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ALIENATIONS FROM SCRIPTURE:

THE CASE OF ELMER GANTRY's Bible

Since the Bible is the unique literary root of & reference for biblical religion, to be alienated from it is to be alienated from Judaism & Christianity. This alienation takes many forms. Elmer's form, extremely common in hyperindividualistic sub/cultures, is ego isolato, the autonomous ego: why cooperate with God when it's more fun & profit to compete? Then there's the alienation of antiquity: the Bible's so long ago that, given its strange form & even stranger content, the relevance payoff isn't worth the hermeneutic struggle. Too, its provinciality as a largely Near-or-Mid-eastern artifact turns off today's globally minded. Nontheists are alienated by its theism. Womanists (radical feminists) are put off by its heaven-and-earth patriarchalism, which they call androcentrism. So on to Elmer's Bible....

1. Good ol' boy, two-fisted, he-man Elmer (ELMER GANTRY, H,B,&C/27; Signet/67) found the Bible **inconvenient** to his double lust, viz, womanizing & power-grabbing. His hermeneutical project was getting the Bible off his back & into his hands, where he could control it by distancing it from his conscience so he'd be morally as free as the breeze. The flipside is that he found Scripture **convenient** for flailing others' consciences in order to bring them & their money, esp. the latter, under subjection to him. Because this double abuse tempts all Bible-users, professional & lay, Elmer is a caution not just in the humorous sense. Elmer was a pushover for preDepresssion, now-old-fashioned, self-&-culture-congratulatory modernism, which liberated, freed, "modern man" from antiPromethean restrictions, which it viewed as trammels on humanity creative activity & thus as insults to dignity.

2. Ego isolato (the self standing only before itself & under none), Elmer's form of alienation from Scripture, corrupts today's **liberation movements** & their styles of biblical interpretation. Radical egalitarianism rejects submission, the verticality of being under, underneath, subjected instead of being an independent subject. Since the Bible's dominant dimension is **vertical**, the isolato (individual or group) experiences it as primarily insulting. Isolato human beings live, move, & have their dignity in freedom from any overlordship (as the Gn.3 snake tells us all). Thus consistent womanism will have no more to do with a commands-giving deity than with women-&-children dominating men: verticality is itself sexist, androcentric. Given this account of female dignity, what remains is only to choose between a radically rewritten Bible (Schüssler-Fiorenza's women's-experience criterion) or a rejected Bible as a negative cornerstone of a new religion (Mary Daly). In Elmer's great love, Sharon Falconer, monomaniacal (& thus isolata) evangelist, Sinclair Lewis presents us with a clergywoman who's all over the lot. In the pulpit she's orthodox Protestant; in private conversations she rewrites Scripture; & in her secret chapel, where she takes pseudoinnocent Elmer to seduce him, she prays thus to the Goddess: "Blessed Virgin, Mother Hera, Mother Frigga, Mother Ishtar, Mother Isis, dread Mother Astarte of the weaving arms, it is thy priestess...in me are ye all revealed, and...in this revelation shall come peace and wisdom universal, the secret of the spheres and the pit of understanding." Then "she picked up a Bible" and "crammed it into" Elmer's hands & commanded him to read in the Song of Solomon all that good stuff about female breasts & thighs--during which she continued her prayer, "O Saint Anna, Mother Immaculate, Demeter, Mother Beneficent, Lakshmi, Mother Most Shining; behold, I am his, and he is yours and ye are mine!" After sex, Elmer proposes right there on the chapel floor; but she says (consummate contradiction) no, "I must be free for the service of our Lord." Then a practical fillip hits her: "men converts come in better if they know I'm not married." Then they sing a hymn together, "to the edification of" her black servants. (185f) As you can see, Elmer had a good (?) trip out of Sharon's scripture selection, which was a perfect fit for the occasion....While I'm wholly convinced of the fe/male participant goal at the heart of feminism, a goal validated by cultural changes & both biblical & enlightenment values, I consider it impossible to rescue the biblical God from masculine dominance without losing the biblical religion: Mary Daly is right. Sharon Falconer knew it, & practiced two religions. Philosophy has, & therefore theology can have, a genderless deity: religion cannot, nor can biblical religion have a hermaphroditic deity (though I occasionally concessively pray to "our Father-Mother God").

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3. The alienated from Scripture **alienate from Scripture.** Luther's Scripture principle, viz, what "drives Christ," both intensified early Christianity's look-for-Jesus-in-the-OT & further alienated him & his followers from Judaism & the Jews. Inerrantists, preachers of the errorless Book, alienate their followers from critical biblical scholarship & from noninfallibilitic Christians & nonChristians--as Sinclair Lewis was profoundly, sneeringly, alienated from the obscurantism & dishonesty of the perfectionistic reading of holy Writ (on which see below). Liberationists alienate their followers from all of Scripture except what can be made (to use Luther's word) to "drive" liberation. Womanism, alienating its followers from the God-Father-Lord-King-Son, wants to produce a Second Scripture supplanting the Bible, sending it to the archives--& thus alienating future generations from the unbowdlerized Bible. (As for Jesus, womanism wants him for a womanist priest, as Sharon inducted Elmer as a priest of the Goddess: Jesus had, in addition to the masculine & dominant over the masculine, the feminine qualities of empathetic listening, nurturance, community building [though always unlisted is another feminine quality, Jesus' abject submission to his masculine-qualities God, obedience being as feminine as the demand of obedience is masculine]). (A curious irony: The relational is feminine, the abstract is masculine. The biblical God is known only femininely, in relationship. The abstract "God of the philosophers" (Pascal) is (1) genderless, as philosophical, but (2) masculine, as abstract [&, in this sense, unfriendly to feminism].) Sinclair Lewis scorns the feminized church & clergy (Elmer struggles against the clergy image as "women in trousers"); the current NEWSWEEK (Ken Woodward's article) raises the question whether the increasing % of women clergy will alienate men from church & the Christian religion.

4. Elmer lusted for women-$-fame, & he manipulated churchfolk lusting for **clarity & ecstasy.** Religion is "boxing with the inexplicable" (222), which makes clarity tough to come by. But as a "holy climber" (289) using the "salesmanship of salvation" (285), he could turn on the rousements & produce the ecstasy. For himself, he managed clarity by his consuming ambition & ecstasy (as did another clerical sex-fraud, M.L.King,Jr.) by a series of extramarital sex partners (worse than Bakker & Swaggert)....In preaching, the clarity & ecstasy came together in his oft-preached sermon on love, based on sentences of atheist Robt. Ingersoll, reminding me of media loverboy Leo Bascaglia & current clergy love-preachers.

5. When it comes to commenting on the Bible, it doesn't matter who's speaking in ELMER GANTRY, it's always Sinclair Lewis. Let's see:....(1) Missing Scripture's compass **consistently pointing to God**, SL revels in detailing internal inconsistencies, contradictions, which he takes not as stimuli to Bible study & creative thought but as reasons for having nothing further to do with this literature. Given the rejective mindset, would he have been friendlier to a Bible with all its wrinkles ironed out?....(2) Fundamentalism made Scripture more vulnerable to SL, for it gave a bad answer (the Bible has no wrinkles) to a question extraneous to the Bible's purpose (why isn't the Bible internally consistent?). Something's consistent here: all fundamentalisms are reactive, never initiating; & they evoke an unproductive rereaction of are-too-/-am-not....Much of SL's fun in the book comes from what happens after unsophisticated defenders of the faith let them be pushed into the radical, indefensible claim of the wrinkleless Book. Their first error is intellectual, letting themselves get trapped into an invalid position. Their second error is moral, dishonest defense of the false claim. SL laughs at the first & scorns the second, generalizing from it that religion, preaching morality & practicing dishonesty is hypocritical....(3) SL says that in addition to being dishonest, "Bible-worshiping" religion is given to spurious reasoning, such as (38) "'It's better to have the whole Bible than a Bible full of holes.'"....(4) SL pans the talismanic use of Scripture, Elmer (61)believing he'd "get help from it" by opening it just anywhere, since it's "all inspired, every word."....(5) The Bible so used is oppressive, antiliberating: you must believe the Virgin Birth: "'I know it's true--it's in the Bible. If I could only *believe* it!'" (75) A number of times (eg, 224) we're presented with the false alternative of believing every word or throwing the whole thing out--the invalid slippery-slope argument, which however often functions as a self-fulfiling prophecy....(6) Scribalism, v. "reading the Bible honestly" (362), entails (363) "second hand viewing of actualities," proving opposities, coverups (363, 375).

See also #2303, "'Elmer Gantry' Revisited: Profane Fun at The Expense of Profane Piety."