

May 13, 2012

Sunday of the Samaritan Woman

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

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

For example, the study of the Bible, bereft of the ecclesiological context presumed by the biblical writers and editors as essential to its understanding, has lately been directed by ideologies manifestly alien to its content and purpose. For example, 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. It is safe to say that none of the biblical writers had subjects like these in mind.

Such approaches to the Bible approaches, moreover, have been aided by the presupposition of Postmodernism, according to which the texts inherited from antiquity are indefinitely supple; they are adaptable to whatever happen to be the "personal narratives" of contemporary readers. The truly "real" narrative is the subjective story of the reader.

When applied to the Bible, this supposition of Postmodernism presents 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 within the work itself. For instance, it makes a considerable difference whether one's understanding of Romans is chiefly guided by chapters 5-8 or by chapters 9-11. Read the first way, Romans is a treatise on Justification. Read in the second way, it presents a theology of history. (Since Augustine, the West has interpreted Romans in the first way. In the East, Romans is generally read in the latter way.)

On both these principles Postmodernism lays violent hands, twisting them to mean: First, the reader comes to the text principally guided, not by dogma, nor even by grammar and history, but by the existential concerns of the contemporary world. 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 unique and original reading of St. Paul; one is obliged to declare, nonetheless, that the presentation is more imaginative than compelling.

Although he correctly recognizes Paul as an important Jewish thinker---and properly attempts to interpret him through that perspective---Boyarin brings too many unchallenged cultural presuppositions to the effort. Far from hiding his Postmodernist ideology, he admits, for example, that "post-structuralist inquiries into the significance of the 'phallus'" largely determine his interpretation of what Paul says about circumcision. Well . . .

Similarly, with respect to Pauline teaching on the relationship between the sexes, Boyarin avows he has consulted "the full agenda of feminist cultural criticism." Small surprise.

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." This goal, says Boyarin, also 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 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.

That is to say, Boyarin admits he is simply projecting a contemporary Jewish social problem onto Paul, whom he regards as "emblematic of Jewish selfhood." Paul "represents the interface between Jew as a self-identical essence and Jew as a construction constantly being remade." This assessment may describe a modern deracinated Jew (like Arthur Koestler), but it has nothing to do with our Apostle.

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor

phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

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