THE ABUSE OF NATURE, THE ABUSE OF WOMEN

AND THE PROMISE OF BIBLICAL FAITH

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Two decades ago, when I had just begun my 13 years of service as the Chaplain of Wellesley College, one of the women whom I invited to preach in our College Chaplain was a young pastor from West Virginia. She had been involved for a number of years in ministry with and among poor women in rural Appalachia. I listened with stunned attention as she spoke with the young women of Wellesley College about the lives of women in the mining towns and the backwoords of West Virginia.

11 was all about violence. Above all the violence of poverty. The malnutrition. The lack of any medical care to speak of. The miserable living conditions. The black lung disease of their husbands and the accidents by which their husbands were continually being victimized.

It was also about domestic violence and the violence of rape more generally, to which many of those poor women, she explained so poignantly and so painfully, were continually subjected.

When I had occasion to talk with her privately, and to hear more about the pastoral challenges she was facing, I asked her this question. I had developed, by that time, a deep interest in the theology of nature and had become concerned about a whole range of environmental issues that were even then of profound seriousness. Among those issues was the question of strip minting.

I said to her that I was somewhat surprised that she did not mention the issue of strip mining, since that was the one issue relating to appalachia that many of us in the Northeast, including myself, were familiar with. Indeed, I asked her, had she ever given thought to our commonplace way of speaking, when we talk about not only the rape of women, but also the rape of nature ?

She gasped. She told me she had never thought about it before.- But of course it was true. The two were profoundly related, the rape of women and the rape of nature, the violence done to women in West Virginia and the violence done to the earth in West Virginia. And then we continued to talk for a long time.

That conversation brought to the surface concerns in my own soul, which I have been struggling with ever since, theologically, pasto rally, and personally. Hence I very much welcome this opportunity today to return to them, in this kind of e.onrmuMa l Church setting, to take another reading on them, and to enter into dialog with you, who are undoubtedly attuned to many of th<se issues much more than I am. All with the hope of seeing

together, I trust, some light at the end of the tunnel: hence my topic, "The Abuse of the Envirnoment, the Abuse of Women, and the Promise of Biblical Faith."

I.

I want to begin with some historical observations. In these remarks, I will focus on attitudes toward the environment primarily, and only allude to attitudes toward women, since I have some historical acquaintance with the former and very little with the later. I have published a historical study, indeed, about Christian attitudes toward nature. But I have never published anything about Christian attitudes toward women.

At the same time, I want to emphasize, I bring with me today a whole range of concerns relating to Christians attitudes toward women, which have arisen for me chiefly, although not exclusively, in my own pastoral ministry. It was no accident, for example, that I asked that West Virginia pastor the question about the rape of women and the rape of the earth.

I arrived at Wellesley College in the midst of "the Sixties," bringing with me a whole range of questions and concerns about racial justice and economic justice. But ty pi ally for my time and for my gender, the thought of gender justice at that time had not really crossed my mind.

It was not too long, however, before such issues began to clamor for my conscious attention. Most dramatically with the question of rape. As a counselor, I began to hear stories of domestic abuse and rape that tore me apart. In that context I discovered for the first time in my life, what to maybe half the population has always been an obvious fact, that men and women in this society live in two different worlds, that most women in this society, at one level or another, live in sustained if not always constant fear of rape. I also came to see at least some small ways how much a subject of taboo this "rape culture", as we later came to call it, actually was, and how much "blaming the victim," as we later came to call it, was such a common practice.

In addition to those pastoral experiences, I also was a part of s-pme deeply unsettling conversations with colleagues \in the Counseling Center at \fel Lesley College. It, was I, strangely enougn\ encouraged by Conversations with theologians such\as Mary Daly an cl Rosemary RuetheiJ in those years, who- began to raid's questionsX in the counseling staff about some of the psychoanalytical assumption's that were commonplace there, chiefly Freudian assumptions about wWn and sexuality, y

A vignette. \ One of the counselors at that time ,\ a female counselor ironically, presented^ case for discussion to the counseling staff,\where one of thK descriptors was this. This student had had a sexual relationship with her father, since early in her teens, and perhaps before. This relationship was

described almost without comment, when the case was presented., and w^th this purpose.- That that relationship probably had \ something to do with the fact that this young women had a problem with inthsmacy in her relationships with men. The discussion was all so clihj.cal! There was no anger expressed, no rage b.

\ I look backXat that case conversation now, almost with disbelief, but also with gratitude that I was indeed a pastoral counselor in those bays, as now, and that questions of gender V justice were beginning to come alive in Christian cirlces in those dhys, and all the more so todays

I still remain a learner with respect to these issues. That is why, important as I believe they are, I have not ever attempted to do any public writing about them, and why I very much want to focus on the question of abuse of the environment today, and only allude the question of the abuse of women.

11.

In my 1985 study, THE TRAVAIL OF NATURE, I suggested that it is critically important for us to grasp the roots of Christian thinking about nature, not just what Christian theologians have in fact said about nature, but, prior to that, the images that have shaped their thinking before they said what they said. So I suggested that we should undertake a kind of theological archeology, to uncover the roots of Christian thought about nature.

When we do that, I believe, was can uncover two major motifs that have shape Christian attitudes toward nature, which I call the spiritual motif and the ecological motif.

First the spiritual motif. You have perhaps heard of the classical Western image, which the historian Arthur Lovejoy described in his study with that title, The Great Chain of Being. This is the idea.

EXPLAIN GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

I suggested in my book that a still more primordial kind of human experience lies behind this somewhat abstract philosophical conceptuality, which I call the experience of the overwhelming mountain.

EXPLAIN THE EXPERIENCE OF THE OVERWHELMING MOUNTAIN

Mythologically: the axis mundi, the center of the earth, the umbilical cord to the world of immortality, to the world where the gods live.

Now Lovejoy does not address this question in his book, nor do I,

but feminist scholars such as Rosemary Ruether have not been at all reluctant to make these observations. My thoMcal ly speaking, the top of the mountain stands for the realm of the"Father Sky God "'and the regions at the base of the mountain stand for the "Mother Earth Goddess.[lt] And at this point you can identify some gender stereotyping built right into the most primordial images of the Western mind.

The apex is the world of pure spirit, the world of immortality and light — close to the sun. The nadir is the world of mere matter, the world of change and shadows and darkness. Note that the word matter is related etymologically to the word for mother, mater. I will come back to this observation presently, since it is a matter of profound importance for our subject.

Now Lovejoy points out that the Western mind, so deeply shaped by this image of the Great Chain of Being, has been profoundly ambivalent, not to say schizophrenic, about the world. This conceptuality brings with it the possibilities of two radically different kinds of spirituality. The one is world-transcending or other-worldly, focused on the idea of pure spirit above. The other is world-affirming, focused on the idea of the fecundity of the earth.

This upward movement of the mind, along a hierarchial ly construed structure of finite reality, I call the spiritual motif#'?'" It has been pervasively influential in the history of Christian theology and Christian^ spirituality.

You can see how the goal of the spiritual life would have to be leaving the earth behind, which is precisely what countless theologians and mystics taught the faithful to do. With that developed a kind of contemptus mundi, and a contemntus feminae as well. The world of sheer matter and the world of the female were often described by theologians and mystics in the most negative terms, as is indicated by the traditional phrase,'zthe world, the flesh, and the devil J* And you've got to realize that when the Church's public and published theologians and mystics, most of whom were men, thought of "the flesh"'and its evils, they thought first and foremost of female flesh.

Now the Christian tradition contained within itself an activist side, as well as a contemplative side. It came into full public view in the traditons of Benedictine monastic ism and later in a way that transformed European civilization, with the emergence of Calvinism. In this context the idea of human dominion over the earth took on a new kind of fateful i mportance•

EXPLAIN DOMINION and DESCECRATION OF THE EARTH, PERHAPS ALSO THE LEGITIMIZATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

This, then, is the spiritual motif, in broad outline. Rising above the earth in quest of pure spirit, and returning, on the

part of some, to dominate and exploit and abuse the earth.

I II.

Now I want to talk about what I called the ecological motif. It presupposes the same grand vision of the overwhelming mountain and the same grand conceptuality of the Great Chain of Being, but in this case the itinerary of the mind is descending and expanding. The mind and heart focuses on the overflowing of the eternal goodness of God. This has a basis both in classicist, philsophy, and in the Bible.

SEE PSALM 104

In addition to the experience of the overwhelming mountain, some additional themes from the Bible come into prominence here, above all the idea of the promised land.

EXPLAIN THE LAND IN THE BIBLE
Deuteronomy. Genesis 1. Noah.

So you have two themes here the experience of fecundity in the earth now (Psalm 104) and the experience of fecundity in the world that is to come. (Is. 25)

With this goes a different kind of idea of human dominion --

CONTEMPLATION AND A SENSE OF SOLIDARITY.

Luther - table before too full grace diminent

See how this comes together in the NT

Ro. 3

Col. 1 :15 f f.

contemplation and solidarity — and eschatology.

THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST
a little child shall lead them -- the excluded shall be included, Greeks, slaves, women, and indeed the whole earth. Gal 3:26 f.

THE CASE OF ST FRANCIS — an exemplar of the spiritual motif, and the promise of biblical faith.

Care - The question of stewardship or partnership.