

Social Location

There is a movement in interpretation that leads the reader to focus on her or his social location. The social location refers to a person's country and culture and to the place one has in their particular social order. It is no longer enough to ask about the *personal* biases and beliefs and values of the individual interpreter as the means to discern the perspective that shapes interpretation. These are very important. Yet we need also to look at the *social* factors that shape interpretation, that is, the ways in which individuals are shaped by virtue of being embedded in societies, communities, and groups.

One of the problems is that Western students tend to see themselves as individuals and do not realize how much they speak out of their social location. Furthermore, Western students do not appreciate how much people from many other cultures get their personal identity primarily in terms of the social groups of which they are a part—nation, ethnic group, race, family, village, class, gender, and so on. In the US, we might consider the Amish communities as examples of group identity, because they have a set of distinctive customs and values by which they live together. The Amish people get their identity as a community rather than in terms of the kind of individualism common in the rest of the culture.

So, what difference does it make that a person comes from a certain country or culture? What difference does it make that the interpreter is a male or female? Black or white or Native American? Has a certain economic level? Comes from the inner city or grew up in a rural area? Is healthy or ill? Has a criminal record? Is young or old? People come to the text with certain assumptions and experiences that are to a great extent based on the groups with which they identify and into which they were enculturated. We usually share certain presuppositions—ways of thinking, ways of relating, values and beliefs and customs—that are determined (or at least shaped) by the groups in which we find ourselves in a culture, often without our awareness of it. Hence, when students read the biblical text, they come with a whole complex of influences out of their social location.

Furthermore, many folks are mixed in their racial and ethnic background. My adopted daughter is mixed race. When as a child she began a new school, I asked her if there were other black children in her class with whom she could identify. She straightened me out fast by saying, "Dad, I'm white too!" It is the Tiger Woods phenomenon, who has his identity from many cultures. This hybrid identity makes the notion of social location complex and cautions us against stereotyping of any kind. Also, people are mistaken to lump together all Hispanic Americans or all Native Americans or all Asian Americans. People originate from many different cultures within those groups. And we white Americans tend to think of "others" as hyphenated Americans without realizing that we are *European* Americans who have diverse roots in Europe.

And there is a tendency to think that all those who come from a particular social group are pretty much alike. Groups may have some prevailing traits, values, worldviews, and patterns of behavior. But people differ. And many people resist the dominant values of their group and seek to counter them or to overcome them. There is no essential makeup of a group; groups contain diversity, and they change over time. We teachers have much to learn about these dynamics, because they represent pitfalls and stumbling blocks in education.

Furthermore, social locations are fraught with power dynamics between different social groups: dominant culture/subordinate or minority culture; male/female; wealthy/poor; educated/non-educated; healthy/sick; young/elderly; positions of authority/positions of

subordination. These power dynamics enable some groups to take things for granted and others not. Most often, people in positions of dominance—such as being white or male in the US—do not reflect much on the group dynamics that characterize what it means to be white or male. They can take it for granted, because it is “normative” in the society. There is a tendency to think that their/our way of relating is just the way things are and the way things ought to be. In so doing, they dominate and marginalize often without even being aware of it. On the other hand, people in subordinate groups and cultures are often well aware of how different they are from the dominant culture, because they/we think and relate in ways that do not predominate and may not be acceptable. And people in subordinate positions know both their own patterns of thinking and relating as well as those of the dominant culture—because they experience the negative effects of the power dynamics of the dominant groups.

The power dynamics of social location are often very complex. Some groups experience multiple forms of discrimination. Womanist thinkers point out that black women, by virtue of their social location, experience three levels of oppression: economic, racial and gender. And the dynamics of their gender oppression differ from the oppression that white woman may suffer. Black women may experience gender oppression from black males, but they are in solidarity with black males in their common experience of being subject to economic and racial oppression.

Also, in relation to one group, someone may be in a dominant position. In relation to another group, they may be in a subordinate or marginalized position. One African American student at our seminary had a personal crisis over this dynamic. She had experienced various forms of oppression all her life as a black female. However, when she took her internship in India, they did not care what color she was. She was American, and people there saw her as one of the oppressors! After struggling to overcome oppressors, she found it extremely difficult to experience herself in the dominant social location of an oppressor. Conversely, in the nineteen eighties, as women rose in ministry at the seminary, there were male students used to a dominant role who felt emasculated when they experienced a subordinate position.

For centuries, the publishing scholars from universities and church positions have interpreted the Bible from the point of view of the dominant cultures—white, male, Christian, often clergy, middle/upper class, European or European American, educated, and mostly university professors. Because they (we) were all pretty much from the same social location and did not know or acknowledge interpretations of people from other social locations. We thought we had had some objective truth, because we all thought alike about so many matters! However, when Jewish scholars began studying the New Testament after the Holocaust, when European American women and then women of color entered the public arena of interpretation, when base communities of poverty in Latin America and Africa, and when various other liberation groups joined the community of those who interpreted the Bible in the public arena, when scholars in colonial and post-colonial places became part of the scholarly conversations, the point of view of the dominant culture began to be relativized and was called into question in so many ways. The new insights and the challenges to traditional scholarship have been due in large part to the diverse social locations from which interpreters took their stance.

One of the results of this shift has been that some interpreters began to name their social location at the beginning of their publications so as to acknowledge the influence and perspective from which they interpret. It used to be that writers would suppress their social location under the guise and pretense of being objective, as if they had been able to overcome their place in life and attain detachment. Again, this is “starting” to change. In this regard, I find the *Global Bible*

Commentary to be very helpful in the classroom. Each contributor identifies the contemporary social context from which they write, and then interprets the biblical book in question in light of that, and then comes back around to apply insights from the commentary to their situation. I ask students to write one solid paragraph on each article they read from this volume—such as the article on Galatians by Nestor Miguez (Argentina) or the one on I Thessalonians by K. K. Yeo (China)—giving first the social location of the author and then explaining how that social location has informed their interpretation. Other such commentaries are available from feminist, African American, and same-gender-orientation perspectives. Identifying your social location clarifies so much about the approach one takes, and the practice encourages others to do the same.

This practice of identifying your social location as an interpreter is done mainly by traditionally suppressed cultures. European Americans from the dominant culture often cannot see clearly how their social location informs interpretation—maybe in terms of religious denomination or modernism, but not many other factors. There remains a kind of blindness among us to the nature and influence our own social identity. This seems to be true also with students. At Carthage, I used to do an exercise in which I would ask students to tell me my biases simply by looking at me visually standing before them in the classroom. They were a pretty homogeneous group. Almost invariably they would name only those things that made me different from them. I was a male; I was older than they were; I had a beard; I was a teacher; I wore a sport coat; and I wore glasses. They looked and looked for other things, but they could not see the things that reflected themselves. I needed to point out: I was white; I was European American; I spoke English; I was well fed; I could afford to wear good clothes; I was healthy; I was without disabilities; I had a watch (Western view of time); and so on. Then I would begin to elaborate on some of the biases that would inform “my” and “our” biblical interpretations in distinction to people from other social locations.

Unless we (in dominant positions) examine ourselves and think about our differences in relation to others, we will not see what we as a dominant culture or group take for granted. It is embarrassing to tell about one of my awakenings now, but it was an epiphany for me. Until I first entered the civil rights movement in the 1960s, I had had little interaction with blacks. I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania, and now I was living in the south. I knew little about the hardships, suffering, and discrimination blacks were enduring, but I wanted to “help.” I was living in North Carolina. I went to a racism workshop of encounter between blacks and whites. My intent was to learn more about what it was like to be black, so I could understand better and so I could work with blacks and support them. I was completely shocked and taken aback when I was told that this was not what was needed. Instead, they thought it was a good idea for me to find out what it meant to be white! And as I was finding that out, to work with my white brothers and sisters to change the things we do that contribute to conditions of discrimination. That early shock has been with me through my life as I have sought to understand all that I take for granted, all the privileges I enjoy, all the actions I take that are marginalizing of others, all the de facto segregation that takes place simply because of the groups of which I am a part, all the things I say that are thoughtless and hurtful, all the things I do—consciously or unconsciously—that serve to exert power over others or marginalize others. And it is not up to people of color to show me what I do. That may help, but I have to examine these things for myself. I have to take responsibility for my harmful actions and attitudes.

Social location involves soul-searching and honest social-self reflection to ferret out and admit the biases and perspectives and leanings and experiences that inform our interpreting,

however one may be proud of one's social location or feel disadvantaged by it. This is especially true of those from dominant cultures. But it is true of anyone wanting to understand their social location and how it may inform their interpretation of scripture. Taking stock of our social location is like the Alcoholics Anonymous process of doing a "fearless moral inventory." We reflect on who we are in our social groupings and what advantage or disadvantages our social location may have in relation to other groups. We reflect on those we may have harmed by our past interpretations. We seek to make amends and change our behavior.

And the process of self- and social-examination never ends. I learned this from the women's movement. In the sixties, I thought I would develop an awareness of the dynamics of sexism in my life and then come to some pristine self that was without sexist biases. Not a chance. How naïve! I now realize it is layer upon layer of sexism all the way down, just as it is layer upon layer of racism. Hence, it is a process to be proactively engaged in for a lifetime. The classroom may initiate the process for some and it may facilitate the process already in motion for others. And many students may be ahead in the process and able to help the rest of us. But what the classroom experience must not do is to hinder or reverse that process—or be ignorant of it. That applies to me and to my students.

So what implications does all this have for learning in the classroom? First of all, it has implications for how we imagine the entire learning enterprise. Justo Gonzalez has proposed an image of the classroom as an ethnic roundtable with people from many different cultures gathering at a "round table," an arrangement in which no one is privileged and no one is marginalized. We can extend the image to the study of the Bible, in which the text is in the middle and there is a dialogue of mutuality with one another and with the biblical text. Even with this image, we need to be careful not to privilege the biblical text, especially when it threatens to bring harm to women or Jews or gay and lesbian folks. And to take seriously all the dynamics of social location, we need a gender round table, an age round table, a gender-orientation round table, a religion roundtable, a health roundtable, an economic round table, and so on. And that is what we potentially have in the make-up of our students in the classrooms—very complex differences among people that need to be honored in such a way that they can all be a source of insight and learning.

If the round table is the image, then I as a teacher need to design the class to reflect this image. Setting up the tables and chairs for dialogue is one step. Announcing the class in such a way as to draw a diversity of students is another. Also to be included are choosing textbooks, designating readings, inviting guest speakers, and crafting assignments—all set to honor diverse social locations. And I need to create an atmosphere in which people can mutually contribute and challenge each other in a common quest for understanding.

The diversity of social locations has implications for me as a teacher. I will note two ways here. First implication is that I have a responsibility to show awareness of my own social location. If I am not aware of my social location and how it informs my interpretation of scripture, in terms of how I relate to people from other social locations, and in terms of the power dynamics involved in my position, then I am hardly going to be able to empower others to speak from their social location. I need to name these factors of my own social location explicitly to model it, to state my desire to resist anything negative, and to state my desire to empower others to speak.

Part of my personal difficulties as a teacher in a position of authority is that I am the quintessential oppressor—white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (WASP), male, heterosexual, upper middle-class, educated, older, American—and the teacher! I can trace my ancestry to the earliest

British settlers, and our family actually qualifies for the Mayflower Association. This feels to me to be the greatest liability for myself as a teacher—knowing that I bear actually and symbolically all the blindnesses and limitations of oppressors. In the written reflections in these essays, I may seem to be barging ahead as I talk about issues of social location, but inside I shudder. Nevertheless, here I am, in this position as a teacher, and I cannot deny my own flesh. Wendell Berry once wrote to the effect that people in my circumstance should stop thinking they will contribute anything to the salvation of the world and just spend a century or two “cleaning up after ourselves”!

At the same time, I try to overcome the negative impact of my social location and work against it. I try to foster an atmosphere in which students may differ with me and be critical. At Carthage I reinforced this commitment by giving a dollar to anyone who caught me using male preference language of people or God. I should do that about all aspects of my social location! In the classroom mix, without denying my position as a teacher, I seek to see myself as one among many interpreters, all of whom at different times can be teachers and learners. I understand my task as teacher to minimize the power and privilege of my social location and to use my position to empower students—to encourage people to speak out of their social location, to appreciate the social location of others, and to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other. Way easier said than done!

The second implication of social location for me as a teacher is this. The time has passed when it is enough for a teacher to know only their subject matter. Now we also need to know our students. And this is fortuitous, because the best people to teach us about that are the students themselves. And this places me in a position of being the learner, the inquirer, the inquisitive student. I can model what I want students to do with the subject matter by having an appetite for learning about the students—their social location, their point of view, and how this can inform their interpretation of scripture.

There are also implications of social location for students. I will name three. First of all, if students are to engage in the act of reading and interpretation, they need to know the factors in their own makeup that affect how they read and interpret—what they are interested in, what they look for, how they understand it, how they frame it, what they ignore or simply do not see, why their perspective differs from the interpretations of others, and so on. Perhaps the most important thing for students to learn about interpretation is that social location is never a reason to dismiss an interpretation. Factors of social location can help someone understand the text, often in fresh ways, because diverse interpreters are noticing things that others have not discerned before in the text and its life world. At the same time, factors of social location can hinder or inhibit one from understanding the text, because we may be imposing a framework from our time and culture onto the text. So interpretation is a matter of discernment that involves both empathic engagement and detachment. My role as teacher is to assist the students to be aware of this dynamic. That is to say, it is no longer enough to look at the text. One must look at oneself looking at the text. This is true in terms of the methods one uses to interpret, and it is also true in terms of social location. *Students must interpret themselves interpreting the text.*

How can we give time and some tools for students to do this? One way is simply to ask what the student is looking for when they read the Bible. Are they looking for spiritual guidance and insight? Are they looking for resources for liberation? Do they want to know how they can minister in a church? Do they want to know how the authors treat women? Are they seeking the Gospel message of salvation for preaching or witness? Often it is possible for them to correlate their quest in reading the Bible with some dimension of their social location—their gender or

ethnic identity, their family background or church group to which they belong, or their vocational choices. A simple survey or a set of questions to be posed between students working in pairs can make this happen.

There are other ways as well. The main strategy I employ is to provide students with a “social location profile” to fill out. I give students a handout in which I list the following categories down one side of a page with space to put notes: nation of origin, language(s), race/ethnic group(s); gender; economic level; occupation; education level; religious affiliation; political party; geographical origin; gender orientation; health; legal status. I make it clear to them that these categories are not meant to label or to stereotype anyone, but only to give some suggestions about social factors that may shape their interpretation of texts—and that they can revise the form accordingly. I also add two other categories, namely, “personal experiences” and “commitments,” because I know these help to qualify and even counter a social profile. I then ask students to take notes on these factors (not to be turned in)—how they relate to each category. Then I invite them to share (what they feel comfortable sharing) with one or two other persons what factors *they* think are important on the profile as lenses through which they interpret the Bible. This exercise is often a real eye-opener for students.

On the back of that sheet of paper, I then give another list of factors that would have shaped how a biblical author may have seen the world: Judean/Gentile; gender; family position; village or town; position of social honor or shame; scale of purity or defilement; elite/ peasant/ expendable; countryside/city state; and so on. Then I ask them to identify the social location of the biblical writer under study, say the author of Gospel of Mark or the apostle Paul, in relation to these factors. Not only do the students realize how much their own social location impacts their way of seeing the text in contrast and comparison to other students; they also realize how different is the social location of the biblical writer from their own—and that their interpretations of the text and their appropriations of it for contemporary situations need to take account of that dynamic.

There is a second implication of social location for student learning. The class becomes much more dialogical, because the students are more aware of their own distinct perspective, the perspectives of others, and the perspective of the biblical text. In learning to read and interpret out of their social location, students learn that they have something distinctive to see and to say. What do you see when you read from the position of the dominant culture? What do you see when you read as a female? And what do you see when you read with an illness or disability? Obviously, such factors in no way exhaust the grounds of their reading. Nevertheless, the goal is that they each find their own voice and begin to speak out of it in relation to the biblical text and in relation to other students. And students come to value the diverse perspectives in the class and to depend on this diversity as a means to see dimensions and meanings of the text they would not otherwise have noticed. They can more clearly see the interpretation they have chosen and ways they can challenge each other. They are eager to hear what insights each person has and why/how they have them.

A third implication for students is that the concept of social location affects students (and teachers) in terms of power dynamics. The students become attuned to the power dynamics in the biblical text in new ways, but they also become more open about the power dynamics in the classroom. Why not talk about the fact that there are men and women, people of different ethnic groups and races, people with disabilities, people who have wealth and others who come from backgrounds of poverty. These differences can be lightning rods for conflicts over interpretation. I recall Bill Williams some years back feeling marginalized in the classroom when he talked

about the significance of his social location as one with the fatal condition of cystic fibrosis. Despite his illness, many women in the class could not take his illness-related marginalization seriously, because after all he was a male. Before he died at age forty, Bill went on to write out of his social location one of the most profound theological books I have ever read. He titled it *Naked Before God* (Morehouse Publishing)

While conflicts can and will occur, the differences can also be an opportunity to engage in creative dialogue that brings forth some new ways of relating to people who are different from each other—and whose social locations are also in conflict in the larger culture. In this way, the process can show promise as an opportunity to rectify injustices, as a means for people to relate to each other so as to overcome the interactions that suppress or exploit or marginalize and to practice dialogue that is liberating and empowering. These dynamics are nowhere better dealt with than in two books: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Friere and *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* by bell hooks. I commend them to you.

Rectifying injustice cannot happen in the classroom if the teacher is uncomfortable with conflict or does not have some sense of when to intervene and when not. Even if I may not feel that way on the inside, I try to be a non-anxious presence. Sometimes one must intervene to make sure the classroom is a safe place to have conflict. Recently there were some heated exchanges between black and white students in several of my classes. I thought we were headed for trouble but decided to trust the students to play it out. Fortunately, in each case, they stuck with it, explained their views, listened carefully, acknowledged each other, and even changed somewhat—to the point where I was able to name these incidents as model examples of how to interrelate through differences.

This whole effort is about students having their voice, having an authentic self to share with others in the learning process. It involves not letting others name you and not being presumptuous about your point of view. I use two slogans to convey this phenomenon. The one is: *Don't let others interpret for you*. That is to say, find your own distinctive approach and interpretation. This may be advice best proffered to people from subordinate cultures whose voices have been traditionally suppressed. The other adage is this: *Don't trust yourself to interpret alone*. In other words, our perspective is limited and we need the points of view of others to see the biases, limitations, blind spots, and distortions of our own interpretations by being in dialogue with others from differing social locations. This may be advice best proffered to those in traditionally dominant positions. And then out of the mix, we seek to have the voices speak together to discern insights and understanding and perhaps guidance from the text.

Some marvelous insights have come out of such classroom conversation. It may not be too much to say that the outcome of some classroom conversations about scripture can be considered as revelation, with a small “r.” If the word of God is not equal to the Bible the printed page in and of itself, but only comes to be revealed in our communal dialogue with the Bible, then may we be permitted to say that the class quest for understanding can be “revealing.”

There are two theological insights about revelation that are relevant to our discussion of social location in the classroom. First, revelation is always located and particular, never general and universal. It may have universal implications, but it is always local and culture-bound in expression. This is what is meant by incarnation, the bodily concreteness of the presence of the spirit in time and space, at a certain period in history, in a certain culture, at a particular time, in a unique circumstance. In a sense, we can talk about the various social locations of revelation and of the spirit. Incarnation of the spirit in the biblical location and in our location certainly bears both opportunities and limitations in interpretation and appropriation. Such incarnation of the

word can happen in specific classrooms at specific schools on specific days. If we think of revelation that way and if we look for it there, we just might experience it.

Second, revelation is communal. It emerges from communities of dialogue. The work of the spirit is communal. In Pauline experience, the spirit is given to the community, and individuals within the community receive diverse gifts that build up the body as a whole. By spreading the gifts among the group, the spirit is the sustainer of the community. Likewise, the fruits of the spirit are oriented toward building up the community and avoiding behavior that tears it down. We are comfortable with the diversity of the gifts of the spirit, but what about the diversity of cultures and social locations and perspectives and even values and beliefs. This is the diversity we encounter in and among churches. And it is the diversity we encounter in classrooms. The spirit is working to bring the best for the community from a diversity of points of view in interaction with each other. Each interpreter is socially located, and the communal experience of the class is also socially located, an incarnation of God's work designed to lead to knowledge, insights, wisdom, and relationships that bear the fruits of the spirit for the well-being of the community—and the world.