

"THE BIBLE TELLS ME TO HATE MYSELF": THE CRISIS IN ASIAN AMERICAN SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

In this short essay, I will share stories from my years ministering in Asian and Asian American contexts to explore when the Bible is useful in spiritual growth and when it is not. I will pose the metaquestion of why the Bible ends up having such a prominent place in the lives of believers, situating this logocentrism in the context of European history and East Asian cultural privileging of texts. I will then argue that experiencing God is central to the Christian life, and finally suggest what might then be other tools or means for experiencing this other than the Bible.

My first job after ordination was as the assistant chaplain at the University of California, Los Angeles. Because of the overwhelming number of Asians, UCLA was sometimes mischievously referred to as the University of Caucasians Lost among Asians. I would set up my table next to the many other tables advertising other campus groups in the middle of Bruins Walk, an open stretch of pavement in the middle of campus. Shortly thereafter, a Korean American sophomore from the Campus Crusade table walked up to me and gazed quizzically at the sign I had posted: The Episcopal Church Welcomes You. This ubiquitous banner for the Episcopal Church had a tag line that I had inserted: *As You Are*. I meant to say that at the Episcopal Chaplaincy, our hospitality would be unconditional, since unconditional acceptance was a key feature of Jesus' ministry. Intrigued by my tag line, he asked if the Episcopal Church accepted everyone? I said we weren't always good with doing that, but yes, because Jesus did so.

"But what about the Pharisees? Jesus rejected them!" he countered.

"Okay, let's say he did. Who do you think the present-day equivalents of the Pharisees are?" I asked.

"They are the unbelievers," he replied.

I wondered who made up this group of modern-day Pharisaical unbelievers. His following questions gave me a clue.

"What does the Episcopal Church believe about abortion?" he asked.

I started to reply, talking about how in the Anglican tradition we assess truth claims based on reason, tradition, scripture, and experience. I then

commenced on a brief exegesis of different biblical passages he had alluded to and tried to tie them to a feminist context. But before I could finish, he then asked me about divorce, and then he cut my exegetical response and asked about homosexuality. Finally he asked: "Do you believe that the Bible is the Word of God?"

I didn't know whether to look hurt, insulted, or incredulous! Somehow, my previous responses had given him an impression that I didn't believe in the Bible.

"No," I purposely said, "the Bible is *not* the Word of God." He looked startled. I had his attention.

I continued, "Jesus is the Word of God. In Jesus, we know who God is. The Bible is just the faith record of how the people of God experienced God's salvation."

"But to believe in Jesus, you must believe in the Bible," he argued.

I wondered to myself why folks don't just call themselves Holy Biblians instead of Christians.

I said, "We can keep on discussing what the Bible is or is not, but I am more interested in who Jesus is to you." Looking startled a second time, he replied, "*The Bible says* that Jesus is God's son, who came down to earth, died on the cross for our sins, rose from the dead, and then went back up to heaven to be with God the Father." Sounded more like a Gnostic heresy to me, but I kept that comment to myself.

"Okay, that's what the Bible says. But what do *you* say?"

For the next minute, he repeated what he had just said to me, word for word, sounding like a modern-day version of the Nicene Creed. Each time, I pressed him to share something about himself as a person, and each time he repeated his creed. Then, perhaps because he had had enough of me, he abruptly stood up and left.

This was not the last time I was to have such a conversation with a student at UCLA or UC Irvine, two schools that I served. The students, both white and Asians (of which there were many at these schools), almost invariably wanted to know if I believed the Bible to be the Word of God. That was always a starting question, prior to any other subsequent topical question. It is a real curiosity that no one has ever asked if I love Jesus. If indeed we even have the right to test someone's faith and devotion, why not ask other questions?

Despite all the talk among these evangelical/fundamentalist students about a personal God and personal Savior, they were themselves unable to speak about their own persons. What do you love? What does your heart say to you? Who is Jesus to you? These questions were invariably met with canned answers, and the mark of individuality that one expects of university-age students was strangely missing. I wondered what lay at the heart of their singular focus on the Bible.

Then one day a student came up to me and launched into one of those questions again. This student had recently been "saved," and he wanted to know what I thought about divorce. He had said to me, "when I find the woman of my life to love, we are going to live together forever." This was soon followed by questions about homosexuality and the Bible as God's Word. (Meanwhile, I couldn't help but wonder if there was some internal dam about to collapse around the pressure created by girlfriend, divorce, *homosexuality*, and God.) The questions about what I thought of these topics came in rapid fire. At the same time, there was no interest in what I had to say. What was he trying to figure out about me? I didn't know, and there wasn't time. How could I reach him through his juxtaposed questions?

I said, "Look, I won't try to convince you of anything. You seem to have your mind made up. But I do have one thing to say to you, as one brother in Christ to another. Ultimately, I don't think that God cares what you do or what you believe. God only cares that you come to love yourself as unconditionally as God loves you."

He paused, then said, "But I can't do that. *The Bible teaches me to hate myself.*"

I

In America today, though perhaps at other times as well, our private convictions and our public discourse both invoke the Bible. Someone points to a part of the Bible and says: the Bible teaches that slavery is okay. Abraham owned slaves. King David too. Hey, even St. Paul says that a slave ought to obey his master. Then someone else points to another part of the Bible and says: slavery is not okay. The story of the Exodus is about God setting slaves free.

Throughout the ages, any topic *de jour*—abortion, divorce, homosexuality, tax cuts, military service, etc. etc.—could be simultaneously supported or refuted by passages from the Bible. Those outside the Christian tradition see what we don't see: that there is a *person*, who teaches the Bible, regardless of what the Bible actually says. It's a bit like the Wizard of Oz: a little person behind the curtain pushing the buttons and creating the steam and fire that on the outside of the castle look incredibly threatening and powerful. Our equivalent of this Wizard in Christianity is sometimes the single pastor of an independent church on a street corner. Sometimes it is the collection of such individuals organized as a presbytery, council, committee, convention, or papacy. Whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox, human agency is involved in every instance in which truth claims are derived from the Bible. Even if we were to stick literally to believing that the Bible is a divine oracle, a human agent is still involved in at least communicating the contents of that revelation.

So why is it that we don't notice the fingerprints of human teachers? In fact the opposite is true. Whenever the Bible is invoked, we completely don't see or hear or notice the very presence of the human person making those assertions. Why is it that the student at UCLA who told me that the Bible tells him to hate himself doesn't say: John Doe my youth ministers *tells* me that the Bible tells me to hate myself? Why are the various John Does who inhabit the left and right of the theological spectrum never identified in all of the controversies?

The Catholics are a bit more honest—though just a little bit—when they make claims about doctrine and truth. They say, the pope says so. They admit a human agent (though really, as the vicar of Christ, that makes him almost divine). Protestants cannot do that, because our tradition was a refutation of the papacy's role in dictating truth claims in favor of Martin Luther's cry of scripture only. Except that we never really did get rid of human agents in interpreting scripture. They just stopped wearing embroidered garments and instead left the Vatican for Main Street, whether in the U.S. or in any other country. They buckle into suit and ties and simply say: scripture says. Like a Las Vegas ventriloquist show, one doesn't notice the human mouth articulating such convictions.

What I have just described is fairly discernible in fundamentalist factions. But those of us who come from the liberal/rational tradition are not absolved of this sleight of hand. Indeed, those of us trained in the higher-critical methods are taught to investigate biblical texts objectively, using the rational/scientific methods of textual, historical, redactional, and literary criticisms. We do to the Bible what archaeologists do to soil and what historians do to events, by using the methodology of the Enlightenment: dispassionate and reasoned search for truth, without human bias. But the biblical scholar, as a human agent, *chooses* the passages he or she will explore. Show me any Ph.D. candidate in biblical studies, and I will show you a process in which that person's very choice of exegetical passage for research is bound in the politics and personalities (and oh yes, high drama) of academia. A committee of professors (and these days they are *not* just white males) with very real egos that are patiently hidden behind veils of rationality, sit to vet, critique, and approve biblical projects.

Those familiar with Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault will know the argument I am making, that hegemonic truth claims become exercises in power. However, I am not going to go in the poststructuralist direction of more teeth grinding. As a pastor, and as a practitioner in the action-oriented world of business, power is not a literary abstraction. Power is very real. Power does things, implements decisions, changes and transforms relationships. Power is more phenomenal (i.e., an expression of energy) than moral. The most important thing to note is that power resides in leaders.

What we must bring to the forefront of discussion about Asian Americans and the Bible (or for that matter any other topic) is the role played by the leader. And if today we are floundering in biblical exegesis, or community organizing, or meeting the pastoral needs of our people, the crisis is one of leadership. The question is not about finding out which passages of scripture are relevant to Asian Americans, but what kinds of leaders and leadership qualities are needed by Asian Americans.

II

At St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, a one-hundred-year-old Japanese parish whose members had been rounded up and interned in various desert camps during World War II, the parishioners often say to me: "Father John used to say to us that our internment was like what Israel experienced in the Exodus." Father John, now regrettably deceased, was the long-time rector of the parish. He and his father (also a priest) and the rest of the Japanese community in Los Angeles had been rounded up by the U.S. government and imprisoned in internment camps. They, and other American citizens of Japanese ancestry, were considered national security threats. Father John's use of the Exodus story was an application of a biblical story to a real-life situation. (That's what those of us who are pastors do. We find passages that are of use to our people.) Father John used the stories in the book of Exodus to help his people survive the internment. He said that just as the children of Israel had left Egypt to wander in the desert for forty years and God did not leave them, but instead stayed with them and fed them manna from heaven, so too was God now watching the Japanese people of St. Mary's. This application of a biblical story so impacted their ability to survive as a community that when they returned after the war, they had a stained-glass window made of Moses and the Exodus to remind them of their own Exodus.

What Father John did was great leadership. His funeral was one of the most moving outpourings of gratitude by the Japanese American community in the U.S. But may God forgive me for criticizing a deceased man, because his biblical exegesis and application were flawed. The Exodus story is about a people who had been enslaved in Egypt, and who were then led to freedom by Moses to enter a promised land. That they were delayed in the desert for forty years had to do with their disobedience. As such, the Exodus story is *not* analogous at all to the Japanese Americans for whom the U.S.A. was already *the* promised land and for whom their internment was a betrayal by their adoptive country. In fact, it is the story of the Babylonian exile of the Jewish people that most fits the Japanese American internment experience.

And that was what I tried to do, teach the story of the exile and of the return from exile. The return from exile, found in Ezra and Nehemiah, is

particularly interesting because the returning Jews were asked to let go of their foreign spouses. The reconstituted nation, freed by the new Persian overlords, was particularly conscious of racial purity. I felt that the exile story was therefore a good departure point to talk about the completely different tack that Japanese Americans took after their return from exile: cultural assimilation and intermarriage to non-Asians. But my effort at drawing parallels with the Jewish exile didn't work that well. Folks were simply too unfamiliar with the exile story. (Perhaps if Charlton Heston had made a sequel to the *Ten Commandments*, things might be different.) One simple reason is that it is very hard to tell the story of the exile and the various destructions of the Jerusalem temple. Those stories are not found in a particular book in the Bible. Furthermore, Ezra and Nehemiah are a bore to read for many people! Although I can no longer confirm with Father John, I suspect that exegesis wasn't what he cared about. Rather, ministering to his people in the most appropriate and powerful way was key, and his decision to use the Exodus story to teach spiritual lessons was an exercise in leadership rather than exegesis.

The crucial issue facing us all is, what then is good leadership? The UCLA student who believes that being a good Christian involves hating himself because the Bible tells him to do so has been told a lie. His spiritual teachers *abused* him. Now that's a strong statement I have made. Some other pastors may challenge me. Okay. This raises a macro question: How are we going to adjudicate the veracity of the instructions of leaders? If all the Wizards of Oz, including myself, now come out from behind the curtain (if you are missing this metaphor, do go watch this American classic!), who is the better leader? Or the truer teacher? It's a question of biblical proportions, about discerning who the true prophet, or the Good Shepherd of the Sheep, is. And the answers are fraught not only with controversy but danger, for historically this is how Christians have killed each other. Of course, we can appeal to a higher force and ask, so what does the Bible say about good leadership? But then, we end up in a circular argument: a good leader interprets the Bible well, and the Bible tells us who a good leader is.

Here I want to suggest that we step out of our colonized mindset. The universe is not just Christianity and the Bible. All things good and beautiful are not to be found in America alone, or in the Christian tradition (though there is much of goodness and holiness there). Asian is a broad category, and Asian Americans hail from many ancient cultures, with their own wisdom (and folly) about what good leadership is. Therefore, we must look into this much more deeply and extensively. We do not just come from cultures of despots (as the press is liable to portray, though half the time it's true). We come from some of the most veritable birthplaces of spiritual insight, from India to China to Japan.

This topic of Asian American leadership is extensive and beyond the scope of this essay or anthology to cover. However, I suggest two frameworks going forward.

First, regard truth or insight like a bird landing on your hand. Don't grasp. This framework of nonattachment to truth appears in many traditions. Zen has a saying that "when you see a Buddha on the road, kill it." In Christianity, we have Jesus responding to someone who has just called him good with the saying, "don't call me good, only God is good" (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19). In the Jewish tradition, Moses asks God for God's name, and God says, "I am that I am" (Exod 3:14). All these traditions are saying, don't make your experience of truth into an idol. Your attempt to concretize truth, to make it *your own* (and nobody else's) that you will defend with guns, money, and books, will end up an ironical and tragic repudiation of your own spiritual insights.

We see this grasping of a fragment of truth and thereby the making of it the whole truth so evident in the splintered denominationalism of Protestantism. For example, the Methodists, Baptists, and charismatics, as well as those sometimes derogatorily called cults, like the Mormons and Christian Scientists, have all had leaders who had some mystical or ecstatic insight. All have reified and codified these insights, albeit with different degrees of flexibility. All have had others react to this codification with either affirmation or disdain. All scramble to define orthodoxy. The drama is slightly hysterical if you ask an outsider to observe. Even upper-class and dignified denominations like my Episcopal Church are not free from the anxiety of needing to grasp tightly onto the Dove that has landed on one's hands.

It is a good practice to hold truth lightly, simply because IT is larger than us.

Now, truth or insight, if it is held lightly sometimes seem to be dispensed with altogether. This is my second point: the corrective is that truth must be practiced, and practiced somewhat silently. It was Jesus who said that we are to go into a closet to pray (Matt 6:6). I think this is good advice for our age. Less rhetoric and more results. If it works, okay, continue with it. If it doesn't work, it may not be bad, but at least it is not for you. But practice it. Then, what I would like to see is that we come together to share notes of how the truths we have grasped have worked for us. What worked to help us out of depression when a loved one dies? What works for us in prayer to be more centered? What works for us to keep our relationships passionate and committed? And finally, we bring these stories into conversation with the Bible.

These two frameworks I have just described are found throughout different religious traditions, including our own Christian one. It is also embedded in the twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. However, I would be negligent if I did not say that in modern America, their clearest

articulation is to be found in the Buddhism that has come to the U.S.A. Nonattachment and mindfulness are key teachings in Buddhism and may be found, among others, in the writings of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, in the meditation instructions of Vipassana and Zen, and in the writings of the Tibetan and Zen Buddhist teachers.

For Asian American leaders, including religious practitioners and pastors who find resonance in some of the thoughts I have articulated here, the time has come for us to do an important work. We must integrate our experience of Christianity and the risen Christ with the ancient wisdom practices of our forefathers and mothers. As we have discovered, but must now say more publicly: the canon of scripture is not closed. It is not closed because the gospel is being written in our individual and collective lives now. We might be called heretical for doing so. But let us also remember that *heresy* has its root in the word *to choose*. What we are choosing is exercising leadership and insight.