

The Word of God versus the Seven Principles Part 1

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Perhaps you remember Frank McCourt's memoir entitled *Angela's Ashes* or perhaps you saw the film based on it. It chronicles the human cost of poverty, as well as the loss of life to death and the diminishment of life to disease that poverty constantly exacerbates. It portrays a father so overburdened with the anxieties of his life and by the absence of hope for a way out in the future he drowns his pain in alcohol. It also portrays a mother, old and haggard before her time, beaten down by the combination of poor diet and constant pregnancies. It is a moving story of growing up poor in Ireland. It was a time of radical nationalism deeply infused by tribal religion. At that time, to be Irish was to be Roman Catholic. The story reveals the impact on this family as birth after birth after birth is endured as a way to be loyal to their religious heritage. After all, the church urged reproduction on the faithful as based on the first divine command given to the first man and woman in Genesis 1:28 "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it." This is the first of the terrible texts, the sins of scripture; I would like to explore this morning.

It is this text that has caused and still causes great suffering for those who accept this as the Word of God. Defining faithfulness as being in lockstep with an institution that forbids any method of contravening conception or a society that tells women what they can or cannot do with their bodies should they inadvertently conceive is a horrible thing for anyone's idea of God to say. For the characters in *Angela's Ashes* if the church said birth control or abortion were sins, then they were sins. To defy the church was to be condemned to eternal punishment. To submit was to secure the promise of a better life in the world to come. It did not seem to matter that many of the McCourt family babies died prematurely. McCourt reports that he and his siblings actually looked forward to such deaths because they got a day off from school to attend the funeral, an occasion accompanied with much sympathy and heaps more food to eat than they normally had. It did not seem to matter that the lives of both parents were being destroyed in this process, since through it all the teachings of the church were affirmed and the fires of hell were averted. As the parents were taught that the sex act was sinful unless it was used for reproduction, choosing either sexless lives or going to hell had no great appeal. So they opted for sex that was indivisible from pregnancy, no matter that each new pregnancy shredded the fabric of this family that was insufficient to absorb one more baby.

But this was not just an issue for Roman Catholics. You may remember Andrea Yates, a fundamentalist Christian. As a psychologically damaged woman, she sought medical help and counselling after a prolonged post-partum depression following her third pregnancy. Her doctor urged her and her "born again" husband to have no more children, warning that the emotional resources of this family were simply not adequate to have any more children. But in the "Word of God," Andrea and her husband read that God had enjoined the people of the world "to be fruitful and multiply." They concluded that they had to obey the Bible, rather than the doctor who could be an agent of Satan. Two more babies were born. Then, in 2001, Andrea had a breakdown. She systematically took her five children and drowned them in the bathtub and then called the police.

She was found guilty and is spending the rest of her life in prison. But is she the only one who bears guilt. Certainly her husband, who walks free, bears some fault. But I would put at the top of the list their church teaching that this text is a divine law that must be obeyed no matter what the consequences.

Would those children be alive if Andrea and her husband had been taught that this text is at the end of the first creation story, a mythical one at that? In this narrative God's wondrous work of creation is almost complete. On the climactic sixth day God brings forth living creatures identified as "cattle and creeping things and wild animals" and proclaims it good. Then he completes creation with his crown jewel, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth." Then the text states, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

It was at this moment God delivers his first divine command, "Be fruitful and multiply."

Since we live in an age where the idea of God speaking to give commands, seems inappropriate, the questions their church might have raised are: What did these words mean to those ancient people? What was the human experience that caused our ancestors to hear God say these words?

A priest wrote these words some time during the period of Jewish history known as the Exile in the 6th century BC. The Jews were captives, deported to the foreign land of their Babylonian conquerors. They dreamed about returning to their homeland, but had no realistic hopes of doing so. To reproduce and to grow their tribal numbers so that some of them might some day return home was a high priority.

There is also the universal human drive to survive. Consciousness gave us the blessing and curse of knowing we have a past and a future. We live with the anxiety of knowing we will die, but we don't know when or how. We also know we live in a dangerous world. It was in many ways a more dangerous world for our ancestors but with time they developed weapons that made it safer to hunt. They learned to grow crops so as not to starve in times of famine. They gathered in cities with walls to protect themselves from other tribes. Increased knowledge and developing skills in the healing arts began to defeat the causes of sickness. As a result people lived longer and the population began to grow geometrically.

Human life, anthropologists guess, began one to two million years ago. Yet it took from that time until 1750 AD for the world's population to reach one billion. It then took another 180 years for the human population to double in 1930. Then it took only 40 years until 1970 to reach three billion. And in the 44 years since it has more than doubled to over seven billion.

Humans certainly have mastered being fruitful and multiplying, but we are destroying the planet trying to feed such numbers. Capitalism, having turned us into commodities, destroys our natural resources to meet our demands. Clean water and air are becoming harder to come by and of course the burning of fossil fuels has us headed towards cataclysmic climate change.

Our hearts ache at the pain endured by the McCourts and Yates families, but these family tragedies threaten to be global disasters. A text attributed to God created to enable life to survive has become one of the sins of scripture that all but guarantees our annihilation. I don't know if the damage this text has done can be halted or undone, but as Unitarian Universalists we offer the antidote in our Seventh principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. We recognise that creation was not made for us. We are part of that creation. What we destroy, destroys us. What we heal, heals us. We offer the world a new "Word of God" inviting all to embrace something greater than our selves.

The second terrible text I'd like to address this morning is from the second but much older creation story. After God has formed Adam from clay and breathed life into him God decides that it is not good that Adam should live alone. He creates all the animals as possible mates, but none are found acceptable so, "God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and God took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, 'She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.'"

To call this text of oppression the "Word of God" is truly a sin. The biblical writer is saying, "This is how the first woman was created. God made her, like the animals, but she, like the animals, was also subject to Adam. He named her, as he had named all the animals, giving him authority over her. She did not share his status, his glory or his divine image. He was made by God. She was taken out of his body. She was kin to him in a way that animals were not, but she was to be subservient, obedient and aware of her second-class status. Her chief role in life was to be the male's helpmeet, to bring him pleasure, to relieve his need for sex and companionship." Sex, incidentally, was originally meant for recreation, not procreation. The story later hints that childbirth, with its resultant pain, was punishment handed out after the fall, not something that was part of the original intention in creation.

Paul centuries later would quote this text to support his negative view of women, and through Paul these words formed the dominant New Testament understanding of a woman. She was not made in the image of God. She was designed to be a male helpmeet, not an independent person. It gives sanction to the idea that patriarchy was the will of God, a system created and blessed by a male deity.

Of course, this text did not establish patriarchy. It just blesses it. While mythologist, Joseph Campbell suggests there was a time in human history when the feminine was the analogy by which God was defined; eventually the male sky god replaced the Earth Mother. This later found its way into the writings of pre-Christian philosophers and each of the world's great religions.

Plato, in "The Republic," recorded Socrates as saying, "Do you know anything at all practiced among mankind in which the male sex is not far better than the female?"

Xenophon stated, "The ideal woman should see as little as possible, hear as little as possible and ask as little as possible."

Sacred Hindu texts state, “It is the highest duty of a woman to immolate herself after her husband’s death.” In the Hindu laws of Manu it states, “In childhood a female is subject to her father. In youth a female is subject to her husband. When her lord is dead, she shall be subject to her sons. A woman must never be independent.”

In Buddhism one is reborn a woman because of one’s bad karma. Buddhist prayers include: “I pray that I may be reborn as a male in a future existence.”

Jewish men are taught to say, “Blessed be the God who has not created me a heathen, a slave or a woman.” Talmudic writers added: “It would be better to burn the words of Torah than to entrust them to a woman.”

The Qu’ran regards woman as “half a man” and that “They are inherently weaker in rational judgment.”

This negativity towards women, supported by sacred texts, has made women prisoners of war throughout much of history. They had little control over their surroundings making them subject to abuse. Society gave men legal protection no matter how they treated their wives. Men claimed the “God-given right” to exercise authority over both the bodies and lives of women. While we claim to live in a more enlightened age, this attitude is deeply entrenched in our culture. Patriarchy is alive and well. We see it in battles about birth control, abortion, sexual harassment, the preponderance of rape, pay inequity between the genders, the glass ceiling keeping women from high office, in a significantly larger percentage of women living in poverty, and domestic violence, to name but a few.

That patriarchy is so difficult to root out of our western society and our selves I believe goes back to this text that divinely blesses it and then declares it the “Word of God.” Again, a UU vision of what the world could be like is the antidote. We are a new “Word of God.” There is no room for patriarchy in our seven principles, especially in the first two. Patriarchy does not recognise the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Patriarchy does not promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Yes, it is a huge, powerful and destructive force and we are small in number, but when we embody our principles it keeps hope alive that this terrible text can be relegated to history’s dustbin.