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# Professor Regina Schwartz finds a dark side as well as a positive side to monotheism

By Paul Galloway / Chicago Tribune

EVANSTON, Ill. -- Five years ago, an 18-year-old freshman raised his hand in class and asked a question that caused his professor, Regina Schwartz, to have what might be described as the academic equivalent of a religious experience.

Or perhaps the academic equivalent of being hit by a truck.

At the time, Schwartz, who joined the Northwestern University faculty in 1995, held joint appointments in the departments of English and Religion at Duke University and was teaching a course that looked at the Bible from a literary and cultural perspective.

"I was talking about how marvelous the Exodus story is in relation to the foundational myths of other cultures," she said during an interview in her office at Northwestern, where she is an associate professor of English and director of the Institute of Religion, Ethics and Violence. "So many cultures are founded on myths of conquest. The founding of Troy is one of many such stories.

"But here, I was saying to the students, the Bible is telling a story of liberation rather than conquest - about the origins of a people who were freed from slavery in Egypt."

She then spoke about how liberation theologians in Latin America have used this story for their political purposes in opposing corrupt regimes, how the civil rights movement in this country used it in the South against racist laws and policies, and how in South Africa it was used in the struggle against apartheid.

"And in the midst of my celebration of the Exodus story, this student asks, 'But what about the Canaanites?'"

"And I thought, 'Hmmm. The Canaanites. Yes, what about the Canaanites?'" "

As she recalled the moment, Schwartz smiled, somewhat ruefully.

“According to the biblical narrative, the Canaanites are the people whom the ancient Israelites indeed conquered after they were freed from slavery in Egypt,” she said. “And I was stopped cold. I knew how right he was.”

Humbled, she vowed to take a harder look at the Scriptures.

A result is her 1997 book, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, which has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in non-fiction and is a compelling analysis of what she sees as the “two poles” of Western religious belief and their manifestations throughout history and in today's world.

“The dark side of monotheism endorses exclusivity and intolerance and competition for scarce resources – there aren't, for instance, enough blessings for both Jacob and Esau. Community is imagined as ‘us against them,’ ” she said. “The ‘Other’ is the infidel, who's to be degraded and hated. This is a vision that has been used to justify discrimination and genocide.

“Monotheism's positive side is one that endorses generosity and imagines plenty – like the vision of manna raining from the heavens, enough to feed everyone. It's an inclusive vision depicting a deity who embraces diversity.”

To Schwartz, studying the Bible is a means of understanding our culture and ourselves.

“In the book, I emphasize that it's the interpretations that often cause the trouble rather than the biblical narratives themselves,” she said. “Whoever's holding the reins of power in a community has the authority to interpret these narratives authoritatively, and sometimes those interpretations are incredibly deadly, sometimes they say, ‘Behold, there's the infidel. Go murder them.’ And the community acts.”

Over the years, of course, the infidels change. “Sometimes they are Jews, sometimes blacks, sometimes Catholics or various sects of Protestantism, sometimes gays,” she said. “But the consequence of imagining that God wills or endorses intolerance, hatred and violence is that it is very difficult to challenge these views. Who dares question the will of God?

“And that's the reason why it's important, even for secularists, to take the Bible and its influence seriously and not be too confident that it has been displaced by reason.”

A primary influence, Schwartz said, has been on the way we think of ourselves as members of a specific community or group – one formed in contrast to other groups.

“Most of the pages of the Hebrew Bible are not filled with lessons in piety, but with stories detailing the processes of forming collective identities. Nationalism was coming into existence when the Bible was a best seller in Europe and when Bible reading was the common practice, and these narratives became a pattern for modern nations, most of which imagined themselves as a new Israel. This was the case for England and France, as well as for America.”

The tragedy, she believes, is failing to move beyond a vision of exclusivity, although categorizing is sometimes beneficial. “Much has been gained politically by digging in and claiming a distinctive identity,” she said. “But my fear is that there’s an enormous cost, which is aggression and suspicion and the antagonism that come from claiming a distinctive identity.”

While it may be rewarding to appraise the Bible through the lenses of culture and literature, it would also seem to be unsettling for students who object to such an approach because of their religious beliefs.

“In 20 years of teaching the Bible, I’ve never had a complaint from students or parents, and I think it’s partly because I don’t make the claim that I’m a spiritual leader on the one hand or that the Bible is not a sacred text on the other,” Schwartz said. “I simply say it’s ‘in language’ and ‘in culture,’ and we’re going to pay attention to both. I think my students also sense that I’m allowing room to believe in a God beyond the text, an unsayable God.”

At first, she says, some students are fearful, wondering how much they will have to reject and looking for clues to the teacher's religion. (Schwartz has roots in the Reform tradition of Judaism.)

“As the (school) term goes on, and I’m constantly stressing the manner in which God or the ancient Israelites or good and evil are portrayed, students come to believe that God is more often created in the image of man than the other way around. That is, mankind’s greed, pettiness, jealousies and fears are often projected onto God.

“But instead of that insight inspiring a crisis of faith, it seems to have the opposite effect. It makes their faith inviolate. They think, ‘Well, the Bible, like other works of literature, is at best an approximation of reality, of the world, and as a work of human imagination, it’s going to constantly fall short of divinity.’

“So when the narratives offer glimpses of a God who’s generous or merciful, they’re pleasantly surprised that human beings who lived in the ancient world, which was fraught with conflicts and scarcity and violent competition, could rise above their darker instincts and imagine this kind of deity.”

And what would Schwartz now say to the 18-year-old student who asked about the Canaanites?

“The answer is complicated,” she said. “Most biblical scholars believe the conquest narratives were written after 586 B.C., when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and the Israelites were exiled to Babylon.

“So this is not a narrative written by a people who were in a position to oppress others. The Israelites were beleaguered, homeless, abused and surrounded by the mighty empires of the ancient world, and they were writing about their dream of returning to their land and their belief that God was on their side.”

That context, Schwartz said, is essential to the story's meaning. “It would be a mistake simply to attach the dark side of monotheism to Judaism, which has been a notably tolerant religion. Understanding the biblical conquest story as the hope of a powerless people for a home is one thing, but using it, as Christendom has, to justify the Crusades, or the Spanish Inquisition, or the conquest of the New World gives it a completely different afterlife.”

In the end, she said, people read the Bible selectively: “If their commitment is to generosity and charity, then they’ll highlight the passages that affirm this, and they’ll either allegorize or bracket or explain away the dark visions of intolerance and violence.”

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