

August 31, 2008
Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Over the ensuing years, the sixteenth century's rift between the Holy Scriptures and the Church has tended greatly to widen, unto the serious disadvantage of exegesis and theology. Nowadays it is really amazing what passes for biblical interpretation.

For example, bereft of the ecclesiological context presumed by the biblical writers and editors as essential to its understanding, study of the Bible has lately been directed by ideologies quite alien to its content and purpose. Thus, annual biblical conferences in recent years seem always to include some section or other devoted to Feminist Hermeneutics, Liberation Theology, World Religions Perspectives, and/or, in these latter days, Homoerotic Exegesis.

All these approaches, moreover, have been aided by the presuppositions of Postmodernism, according to which the inherited texts of antiquity are indefinitely supple to accommodate whatever happen to be the "narratives" or perceived needs of the contemporary reader.

In the case of the Bible, let me hasten to remark that these suppositions include a distortion of two valid principles, the one theological, and the other hermeneutical. First, the Bible is not just an ancient text; it is God's living Word proclaimed in the here and now. Second, the interpretation of a given biblical book or author is in many respects guided by selected individual passages. For instance, it can make a considerable difference whether one's reading of the Epistle to the Romans is guided by chapters 5-8 or by chapters 9-11.

On both these principles Postmodernism lays violent hands, twisting them to mean: First, the reader comes to the text principally guided by the existential concerns of the contemporary world, not by dogma, nor even by grammar and history. Second, the reader's selection of guiding texts is determined by those same contemporary concerns.

To illustrate this "method," I pick a representative example in which both distortions are brought overtly into play: *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley 1994), by Daniel Boyarin. The author of this work, a Talmudic scholar of note, presents a truly original reading of St. Paul; I am forced to say, nonetheless, it is more imaginative than compelling.

Correctly recognizing in Paul an important Jewish thinker, and properly attempting to interpret him through that perspective, Boyarin nonetheless brings too many unchallenged cultural presuppositions to the effort. Far from hiding his Postmodernist ideology, the author admits, for example, that "post-structuralist inquiries into the significance of the 'phallus'" largely determine his

interpretation of what Paul says about circumcision. Similarly, with respect to Pauline teaching on the relationship of the sexes, Boyarin avows he has consulted "the full agenda of feminist cultural criticism." And Paul's extension of salvation to all the nations, Boyarin believes, "was motivated by a Hellenistic desire for the One, which among other things produced an ideal of a universal human essence, beyond difference and hierarchy." Indeed, this universalist goal, says Boyarin, is what determined Paul's distinction between the Letter and Spirit in the work of exegesis.

Boyarin, in choosing his guiding text in this reading of Paul, is naturally attracted by Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." In this last phrase, "in Christ Jesus," Boyarin sees the metaphor motivating Paul's dramatic readjustment of what it meant to be a Jew.

Boyarin does not stop there, however; he goes on to subject Paul's teaching, thus understood, to the same social criticism to which he imagines Paul was subjecting the culture of his day.

One can hardly avoid the suspicion that this author is simply projecting a contemporary Jewish social problem onto Paul, whom he regards as "emblematic of Jewish selfhood." That is to say, Paul "represents the interface between *Jew* as a self-identical essence and *Jew* as a construction constantly being remade." Well, this description may apply to a deracinated Jew like Arthur Koestler, but certainly not our Apostle.

The average Christian believer will be, I suspect, as little sympathetic to this interpretation of St. Paul as he will be disposed to regard Boyarin's entire enterprise as a sensible way to study the Bible.

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