

Sunday February 12, 2012

Irresistible force encounters immovable object

By Jim Taylor

The rearguard battle against abortion in the U.S. took a new turn a week ago, when the Susan G. Komen Foundation did a U-turn on funding for Planned Parenthood.

The Dallas-based Foundation was created to fight breast cancer. It used to give Planned Parenthood \$650,000 year. A week ago, it withdrew funding for Planned Parenthood. Then, after a flood of protest, it reversed itself.

The reason given for dropping Planned Parenthood was that Komen would not fund organizations “currently under congressional investigation.”

Indeed, Planned Parenthood is under congressional investigation. But so are other organizations that the Komen Foundation continues to support.

As Britain’s *Guardian* editorialized, “The problem is that the investigation was launched by overtly politically motivated individuals who are opposed to abortion. The organisation is a favourite target of anti-abortion lobbies...”

Republican candidate Rick Santorum, campaigning in Missouri, inadvertently confirmed the Guardian’s diagnosis. Santorum ignored the fact that 97 per cent of Planned Parenthood’s services provide contraceptives (birth control); emergency contraception; screening for breast, cervical and testicular cancers; pregnancy testing and pregnancy options counselling; testing and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases; sexuality education; menopause treatments; vasectomies and tubal ligations. Instead, he characterized Planned Parenthood purely as “the No 1 abortion provider in the country.”

Part of a bigger battle

But I don’t think this is just about abortion. I think it’s about men controlling women.

So does Charles Pierce, who ranted (for *Reader Supported News*), “The anti-choice people want the power to reassert control over what the ladies do with their lady parts, because that is the way Jesus and their daddies intended it to be... It will not stop with abortion....”

He’s wrong about Jesus, who never claimed that women should be subservient to men.

But he’s right about the political motivation. It will not stop with abortion, because it didn’t start with abortion.

Women’s rights were the defining issue of the 20th century. Susan B. Anthony in the U.S., Nellie McClung in Canada, made universal suffrage an issue. The birth control pill, in 1960, gave women the right to choose whether or not to become pregnant.

The issue of women’s rights changed the way many of us see the world. Richard Holloway describes attending the 1998 Lambeth Conference with Anglican bishops from around the world. He was shocked at some bishops’ venomous use of the Bible to justify prejudices. But he realized that a decade or two earlier, he would have read the Bible the same way. He now read it with different eyes because of the influence of feminist theology.

Some would then argue that he now approaches the Bible with a bias. Feminist principles take precedence over what the Bible says.

True. But in fact, everyone reads the Bible with a bias. Except that a patriarchal bias – both of the reader and of the Bible itself -- is unquestioned. It is not recognized as bias at all.

A watershed change

To my mind even feminism is an inevitable consequence of an earlier struggle.

That struggle was against slavery – abolished in England and Canada in 1833, not until 1865 in the U.S.A. Like patriarchy, slavery had been taken for granted from time immemorial.

At no point does the Bible specifically condemn slavery. In a momentary flash of insight, Paul's letters to the new churches visualize an ideal community that contains "neither slave nor free." But elsewhere, he takes slavery for granted. He calls himself a "slave for Christ." He sends an escaped slave back to submit to his owner's mercy.

And the Old Testament clearly endorses slavery. It provides specific directions for selling one's daughter into slavery. By defining a bill of rights for slaves, it explicitly endorses the slavery itself.

The abolition of slavery rejected forever the notion that one human being could own another human being.

Women are not property

Once that idea was accepted, a corollary was inevitable – a man cannot own a woman, either.

Which runs counter to the final authority claimed by hard-right Republicans. Because the Bible clearly treats women as men's property.

Widows – women without men -- were outcasts without rights. To protect them, Levirate marriage laws required a male sibling to marry his brother's widow. A man called Onan was struck dead for refusing to impregnate his brother's widow.

When Abraham rescued his nephew Lot from a local tribe, Genesis notes specifically that Abraham succeeded in retrieving Lot's possessions of "cattle and women."

Even into our time, many wedding ceremonies include a line, "Who gives this woman to this man?" And many a bride still enters the ceremony on her father's arm, passing from one male owner/guardian to another.

Despite the biblical precedent, the momentum for recognizing all people – men, women, and children – as individuals with their own rights has been building for two centuries. It has become an irresistible force, against which Santorum and his kin cast themselves as the immovable object.

I'll bet on the irresistible force.

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YOUR TURN

About last week's column on the Shafia "honour killings" – assuming that's what they were – in Kingston.

Diane Robinson noted that "the concepts of 'honour' and 'shame' do not reside only in the cultures of the Mediterranean. While non-Mediterranean cultures may not burn/slash/drown/etc. their family members for shaming the family honour, other cultures DO 'punish' in just-as-destructive ways such as shunning the offending family member (e.g. for marrying outside of the 'race') and speaking shaming comments (e.g. 'this doesn't happen in good families'). In my birth family, an older brother (later shot during WW II) said to a younger brother, 'Be a PRIDE to our family'. His directive carried a lifetime of honour/shame baggage for the younger brother -- my father. His baggage of 'pride' was passed on to succeeding generations. If you're not doing your family 'proud', you're shaming them..."

Nancy Kerr also looked into history: "England in the 11th century was an honour culture, the milieu out of which Brother Anselm built his atonement principle explaining Jesus' crucifixion as requiring God's honour because of human sin. At about the same time,

Europe was also honour bound; Heloise and Abelard were also caught in the demands of honour. Interesting, isn't it, that women have so little value in cultures based on 'honour'."

Nancy provided me with several examples of women being treated as property, at least one of which I have used in today's column.

Isabel Gibson mused, "Whether the Shafia family told lies because they were caught between two moral paradigms, or because they knew what our view of their actions would be, may never be known. I know folks who denounce their actions as 'pure evil' -- and any culture that supports/forces such action as evil, too. I have more trouble making these moral assessments across cultures, but do believe that we must enforce our laws rigorously. The judgement of their hearts we can leave to God."

Steve Roney wrote, "I agree with you that there is a clear difference between the 'culture of guilt' and the 'culture of shame.' But what folks like the cultural anthropologists miss is that the distinction is not between 'Western' culture and 'Eastern' culture. It is between Christian culture and non-Christian culture. Our emphasis on guilt instead of face comes directly from the New Testament's systematic condemnation of hypocrisy. For that is what the 'culture of shame' actually is -- a culture of hypocrisy. And people do not generally recognize what a moral breakthrough it was for the New Testament to nail that to the wall."

Norm Grayston reflected on his own reactions: "We struggle to identify with attitudes such as those espoused by Shafia and his surviving family. It remains an almost unfathomable act to have brought the daughters' and wife's lives to an end."

Interestingly, this past week also brought about a dozen requests to unsubscribe (which I will honour, of course). But it makes me wonder why. Is it just the February blahs? Are my columns getting less interesting? Or more offensive? I'd appreciate any feedback.

ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I have a few copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father -- who once took art lessons from members of Canada's Group of Seven -- spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I'm probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is *Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists*, by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me -- Jim Taylor, 1300 6th Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can't send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
