

Wednesday January 29, 2014

The naked woman on an altar

By Jim Taylor

On Christmas Eve, while Cardinal Joachim Meisner was celebrating Mass in Cologne Cathedral in Germany, a young woman sitting in the front row tossed aside her leather coat and leaped onto the altar, naked from the waist up, arms outstretched as if crucified, with “I AM GOD” written across her bare torso.

A group called Femen told German media the act was a protest “against the Vatican propaganda about criminalization of abortion.”

Earlier, Femen’s leader, Inna Shevchenko, had run through Vatican City yelling “Christmas is cancelled,” with the words “Jesus is aborted” written across her bare chest.

Shevchenko threatened to take her protest to Bethlehem itself. “Bethlehem ... can see the rebellious naked breasts of Femen,” she told a news agency.

Feeling shocked

My first reaction was shock.

Then I found myself wondering why.

I’m not bothered by the nudity. I can see bare breasts on almost any European beach. Even the spa here in the Okanagan Valley has a clothing-optional “European hour” every night.

I am offended by individuals – male or female – claiming to be God. That attitude leads too easily to the ego-centred tyrannies associated with Hitler and Stalin, men who considered themselves omnipotent.

I believe God’s spirit lives in each of us. But that belief requires me to acknowledge the God-spirit in everyone else, not to declare myself to be God.

Although I no longer believe that God dwells in musty church buildings, I still think of the altar as sacred space. Whether or not I believe in the ceremonies enacted at that altar, I feel I should approach it with respect and reverence. Just as I should show respect entering a Buddhist temple or a Sikh gurdwara.

The Cologne protest offended me because it violated that sense of respect.

Yet if I were protesting something, shouldn’t I take my protest to the heart and soul of the wrong-doer? Should respect for the convictions of others prevent me from protesting at nuclear missile bases, Walmart’s boardrooms, or Monsanto’s laboratories?

The Roman Catholic Church – along with fundamentalist Protestant denominations – remains the primary Christian holdout against social and legal equality for women. Cardinal Meisner himself advised German women “to stay at home and bring three or four children into the world.”

British bombs spared Cologne Cathedral during World War II. But one German newspaper speculated that the mere presence of an unclothed woman on the altar had so damaged its sanctity that Meisner’s successor might have to re-consecrate the entire cathedral.

Amazing, isn’t it, that a pair of naked nipples can ruin a sanctuary more than high explosives?

Levels of offence

The Femen action was, obviously, a publicity stunt. And an effective one, judging by the coverage in European media – although American media largely ignored it.

Was it in bad taste? Yes. But no more so than the stunt pulled by Thinkmodo, a New York marketing agency. When bystanders attempted to rescue an abandoned infant inside a remotely controlled baby carriage a screaming, red-eyed, head-banging “devil baby” erupted and vomited on them.

Is it OK to offend people to market a product, but not to market a cause?

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YOUR TURN

Norine Wark shared her own experience with toxic bosses: “I have had my fair share of toxic bosses. Your article underscores just how negatively their presence can affect the working environment.

“As a child, I was indoctrinated with idea that God was almighty -- omnipotent, omni-present, perfect, and filled with wrath for those who fell short of his glory. I lived in guilt and terror, knowing that God could even read the evil thoughts in my head and had the potential to strike me dead with a bolt of lightning or turn me into a pillar of salt, if he so chose. I much preferred Jesus -- also perfect, but blessed with love and understanding for all. Although my religious upbringing taught me that being female meant I was born inherently evil, dirty, and less than any male, I found solace in the stories where Jesus treated women with compassion and love. It seemed to me that he was even capable of overlooking my gender to see the human inside. In short, he was my divine hero.

“Although most leaders I have come to know are simply human, with flaws just like the rest of us, I have had the good fortune of working with a handful of exceptional bosses. One in particular comes close to my idea of Jesus. ... We worked in the public school system in a large elementary and middle school setting. Many of the children were poor, angry, and carried historical family grudges and cultural rivalries from disputes long forgotten. It was a toxic setting, but our boss made all the difference in the world. He made every one of us feel like we were exceptional teachers: gifted, innovative, and devoted. He treated the children in this same manner. We responded by pouring our hearts and energies into those children. I would like to think we made a positive difference in those children's lives. With a lesser leader, that school setting could have mirrored hell for everyone who walked through those doors.

“After much research, reading, discourse, and reflection, I have come to the conclusion that leaders like the one I describe here are simply incredible human beings with a gift for bringing the best out in everyone and an unwavering vision for a better world for all. Such people are master leaders as was Jesus; we are fortunate to encounter one in our lifetime.”

Steve Roney thought I had been lucky: “Your toxic boss was intelligent and competent. Far worse to have a boss with those same personality traits, but also stupid and incompetent. That is more often the case, I fear.”

Steve also questioned my criticism of the church: “You cannot have a religion without an essentially top-down structure: authority by definition comes from God to man, not man to God.”

Mervyn Flecknoe wrote (from England, if I recall correctly), “Thank you for the insight that our view of God is [can be?] a good description of toxic leadership. I wish I had ever had the courage to say that. What I have managed to put into words is that to say, ‘God wants me to do this’ brooks no argument; you are putting yourself beyond the reach of the Grace of God through the comment/criticism of friends and lovers. How can someone reply, ‘Well I think God was mistaken!’?”

Isabel Gibson wondered, “whether our apparent (albeit not universal) predilection for a toxic God is because we don't want to accept our share of responsibility for Creation, and for ourselves.

“Where does that childhood impulse go, I wonder: the one that has us saying to parental authority, ‘I am the boss of me’.”

Charles Hill liked Margaret Carr’s letter: “Loved the last word of responses, ‘logorrhea.’ I occasionally suffer from this. Actually, my students have suffered.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The congregation I attend has chosen to diverge from the RCL through Epiphany and Lent, so I hope I am still correct that this coming Sunday’s Psalm is Psalm 15.

- 1 Your doors are always open, God;
You have no locks or fences.
- 2 Anyone can walk in --
Anyone who does no harm to others,
who holds no grudges,
who rejects pretence and sham.
- 3 Your guests have no double standards;
They will not doublecross a friend for their own gain,
nor sow dissension among their colleagues.
- 4 Yet they do not simply tolerate whatever comes;
They steer clear of evil causes.
They keep their word -- even at personal sacrifice.
- 5 They do not see money only as a means of making more;
They will not seek profit from the plight of the poor and helpless.
They are not fickle or changeable.
They will not do anything to cut themselves off from your company.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- 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.

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
