

A Huffington Post Humanist Urges the Church to Stop Using the Bible as a Moral Guide

It's one thing when a humanist attacks the Bible. That's expected. It's another thing when a humanist attacks a Christian denomination for using the Bible as a moral guide. But that's exactly what humanist author Clay Farris Naff did on the Huffington Post on April 29th.

Naff was upset that the highest court of the Methodist Church struck down the consecration of Bishop Karen Oliveto, since her only infraction was being married to another woman. How, he wondered, could the church punish her for love?

He writes, "To anyone free of ancient prejudices, the injustice of condemning Oliveto is plain. How can love be wrong? How can love enfolded in commitment and fidelity be wrong?"

The answers are simple and self-evident. Love is not always right, even when it's "enfolded in commitment and fidelity."

A father may love his adult daughter in a romantic way, but that doesn't make the relationship right. Twin brothers in their 30s may love each other in a sexual way, but that doesn't make their sexual activity right. A man who no longer loves his wife may now love his female co-worker, but that doesn't make his adultery right.

It's possible, of course, that Naff has no problem with consensual adult incest or with adultery. And maybe he has no issue with polygamy or polyamory. But as a thinking man (which he clearly is), he should be able to understand that

conservatives have reasons other than “ancient prejudices” for opposing gay marriage. After all, there were ancient cultures that celebrated homosexuality, yet they still recognized marriage as male-female only.

That’s because marriage has had a specific function and purpose through the millennia, and it’s not just “ancient prejudices” that cause many of us to reject its redefinition. Or is it only prejudice that believes God designed men for women and women for men? Or is it only bigotry that believes it’s best for a child to have a mom and dad?

Naff asks, “What possible harm can her marriage cause? Not even the claim of setting a ‘bad’ example holds water. People do not choose their spouses on the example set by clergy. If they did, there’d be no Catholic children, and poor, sultry Elizabeth Taylor could never have married even once.”

Actually, many people do follow the examples set by their leaders (including clergy). As for Naff’s argument regarding Catholicism, wouldn’t he argue that the sins of some pedophile priests have been especially heinous, because they are looked to as religious leaders?

Of course, I’m not comparing Oliveto’s “marriage” to her partner to a priest abusing boys. I’m simply saying that clergy have a special responsibility to set good examples. Their bad examples have a wider, ripple effect.

Naff then focuses on the Bible itself, using the same hackneyed, pro-gay arguments that have been refuted time and again.

Not only so, but he seems oblivious to the idea that, when Methodist leaders speak about “Christian teaching” on homosexuality, they do not refer exclusively to the Bible. They’re speaking in general about the unanimous teaching of virtually all branches of Christianity for nearly 2,000 years. And they’re speaking in particular about the clear teachings

of the Methodist Church throughout its history.

But this is not important for Naff, since he feels there's a much deeper problem with the Methodist Church: hypocrisy. Why, he wonders, does the church not ban divorce the way it bans homosexual practice?

The answer is that, according to Scripture, there are some legitimate causes for divorce, and these are recognized by the Methodist Church. It is the question of remarriage that is in question, but that's a question he fails to ask. (He could have made a better argument had he addressed that question.)

Either way, Naff isn't calling for a church ban on divorce. Instead, he explains, "I am trying to help you see that the Bible may be many things—historical treasure, poetical comfort, and sacred Scripture—but as a moral guide, it is hopeless. Some claim to follow its commands literally, but they deceive themselves. No one can do so, for the Bible is a hodgepodge of contradictions and morally obscure or outrageous injunctions."

So, it's fine if we take the Bible to be "sacred Scripture," as long as we realize that it's "a hodgepodge of contradictions and morally obscure or outrageous injunctions," not to mention "hopeless" as "a moral guide."

Thanks, but no thanks.

That kind of "sacred Scripture" is neither sacred nor Scripture. Why would anyone take comfort in its words and find guidance for life if, in fact, the Bible is what Naff describes it to be?

After launching a few more (weak) salvos against the Scriptures, Naff writes:

Look at the Bible with fresh eyes, and you'll find the record of ancient peoples who, lacking any police force, detectives

or proper jails, did their best to construct rules for getting along with each other and used the fear of God to enforce them. Look even closer and you'll find that those in power often bent the rules in their favor. I suppose God might have wanted the people to heap silver, gold and fatted calves on their priests, exempt them from any real work and give them a retirement plan (Numbers 7-8), but I find it more likely that the priests themselves heard the Word of God that way.

Put another way, this is not the Word of God, so don't treat it as the Word of God.

Instead, Naff states, "I've shown that the United Methodist Church is interpreting the Bible to privilege the heterosexual majority while sanctimoniously applying ancient 'laws' in a questionable way to Bishop Oliveto. But more important, I hope I've shown that Methodists, and all other religionists, would do well to abandon the effort to apply scriptural codes to contemporary life. Draw inspiration, by all means, but recognize that the hard work of thinking through right and wrong remains a moral duty for us all."

In truth, Naff did not prove his points at all, let alone demonstrate them in such fashion that Methodist leaders should feel beholden to follow his counsel.

But it is not merely Naff's attack on the Bible that falls short. It's his logic that falls short as well, since, if he is right in his description of the Bible, there's no reason for the Methodist Church (or any church) to exist. There's not even a reason for a single synagogue to be found on the planet if what we call sacred Scripture is merely a compendium of human ideas, many of them flawed, and none of them perfectly inspired.

In short, if Jesus is not the Son of God who died for our sins and rose from the dead, Christians are believing lies. End of

subject. And if the Torah was not given by God through Moses, Jews are believing lies. That's all that needs to be said.

Not only so, but if the Bible is not a moral guide, it cannot be a spiritual guide, since it purports to tell us who God is and what He requires from us, His creation.

I do understand Naff's concerns about religious fundamentalism, which he has articulated elsewhere. But he fails to understand that: 1. the Bible's moral witness is quite coherent when studied holistically and in-depth; 2. scholars have answers for the questions he has raised, along with many more; and 3. there are solid reasons, both practical and moral, to stand against homosexual "marriage."

What is lacking, then, is not the inspiration of Scripture or the wisdom of Scripture or the moral authority of Scripture. What is lacking is the understanding of human beings (including Naff), which is exactly why we need God's Word.

Human reasoning alone will always fail us. God's Word will never fail. {eoa}