

Bad Religion

Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
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Ancient Witnesses: Numbers 21:4-7, 1 John 4:7-11

I have a dear friend and mentor who recently wrote about today's passage in the Hebrew Scriptures:

What a story! God unleashing poisonous serpents upon his own people. That's teaching those disgruntled Israelites a lesson. You Israelites think it's okay to criticize God for making you miserable!!! God will make you even more miserable, sending serpents, who knows how many, the Bible doesn't tell us, it leaves it to our imagination. So let's imagine: hordes of serpents, tens, hundreds, crawling along the ground, biting people in their calves, their thighs, their arms, doing this, day and night, with their poisonous fangs; men, women, children, dying, at a greater rate than if hit by a coronavirus. Of course, my love for this story is perverse. It's wonderful imagery; think of it on a large movie screen; it would grab our attention --- in a horrifying way. All that screaming, people dying in pain. We would close our eyes. But, on another level, what is truly horrifying in this story is its picture of God. What kind of God is this, so easily hurt by criticism, so determined to stamp it out, so willing to inflict suffering. What in the world is behind this picture of God, this understanding of religion?

There are many other similar stories with troubling implications throughout the holy scriptures. And we can either simply ignore them, or we can deal with them. We have the troubling story of the flood. God annihilates the whole of humanity—men, women, old, young, boys, girls, babies—and all the animals, with the exception of one nuclear family and a pair of every beast. That's a picture of a powerful God, but is this a loving God? And there's the story of the 10 plagues visited upon the Egyptians, one of which took the lives of the first born in every family. Is this an image of a God who so loved the world? And there's the story of God ordering King Saul to utterly destroy the Amalekites—men, women, children, and their sheep and cattle. And when Saul could not bring himself to do such a ruthless thing, God turned against him. And then there's the story from the Book of Acts when Ananias and Sapphira sold some of their land, they didn't give all of the proceeds to the apostles but held some of it back. And so it says that they both died because they did this and were found out. And then there are those passages of Paul affirming the subordination of women.

All of these stories and images of a violent, vengeful, blood-thirsty, heartless God can only be called "bad religion." Yes, I'll say it, in our beloved Bible there is bad religion. This shouldn't surprise us, though. Nor should it undo our love of scripture. Countless people were responsible for the composition of the books of the Bible, composed over a period of a thousand years. They were people of deep faith, but they were people. And they, like all of us, were motivated by self-interest, by tribalism, by fear of what is different or threatening, by their ego and agenda. I guess what is amazing is that so much of scripture rises above that. We see over and over again these

passages in the Bible that testify to great transcendent moments, what we call revelation—moments of startling intuition into God’s compassion, love and goodness. And so this is what we’re called to do when we read scripture: to distinguish between what is revelation and what is merely human. If we say this is an easy thing to do, we only deceive ourselves.

Throughout our history, there are many, many people who chose to emphasize bad religion. Our own nation was founded on a system of white supremacy and slavery that was undergirded by a multitude of biblical texts that support slavery. One can find these texts in both testaments; we find them in Paul’s letters; we even find in Jesus’ parables references to slavery without any kind of denunciation. In the book of Genesis, there’s a story of Noah, who got drunk and fell asleep naked. His son, Ham, saw this and told his two brothers, who covered up their father. Noah was so embarrassed and incensed that he cursed Ham and the people of Canaan, who were Ham’s descendants, saying that “Canaan will be the servants” of the descendants of the other brothers. Some theologians said that Canaanites, whose skin was darker than the others, represents Africa, and this indicates that God ordained their slavery and bondage to the European colonists. Bad religion. And the systematic oppression continued after slavery ended in 19th century with laws that forbade the intermingling of the descendants of Africans with the descendants of Europeans, including racial purity laws against intermarriage. Bad religion.

You can find Christian Dominionism right here and now on the Palouse that is based on the command in the creation story in Genesis: “Be fruitful and multiply... and have dominion over the earth and every living thing.” Dominionists aim to “conquer” and take over communities to establish their own version of biblical law, promoting white supremacy and anti-gay rhetoric based upon their selection and interpretation of biblical texts. This lineage of bad religion starts in the Bible and runs through history to the church in the present.

You can find forms of Christian White Nationalism making a resurgence throughout the nation today, espousing the exercise of political power over others based on white Christian identity that has its roots in the doctrine of “manifest destiny” in the 17th Century, that was a religious justification to seize and colonize the land in the new world as God’s chosen race. Bad religion.

How do we know what is bad religion? In the gospel of John it says, “God so loved the world that he gave his only son.” And in our reading from the First Letter of John today it says, “God is love.” In good religion, we are to love what God loves, and this includes all of our fellow human beings, not enslaving them, not subordinating them, not persecuting them. None of that is love. The apostle Paul tells us what it is to love others: to think of them as your brothers and sisters in Christ, because in Christ there is neither slave or free, neither male nor female. All are one in this love. Love means no slavery, no subordination of others, no dominance, no conquering, no exclusion, no supremacy. All are created in the precious and sacred image of God.

And let us not take on an air of superiority ourselves. Who among us is not susceptible to the allure of bad religion? As Paul said, “If we say we are without sin—and bad religion is a form of sin—we only deceive ourselves.” We need to be vigilant and always examine ourselves, that we aren’t mistaking our own hidden desires and self-interest for revelation. For bad religion is

baked into our beginnings, our history, our human psyche. As Augustine once said, “Never fight evil as if it exists only totally outside of yourself.”

In an article titled, “The Science of Spiritual Narcissism,” the author discusses how self-enhancement through spiritual practices can fool us into thinking we’re evolving when all we’re growing is our ego. He writes, “If a major point of yoga is quieting the ego and reducing the focus on self, why are there so many yoga pose pictures on Instagram?” Bad religion is insidious, and even those of deep faith cannot avoid using it for one’s comfort, convenience and privilege.

Thomas Merton said that it is dangerous to put scriptures in the hands of those not sufficiently spiritually awakened because they will use it for their own egocentric purposes.

There were many encounters of people throwing Bible verses at Jesus. One time it was a passage that made divorce legal. But Jesus observed how the letter of this law was being used to hurt women, leaving them abandoned, dispossessed and vulnerable. So he says to them, “Moses only allowed divorce in the first place because of your hardness of heart.” And then he abolishes divorce, except under extreme circumstances. He takes this Bible verse and pitches it out, a response that is understandable for the circumstances of his ancient world. Why? To protect women! For love! New Testament scholar, William Countryman writes:

When Scripture seems to confirm your own hardness of heart, it’s wrong. Ditch it, just the way Jesus did. Conversely, when Scripture breaks your world open and makes it bigger and more loving, it is achieving its true goal.

Jesus love his tradition, flaws and all. He loved the Jewish scriptures. Because of this, he struggled to see them in light of the Spirit of God.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, what then can we say? Our scriptures are a mixture of revelation and human desire, good and bad religion. But like loving a person, we can only love the whole person, faults and flaws included. The same can be said for our tradition through history and even the present day church. My friend put it so well:

We have a wonderful faith. God is love, and God loves us, has mercy upon us, forgives us --- and, God knows, we need forgiving --- (and God) calls us to love, to live a meaningful life doing good in one way or another. Scripture tells us that, reminds us of that. So it’s right to love scripture, to love the whole of it, even the bad religion parts, thinking of them as mirroring our own sinful inclinations, and calling upon us to interpret those stories as judgment upon us, for we know, we know, that God does not send poisonous serpents upon us, because God is love, God is compassion, God is mercy, God is forgiveness, God is goodness, God is truth.

Thanks be to God who is love.

Thanks be to Christ, the embodiment of this love and our companion who understands.

Amen.