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Thou Shalt Not Kill by Peter Berkowitz

A review of The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism by Regina M. Schwartz. University of Chicago Press, 211 pp., $22.95.

Modern philosophy has taken an avid and occasionally malicious interest in the evils, petty and profound, that have been committed in the name of biblical faith. Machiavelli relished recounting Christianity's "pious cruelty." By a carefully drawn comparison to the tolerance of pagans, Hume was pleased to show off the intolerance of Christians. And Nietzsche blamed Judaism for giving birth to Christianity, which he attacked for preaching, under the guise of universal love, a virulent hatred for all that was healthy, beautiful and noble.

But these illustrious enemies of religion were not the first to put biblical religion to the test of morality. They had sharp and distinguished precursors in ... the Bible. In the face of God's determination to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham confronted God with the demands of justice, urging Him to consider the innocent along with the wicked. The prophets called their communities to account for mechanical and coldhearted observance of religious ritual. Jesus was forced to overturn the tables of the money lenders and expel them from the Temple because those responsible for maintaining the holiness of that holy place were unable to separate the service of God from the service of Mammon. And in the name of the priesthood --- or the fundamental equality --- of all believers, Luther mounted an attack on what he regarded as a corrupt Church hierarchy.

Biblical faith itself has been one spectacular moral source for the critique of biblically based religious life. Unfortunately, Regina M. Schwartz does not take much notice of the long and varied tradition of moral criticism of biblical faith that preceded her own contribution to the enterprise. In her book she concentrates instead on laying bare the dominant and (in her view) deeply destructive moral vision that she believes is inscribed in the Bible. Her aim is to loosen that vision's grip on men and women in the West and to sketch the outlines of an alternative morality.

A self-proclaimed "outsider" and "interloper" in the world of biblical scholarship, Schwartz provides provocative readings of a range of biblical tales and teachings; and she does not hesitate to indict, convict and render final judgment. The trouble, in Schwartz's eyes, is not with the Bible as a whole, whose conflicting tendencies, self-subverting stories and crisscrossing narratives she applauds. As her many probing interpretations effectively show, the Bible can be read against the grain: it exhibits self-critical moments, and in various ways

invites the reader to appropriate and to refigure its leading themes and judgments. No, the trouble, according to Schwartz, is with monotheism, or as she sometimes prefers the "myth of monotheism" or just plain "Yahwism."

This myth --- the belief in one God, creator of the heavens and the earth --- constitutes "a system in which identity depends upon rejection of the Other and subjection of the Self." Sometimes Schwartz goes so far as to suggest that monotheism lies at the root of evil in the Western world. In her account, monotheism's violent legacy is a consequence of the "law of scarcity" that it implies. The law of scarcity (or "the logic of scarcity," "the rule of scarcity," "the myth of scarcity," "the supposition of scarcity," "the scarcity paradigm," "the tragic principle of scarcity," "the pernicious principle of scarcity") proclaims that there is never enough of the good things --- attention, prosperity, land, love, blessings --- to go around. And the law of scarcity is a myth, because it does not reflect the ultimate truth about the world. The myth has come to be regarded as a law, Schwartz thinks, in large measure through the enormous influence that the Bible has exerted on the making of the Western mind.

It is an oddity of Schwartz's account that the law of scarcity does not derive its power and its influence, so far as she can see, from facts about the world or common human experiences. Its authority flows, rather, from faulty metaphysical principles and misguided beliefs about God. "Scarcity is encoded in the Bible as a principle of Oneness (one land, one people, one nation) and in monotheistic thinking (one Deity), it becomes a demand of exclusive allegiance that threatens with the violence of exclusion." Of course, by excluding from the interpretation of the law of scarcity all but the ugliest meanings and motives, Schwartz practices the exclusion that she so fervently opposes. Surely it is conceivable that the devotion of one people to one land and one nation can contribute to the realization of justice by restraining that people from imposing its vision of justice on other lands and nations. And one can certainly imagine that by establishing the essential connectedness of all humankind, the affirmation of and allegiance to the one God, creator of all the world, works to override the fear of foreignness that comes from the encounter with deep differences of language, culture and religion.

While she is single-minded in her opposition to the law of scarcity, Schwartz acknowledges that the Bible did not invent scarcity and has no monopoly on it. "Ancient peoples conquered one another long before the Israelites wrote about it, and in philosophy, Aristotle's principle of noncontradiction established that for A to be A it could not be B while Plato wrote of polemos, endless war against the foreign, the diverse, the enemy.'" But Schwartz introduces these qualifications without grappling with the problems that they raise for her argument. If conquering was common before the Bible, in the pagan and polytheistic worlds of antiquity, then doubt must be cast on the tight connection that Schwartz wishes to draw between conquest and monotheism.

In her effort to include Aristotle and Plato among the purveyors of the doctrine of scarcity, moreover, Schwartz is rather reckless in her statement of their views. This fashionable trope that sees evil in the law of noncontradiction is a silliness that must stop. Contrary to what is implied by Schwartz's caricature, it is precisely Aristotle's formulation of the principle of noncontradiction that reveals the sense in which A can be both A and B. According to Book IV of the Metaphysics, "the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect." As Plato's Socrates illustrates in The Republic, with his image of the spinning top that is moving in one respect and stationary in another, the principle of non-contradiction enables us to understand the complexity and the heterogeneity that are such obvious features of the world. And sometimes not so obvious. It is also the principle of noncontradiction that allows Maimonides to observe in The Guide for the Perplexed that Adam and Eve, having been fashioned of the same flesh and bone, "were two in a certain respect and that they were also one." Far from homogenizing the world, the principle of noncontradiction is the basis of our capacity to discern unity within difference, and the difference that accompanies unity.

That Schwartz misses all this suggests that her book is less an exercise in understanding than a polemic against a principle that she is determined to reconfigure as foreign and worthless. Schwartz organizes her case against scarcity around several themes in the formation of the collective identity of the ancient Israelites: covenant, land, kinship and nation. In each case, she attempts to show that forging a collective identity in relation to the one God and His law of scarcity depended on cruelty, perversity and the violent exclusion or negation of others. According to Schwartz, to make a covenant with the one God, as the Israelites did at Mount Sinai, is to be "utterly subjected" and to absolutely reject "the Other." The divine imperative to possess the land of Israel contaminates the people, and it functions to legitimate conquest after conquest and to foster permanent relations of domination. To define identity in terms of kinship relations, as the God of the Bible requires, is bad, because "violence stems from any conception of identity forged negatively, against the other." Schwartz seeks also to " unmask the monotheistic commitments of nationalism" by showing that the biblical God's demand for His people to live in a settled land and to build for Him a permanent house or Temple provided models for the xenophobic and imperialistic drives of the modern nation-state.

For the most part, Schwartz argues, the Bible sanctions the formation of a collective identity that is singular, static and exclusionary. And yet it also provides hopeful glimpses of an identity that is multiple and mobile, inclusive and evolving, governed by the good "principle of plentitude" and not the evil law of scarcity. The "principle of plentitude" affirms that there are enough of the good things to go around, and proclaims the "ethical imperative of generosity," and envisages a world of "ceaseless giving." By showcasing the ways in which the Bible "suggests that identity is a question rather than an answer, provisional and not reified," Schwartz hopes to rescue the "ideal of plentitude" and to provide a "more politically congenial Bible." (That is quite an admission.)

Schwartz's exegetical aim is to repudiate scarcity and to rehabilitate plentitude. What to do, then, with the images of scarcity that abound in the Bible? Appealing to the Bible's preoccupation with memory, but only in order to replace it with one more to her liking, Schwartz advocates a memory governed by the "vision of plenty." Under this new dispensation, memories must be changeable and fluid, and narratives must proliferate, and fixed boundaries around a canon of sacred texts must be resisted. On the basis of slogans such as "truth is multiple instead of single," and "no such thing as accurate memory is possible," Schwartz redefines memory as "innovative interpretation" and "genuine rewriting of traditions." I am not sure that either tradition or interpretation is well served when the meaning of memory is transformed into politically driven poetic invention. Contrary to appearances, the resolute refusal to respect the distinction between remembering and creating, the determination to celebrate the continuities between finding and inventing while simultaneously suppressing the differences, betrays a selective eye for the multiplicity of meaning.

Schwartz's respect for multiplicity is also belied by her static and exclusive reading of monotheism's legacy as essentially a legacy of violence. It is true, as she emphasizes in her introduction, that Cain kills his brother Abel because he feels rejected by God. But this killing and its connection to the essence of monotheism must be put in context, as she neglects to do, by considering, say, that the founding act of the Roman empire, Romulus's slaying of his twin brother, Remus, does not occur under the auspices of the one God, but in a world governed by a pantheon of gods. It is true, as Schwartz shows in graphic detail, that biblical monotheism is persistently entangled with cruelty and violence; but it is equally true that plenty of cruelty and violence is on display in the pagan or non-biblically based religions of the world that she purports to admire: the Greek, the Norse and the Hindu gods are not exactly social democrats.

It is also true, as Schwartz notes, that biblical verses were used to justify slavery in the United States; but it is no less true that biblical verses were invoked in this country not only to demand abolition of slavery (as Schwartz does note) but also to secure civil rights. And it is no less significant that slavery flourished in black Africa and South America and China long before these lands were touched by biblical faith. (And caste society in polytheistic India is entangled with the hierarchical world of the Hindu gods.) It is true, finally, that modern European nationalists invoked biblical passages to support their political programs; but it is also true that the Catholic Church has played a crucial role around the world in defending the cause of human rights.

Schwartz is at turns sneeringly dismissive of select biblical texts and self-righteously critical of the tendency that she finds in the Bible to denigrate what is different. Indeed, she is so out of sympathy with the God of the Bible that she is pleased to depict him as a fraudulent wizard:

> "Moses spoke and God answered him with peals of thunder" (Ex 19:19). "I am Oz, the great and powerful. Who are you?" "I am Dorothy, the meek and weak" begins the familiar parody of the Sinai theophany that exposes God as an inept hot-air balloonist from Kansas. Toto pulls back the curtain of the holy of holies, and we see the all too human wizard from Kansas generating his own mysterium tremendum at a microphone. But when the system of transcendent omnipotence is debunked, when God's ability to grant wishes, confer a heart, brain, and courage is exposed as not having a source in transcendence at all but in token symbols, it is only to be replaced by another system: nationalism. There is no place like home.

This is very clever. When the Bible teaches that other gods are fraudulent, however, Schwartz accuses it of "a particularism so virulent that it reduces all other gods to idiots and so violent that it reduces all other worshipers to abomination." So it is vicious for the Bible to reduce other gods to idiots, but it is right and proper for Schwartz to reduce the God of the Bible to an idiot. Her vision of multiplicity is capacious enough to contain everything but a transcendent deity.

Schwartz writes that, "in the myth of monotheism pluralism is betrayal, punishable with every kind of exile: loss of home, loss of the land, even alienation from the earth itself." She does not say that the myth of monotheism may regard pluralism as betrayal, but declares confidently and categorically that "pluralism is betrayal," that monotheism in its essence seeks to root out pluralism. In fact, biblical monotheism may be seen as providing the rich soil that nourishes respect for pluralism, especially that form of pluralism that above all respects persons in their extraordinary diversity.

One place to see this is in the fascinating chapters with which the Bible begins. Schwartz discusses these chapters, but her discussion is tendentious. Consider her discussion of the creation of man. In Genesis 2, man is made from the "dust of the earth," and so Schwartz asserts that, according to the Bible, "to be human is to be made of land." Well, yes, Adam is made of adama, or "earth," but not of "land," which carries all the connotations of nation, power, and sovereignty that Schwartz is hoping to find. Schwartz herself perceptively points out the universalism implied by the biblical teaching that human beings are all made of the same element. The problem is that she conveniently forgets to mention in this context that Adam is also infused with life from the breath of God, and, according to Genesis 1, man and woman are made by God in His image. This magnificent idea, which encourages the thought that all human beings are of infinite worth and deserving of fundamental respect, cannot be found in all religious traditions.

Today this monotheistic notion receives expression in the doctrine of universal benevolence, the commitment to human rights, and the assumption of equality, all of which are moral principles that are so much taken for granted in the West that it tends to be viewed as a mark of bad manners to ask after the reasons that underlie them. Many liberals have become increasingly inarticulate concerning the foundations of their belief in the principle of freedom and equality for all, and postmoderns are notoriously dismissive of the search for

foundations for their celebration of self-creation for each. But inarticulateness is not a weakness of the biblical perspective. Even when we in the West criticize the West's legacy of colonialism and imperialism, activities that we have not been alone in practicing but which we lead the world in condemning, we do so on the basis of a notion of human dignity, one of whose justifications (not its only one, but a plain and powerful one) derives from the humane and humanizing Bible.

The importance of the idea that every individual is created in the image of God is perhaps nowhere more dramatically revealed than in the Garden of Eden story. All too commonly the story of the first man and woman is viewed as a fall from an initial state of wholeness, peace, and perfection, or, in Schwartz's terms, a descent from the law of plentitude to the law of scarcity. There is much support in the text, however, for seeing the story as one of ascent, from a barren state of satisfaction and completeness to a painful and fractured condition which, through the gift of incompleteness, makes possible the love and the knowledge of what is good.

Before eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam does not laugh or shed tears, pause with surprise or suffer anguish, raise his eyes in awe or lower them in shame. Dwelling alone, in natural splendor and abundance, no doubts assail him, no beauty enthralls him, no task elevates him. Adam seems, when first we encounter him, singularly devoid of humanity. Since he neither protests his solitude nor complains of unsatisfied needs, the Bible gives the impression that in the beginning Adam is content in his garden paradise. But his judgment is called into question by God's divergent judgment: "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him."

It appears that one becomes truly human in the presence of another, for God casts a deep sleep upon Adam and, in the interests of finding a companion truly suitable for him, fashions a human being out of Adam's rib. When Adam awakes, God brings the new creature to him to receive a name. Adam proceeds to deliver a short technical discourse, noting that his new companion is, like himself, composed of flesh and bone. Dispassionately calling attention to the difference between their bodies, Adam says that the new creature should be called woman (isha), because she was taken out of man (ish). Somehow Adam omits to mention, or perhaps he just fails to see, the distinctive and highest element out of which the woman is formed. But the text notices it, and it underscores one of the rainbow of impulses and passions that are invisible at the first encounter between Man and Woman: they do not feel shame at being naked. The Bible thereby invites us to wonder what it is that neither sees that might have caused them both to feel shame.

Something, apparently, that only comes to light as a result of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Everyone knows that the woman eats the forbidden fruit because in her weakness she succumbed to the wiles of the snake. And then she seduced Adam into the same transgression. But not all transgressions are equal, and this one especially must be placed in context. Since we are told by the Bible that the tree of knowledge of good and evil is

a "delight to the eyes" and a tree "to be desired to make one wise," it is reasonable to speculate that it is her passion for moral knowledge that draws the woman to the forbidden fruit and renders her particularly vulnerable to the serpent's arguments. Indeed, one is obliged to wonder what defect or impoverishment of the soul makes Adam obtuse to the serpent's rhetorical gifts and oblivious of the tree's sweet delights.

Subsequent events suggest that the woman's transgression brings a great deepening of the human spirit. When the woman shares the fruit with Adam, something quite astonishing happens: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loin cloths." But what do they see in one another's opened eyes that compels them to cover their bodies? The sense of shame that the Bible now highlights, and the absence of which on Adam's and the woman's first encounter it had previously underscored, provides an important clue. What they perceive is that, standing in the presence of one another, they are standing in the presence of a creature unique and unspeakably precious. But God's image in the other is not all they see. With opened eyes, they see as well that they are composite creatures, each made not only in God's image but also out of humbler materials, materials akin to the dust of the earth. And this complex sight, easily blurred, easily suppressed, is the basis of our knowledge of good and evil, the Bible suggests, and the source of our capacity to feel shame, and the spring of our ability to love. And so it is fitting that it is only after the human desperation and the heavenly curse that Adam calls his wife by her name Hava or Eve, meaning "the mother of all the living," for the first time.

Such readings of the biblical text are ruled out by Schwartz's determination to find in the biblical world two rival and absolutely opposed ethical views, the law of scarcity and the ideal of plentitude. Yet she drastically underestimates the case for scarcity, wildly overstates the case for plentitude, and fails to appreciate that the Bible as a whole points the way to an ethic that weaves together respect for scarcity with a vision of plenty.

Schwartz makes the law of scarcity stand for a comprehensive and destructive worldview: "Scarcity, the assumption that someone can only prosper when someone else does not, proliferates murderous brothers and murderous peoples." She writes as if scarcity were an idea that the Bible arbitrarily invented and violently inscribed in the mind of the faithful, as if scarcity were a law manufactured by monotheism out of thin air and which, if we were to construct the correct concepts, we would be free to think away, as if the passion for preeminence were not a powerful impulse of the human heart, as if we could reasonably imagine ourselves bringing into being a world in which there were enough of the good things to go around, as if the desire to stand apart and excel were something to be ashamed of, as if a love were conceivable or desirable which did not draw sharp boundaries between the beloved and the rest of the world.

Although generally overwhelmed in the Bible by the law of scarcity, the ideal of plentitude, in Schwartz's account, is sporadically visible. She opposes God's scattering of the tower builders at Babel "lest they become as gods," which she deems an example of the law of scarcity, to God's making man "in his image," which she regards as exemplifying the ideal of plentitude. But her vision of plentitude, which she admits is utopian, is also, she fails to see, unjustified by the text and a thoroughly reckless imperative for moral and political life. Schwartz believes that being made in God's image means that men should make themselves gods. She arrives at this conclusion (at this late date in modern thought, a banal conclusion) by overlooking several important things. There is a distinction between an image and an original. And whereas she pointed out, in another context, that man was fashioned from the dust of the earth and forgot that man was also made in God's image, here she remembers that man is made in God's image and forgets that man is also made out of what is low, gravity-bound, and perishable. She repeatedly blots out the Bible's teaching that man is neither simply earthbound nor purely a heavenly creature, but an unstable mix of earthly and heavenly elements.

The law of plentitude, for Schwartz, means the rejection of one God in favor of many gods; and it requires not merely diminishing the distance between the divine and the human but entirely eliminating it. Indeed, had the principle of plentitude that is occasionally visible in the Bible taken hold, then, Schwartz argues, "Israel would have longed to be not only a kingdom of prophets or priests, but a kingdom of Gods." In all this, she is rather too kind to gods. It does not occur to Schwartz to reflect on the legendary incapacity of gods to maintain peace among themselves. Indeed, in her idolatrous humanism, Schwartz sees no reason why we should reject the imperative to self-deification.

But reject it we should. Scarcity and plenty should not be pried apart and set up as opposing moral visions, one standing for darkness and depravity, the other for sweetness and light. Nor should they be seen as myths or characterized as laws. Both scarcity and plenty are real, and neither tells the whole story or ultimate truth about the world. The experience of scarcity and the intimations of plenty should be seen instead as opposite poles between which the moral life oscillates. And the moral vision that contains both scarcity and plenty can be seen in the story of the Tower of Babel, though not in Schwartz's interpretation of it.

According to Schwartz, the story of the Tower of Babel is a simple tale told in black and white, a story of "God crushing man's heavenward ambitions and punishing him with divisiveness." The consequence of the people's pride and their rebelliousness is "bondage to a human overlord." And thus "the division of people into peoples is not in their interests, but in the interest of maintaining the power of a tyrannical, threatened deity jealously guarding his domain." Perhaps. But the story can be read in other ways. Indeed, the Tower of Babel tale readily lends itself to being read as part of God's moral education of mankind.

The nine verses that chronicle the tower builders' ambition and the frustration of their project reveal a people of few words and limited desires united by a common language and a shared longing. The general impression is one of innocence and childlike simplicity. For the sake of preserving unity, the people resolve to build a city, construct a tower with its top in the sky, and make for themselves a name. But God thwarts their ambitions by descending from the heavens, confusing their language, and dispersing mankind into separate nations. Neither the tower builders' motives nor God's are entirely clear in the text. But the tower-building may plausibly be said to have reflected a confusion of heart, an illusion of God's proximity and accessibility, a delusive hope to abolish by means of mortar and brick the fearful distance separating God from man. Such an interpretation suggests that it is more than a coincidence that the name of the city where men sought to reach God was called Babel, a word which comes from a root meaning "confusion" and which contains in a confused arrangement the Hebrew word for "heart." The story of Babel thus prizes not the monumental artifacts produced by human hands nor the magnificent structures created by the human mind, but the true service of the human heart. It is the latter that brings man closer to God.

Most surprisingly, perhaps, Schwartz does not see that the outcome at Babel was precisely the diversity for which she thirsts. The rainbow of tongues and ways of life brought about by God's dispersion of mankind at Babel is, the Bible seems to suggest, an expression of His wisdom. Unity and plenty no less than scarcity and division seem to carry with them dangers to the human spirit. A single nation united by a universal language promotes a false sense of human powers, of what human beings can accomplish by taking matters into their own hands. And so, contrary to Schwartz, who insists that monotheism hates pluralism, the Bible teaches that pluralism is a gift that God bestows on humankind to focus our gaze, refine our hearts, and make us more human.

Like Adam and Eve, then, the builders of Babel were emancipated from a peaceful, easy plenty rooted in an uncomplicated and uncomprehending unity. They ascended to a realm where good things are scarce, where intimations of wholeness can be heard if one is lucky and listens carefully, where love is possible because we are incomplete beings moved by dreams of completeness. They ascended to a realm that most people know as the world in which we live.

The Bible does have a dark side, and Schwartz has confronted it with gusto. But the Bible's dark side is not the Bible's whole story, and it will be misunderstood if it is wrenched from context, if it is read reductively, if the interpreters who have lived with and transmitted the text are ignored, if its self-presentation as a document that depicts the revelation of the one God, creator of the heavens and earth, is imperiously dismissed out of hand as so much superstitious stuff and nonsense. Had Schwartz approached the Bible with the respect for multiplicity that she preaches throughout her book, she would have contributed more

effectively to a venerable tradition of moral criticism. For the curse of Cain is not easily or smugly dispelled. And one of the blessings that the Bible bestows is an understanding of why not.

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