*. By bringing these four elements into a reflective equilibration, not only is the subject matter under discussion given a comprehensive treatment, but the process throws up much in the discussion that is often recessed. Furthermore, the operative norms that guide theological reflection are brought to light, and by making conscious the often hidden assumptions and presuppositions of the discourse, we are better able to arrive at considered determinations that take into account the available data and diverse perspectives. This approach appears to possess the capacity to cut across conflicted positions and ideological presuppositions that inhibit constructive theological discourse as it deliberately avoids the merely limited and specific conditions of truth implied by foundationalist approaches on one hand, and the theological relativism that enjoys an ambivalent relationship with truth on the other.

One might say that Fiorenza proposes a theology that is both apophatic and kataphatic in its approach, method and considered determinations. In other words, he acknowledges the mystery at the heart of theological enquiry and that our conceptual horizons have definite limitations while also engaging the intellectual resources of the rich theological and philosophical tradition to articulate with clarity that which can be brought to conscious cognitive reflection. This study hopes to present this underlying intuition of Fiorenza's

theological vision along with the contours of the vision itself and the consequent theological methodology of his reconstructive hermeneutics.

Part one will reconstruct Fiorenza's theological narrative, vision and project by exploring his theological journey and analysing his theological method. This will entail outlining the philosophical and theological influences on his thought. Fiorenza not only developed his thinking under these influences, but also critically engaged with them to profile his distinctive theological position in relation to their thinking. The first chapter will explore this relationship by presenting Fiorenza's dialogue partners and their influence in shaping his vision. Chapter two will entail a deeper exploration of how the development of his theological thought in dialogue with his sources provides the principal ideas that form the core of his theological vision, and how a critical appropriation and development of these culminated in his reconstructive hermeneutical method. The third chapter, with a more specific focus on his project of critical reconstruction in theology, will demonstrate how the ideas dealt with earlier are taken up into his theological method. His project to reconstruct fundamental theology as a foundational theology along the lines of a reconstructive hermeneutics is investigated along with the theoretical elements of this method, which will be presented and explained. Chapter four will analyse his vision and project and critically evaluate his method.

Part two explores, through four interrelated and critical questions in contemporary theology, both the method in action and Fiorenza's distinctive perspective on these issues. The first two issues are internal to theology, while the other two engage political-cultural discourses from a theological perspective and with an eye to the interrelationship between the two. The second discussions in each of these pairings are a further specification of critical issues arising from the prior discussion. The *theologia ad intra* discussions are not limited to matters narrowly theological, but also engage critical issues where theology and society intersect. These are the question of religious plurality and the determination of theological truth in a postmodern context. The *theologia ad extra* discussions explore two political-cultural issues dominant in current thinking in the encounter between particularity and universality. Fiorenza explores these issues as a theologian who is nevertheless deeply concerned with the problems of contemporary global political and cultural-ethical thinking. All these discourses demonstrate an abiding concern reflected in Fiorenza's theological reflection—how concrete and particular historical traditions relate to universal discourses—and how his critical and practical reconstructive methodology sets about responding to this question.

As this study intends to be a vehicle for the presentation of Fiorenza's theological thought and to provide an introductory text for his theological vision and method, his voice dominates in the text. Commentary and analysis are kept to a minimum, and evaluative critique is offered in chapter four, with a personal postscript at the end.