

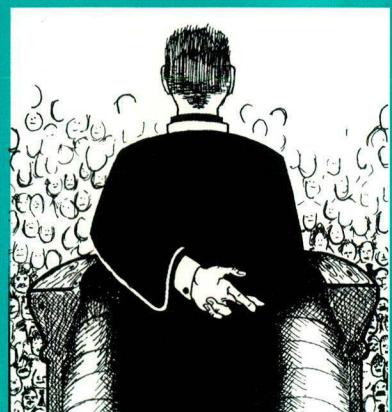
When Clergy Commit the Sin of Silence

**EDUCATED PASTORS KNOW A SECRET,
BUT THEY ARE NOT TELLING THEIR
PARISHIONERS**

GERALD A. LARUE

Clergy in traditional, non-charismatic, non-Pentecostal churches are usually educated in secular universities and in denominational or interdenominational seminaries. In the university, the student is introduced to science and the scientific method of establishing reliable data, to world history and literature (to meet current emphasis on diversity), and to courses that relate to their university "major" and contribute to their chosen profession (perhaps courses in psychology, philosophy, world religions, etc.).

In the seminary, the student studies the Old Testament under the guidance of instructors who are usually proficient in



JONATHAN HARDY

Gerald A. Larue is a Senior Editor of FREE INQUIRY and Professor Emeritus of Archaeology and Biblical Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Semitic languages (Hebrew and often Aramaic, Syriac, and perhaps cuneiform) as well as Greek and Latin. Literary analysis adds terms like *myth* and *legend* to their theological vocabulary. They discover that biblical creation myths are primitive temple tales reflecting notions about the universe that were current at the time of writing—beliefs that science has demonstrated are inaccurate.¹ Patriarchal accounts are recognized as temple legends told to enhance the power of the temple and the state and to provide a theological, but legendary, history of the Hebrew people. They find that we know practically nothing about the Hebrew people before they came to power under Saul, David, and Solomon and that much biblical material relating to these monarchs is fictional.

For example, Solomon's reputed wisdom is not reflected in Ecclesiastes, despite the claim in the opening verse, because Ecclesiastes is a product of a teacher, Qoheleth (not a preacher as in the KJV), who probably lived in the third century B.C.E., long after Solomon was dead. Solomon may have established secular "wisdom schools" for the training of young men seeking careers in government (a pattern probably borrowed from Egyptian wisdom schools), but in no way can Solomon be the author of the Book of Proverbs, despite the attribution in the opening verse (*mishle sholomôh*: the proverbs of Solomon). The Book of Proverbs is, primarily, the work of secular wisdom schools that has

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been overwritten by pious Jewish theologians.² David did not write the psalms attributed to him; indeed some psalms are borrowed directly from Canaanite hymns. The utterances of the ancient prophets that, at their best, are humanistic protests against the priestly temple religion, have been added to by later writers. In fact, the astute student will come to a conclusion that echoes that found in the refrain from *Porgy and Bess*, namely that "the things that you're liable to read in the Bible, they ain't necessarily so."

In New Testament studies, the embryo preacher learns (from educators proficient in Greek and Latin and possibly also Coptic) that the Gospels were not written by those who knew Jesus personally and that Matthew and Luke adopted the story line provided in Mark, adding sayings culled from some unknown source that scholars have labeled "Q" (from the German *quelle*, meaning "source") plus legends from other unknown sources (conveniently labeled "L" and "M"). Indeed, literary and critical analyses of the Gospels has caused the so-called historical Jesus to fade back further and further into the mists of time to the extent that some scholars believe that only a handful of sayings attributed to Jesus may actually have been his, while others argue that there never was an historical Jesus—but only a mythical personality.

The "theolog" learns that Paul's letters are the earliest of

the New Testament documents. And Paul, who never knew Jesus personally (although he appears to know those who did know Jesus) becomes an interpreter of Jesus as the messiah, ultimately modeling the evolving Christianity on the patterns found in popular mystery cults.³

A student who entered seminary believing in "the second coming of Christ" learns that end-of-time mythology was borrowed by some Jews from Zoroastrian religion in the pre-Christian era (as in the Book of Daniel) and was adopted by the Jesus sect—reaching a climax in the apocalyptic pronouncements of the Book of Revelation. The study of church history indicates that every time some Christian group figured out the probable date for the return of Jesus, they were wrong. The student might even come to the conclusion that those who today are interpreting "the signs of end" will be proven wrong, too.

DOWN FROM THE IVORY TOWER

Finally, when the educated student graduates, is ordained, and becomes a clergyperson in one of the more liberal and traditional churches, questions arise. How much of the critical analysis of the Bible can be shared with a lay population? What happens if this information is shared? What is the point of acquiring this data if it can't be used?

When clergy fail to share the information about the Bible and the history of the Christian religion that they have been taught in seminary they commit the sin of silence.⁴ To cover the sin of silence, they devise ways to salve their consciences while denying their congregations the right to be informed. How do they do this? How do they handle critical material in their teaching and preaching? Let me cite a few examples.

A newly ordained minister in a Congregational church discovered that any questions he might raise about the historicity of the biblical stories about Jesus disturbed members of his parish. He solved the problem by using the name "Jesus" when he referred to what he believed was the historical person and the term *Christ* when he referred to the mythical figure. I asked, "Have you shared this approach with your congregation?" He answered, "No, I have enough trouble without opening that door."

On the other hand, a newly ordained Methodist minister, assigned to a thriving church of several hundred members in a town in Idaho, introduced some of the critical information he learned in seminary. After the first month, he was visited by a group of 20 parishioners who told him, "It is clear from your preaching that you are not going to be able to meet our spiritual needs. Your predecessor was liberal, but you are more so. We are withdrawing from the church to form our own independent church."

This was indeed disturbing news for the young man and his wife. But more bad news soon followed. Several weeks later another group came to him with a similar complaint, and they too left the church. The minister began to wonder if

he had chosen the wrong vocation. But then a number of younger men and women began to attend. For them, his sermons made sense, for they, without seminary training but relying on common sense and their own education and reading, had come to conclusions about the Bible that were similar to those of the young pastor. The pastor was indeed fortunate, but, he told me, he had to be cautious not to stress the critical approach since many of the church's older staunch supporters were uneasy and without their financial help the church would be in trouble.

A professor of New Testament studies in a very conservative theological seminary was required by seminary bylaws to sign a statement each year to the effect that he believed that the Bible was the literal, inspired word of God. Through his research, he had arrived at conclusions that made it impossible for him to agree with the statement. But he was trapped. Although he had graduated from topflight universities, the major part of his life had been spent in this particular seminary. His children were now entering college and he was looking forward to retirement. His associations with the fundamentalist school had marked him, making it almost impossible to think that any liberal college or university would hire him. He signs the statement each year under protest.

How do educated clergy cope with the denominational need to use a source book, the Bible, that has for centuries been accepted as a divinely inspired document, but which they know is, like every other book, a human production? There are two general approaches: compartmentalizing and selective preaching. Both are devious, both commit the sin of silence, and both are linked to economic survival.

Compartmentalizing consists of placing traditional religious concepts, including the theological interpretation of the Bible, in a separate compartment of the mind. When one is not preaching or participating in ceremonies that involve biblical concepts, these clergy respond to life as modern individuals. They support the teaching of evolution in public schools, the ordination of women, ecology, equal rights and other social concerns, and in every way perform as liberal-minded citizens. However, when they are in their role as clergy, they move into the religion compartment of their mind and recite traditional formulas in rituals and draw basic precepts and texts for sermons from the Bible. So long as the two compartments can be kept separated, this arrangement can work. Problems arise when religious and secular issues meet.

Perhaps two examples will suffice. When an ordained Methodist clergyman, a professor of religion in a secular university, taught values and ethics, he was expansive. One student asked if he would perform her wedding. The professor agreed. The young couple presented him with their personally designed marriage ceremony, which was devoid of religious language. The professor said, "I will never perform a marriage where the name of my lord and savior Jesus Christ is omitted." The student was shocked. "But," she said, "my fiancé comes out of a Jewish background and I have always

been an agnostic and in the classroom you came across as an open-minded liberal." The professor replied, "What I do in the classroom is one thing; what I do as a Methodist minister is another."

On another occasion, this same professor was invited to lecture to a human sexuality class on "The Bible and Human Sexuality." All went well until the question period when students began to press him on the issue of homosexuality and the Bible. The usually articulate classroom preacher-teacher was at a loss for words. Should he keep the religion door closed and respond as the "liberal-minded" professor? Or should he open the door to the religion compartment and let his dogmatic beliefs guide his response, knowing full well that his "open-minded" reputation would be questioned. He stalled and waited for the bell to ring.

Selective preaching involves choosing biblical passages that, when lifted out of context, undergird widely accepted moral and ethical precepts. For example, a sermon on "the good Samaritan" can emphasize the importance of reaching out to anyone in need—a very safe and humanistic theme.

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PEER PRESSURE

Don't think that churches won't react when their clergy break rank. In another case, a university professor whose position as a New Testament instructor was underwritten by his conservative denomination was reported for not adhering to the fundamentalist literal interpretation of the Bible. He wisely quit his post, joined a more liberal denomination, and began teaching in that denomination's seminary. To the relief of many, the conservative denomination was no longer permitted to fund his former teaching post.

When my involvement in exposing the deception in the CBS series on Noah's Ark was made public (see "Update on Noah's Ark" by Gerald Larue, *FI*, Winter 1993/94), I received several calls from clergy friends congratulating me. I asked, "Why didn't you write in protest to CBS?" and "When are you going to preach a sermon on the flood and tell your congregation that the biblical account is not science but fiction?" They laughed and said, "No way!"

Educated clergy are clearly guilty of the sin of silence. As leaders, they are failures—they miss the mark, they do not lead their congregations away from superstition and magical thinking. By their silence, they strengthen the cause of fundamentalists who would cram the Bible down our national throat. Even when they do speak out, the compartmentalizing tendency remains. The Baptist minister who protested the posting of the Ten Commandments in an Alabama court room based his protest on the separation of church and state (a most

worthy cause), not on the fact that some of the commandments are relics of the past and irrelevant in today's society.

What can happen if the code of silence is broken and the minister admits from the pulpit that the beliefs that sustain the faith system are little more than myth and legend? There is clear evidence that the congregation may be divided and confused. The minister may take refuge in vagaries. Fellow clergy may condemn or support. The press gets involved.

For example, in December 1997, the Reverend Bill Phipps, pastor of the Scarboro United Church of Canada in Calgary, Alberta, and moderator of the denomination, informed his congregation that he did not believe that Jesus was God or was ever resurrected. *Maclean's*, a national magazine, headlined its report on his preaching "Is Jesus Really God" with a secondary announcement: "Jesus is the flash point for a religious debate that is currently as hot as hellfire."⁵ If the Reverend Phipps rejected the divinity and resurrection claims about Jesus, what did he believe? According to the article, the minister is reported to have said:

I believe that God is more than Jesus. God is huge, mysterious, wholly beyond our comprehension and beyond our total understanding. Jesus, therefore does not represent or embody all of God, but embodies as much of God as can be in a person. But to me that does not diminish the divine that Jesus embodies.

If the statement sounds as if the minister wants to preserve his cake and eat it too, what could he say about the resurrection? He argued that the followers of Jesus, transformed from being a defeated people "into people willing to risk their lives"

. . . believed with all their being that Jesus was alive and with them and energizing them to carry forward his ministry. Something very real happened to those people and it has been giving power to the Christian community ever since. But the body that he was crucified with—dying and coming back and walking around the earth and then ascending into heaven in a three-story universe—that doesn't make sense. . . . But that doesn't mean I don't believe in the Resurrection. The power of the Resurrection is the belief and the transforming energy that calls us into the world to follow Jesus who, we say, gives life over death.

Phipps rejects also the notions of heaven and hell, but believes that the human spirit continues in some sort of way after death," and that "the loved ones in my life who have died are safe with God."

There can be no question that the Reverend Phipps has taken a bold and daring step. He is seeking to be honest and share with his congregation some of the results of logical thinking and biblical scholarship. At the same time, he is striving to "keep the faith" by indulging in the vague language of so-called spirituality. If he continues to preach in this vein, what he will be left with are stripped-down first-century writings that present very mixed images of Jesus—writings that Randel Helms has aptly labeled "Gospel Fictions"⁶ and which, according to the controversial Jesus Seminar contain, at best, a couple of dozen sayings that might

have originated with Jesus. The magic of divinity is gone; the beauty of the human remains and, of course, for humanists, the human has always been at the center.

What will happen in Scarboro United Church and to the Reverend Bill Phipps remains to be seen. Varied reactions to Phipps's preaching have come from the clergy. As expected, the fundamentalists are outraged. Within the UCC, the more traditional clergy are upset by the arguments and criticisms. On the other hand, one minister told me that he "breathed a sigh of relief" because Phipps was doing what he and his fellow clergy had not had the courage to do.⁷

I would challenge clergy in liberal churches to help their congregations understand that the material found in Genesis and Exodus has no basis in historical fact, that the rules and regulations of the Torah, including the Ten Commandments are, apart from those embracing a humanistic ethic, without merit or meaning in our present culture.⁸ I would dare them to preach on some of the silly, outmoded sayings of Jesus that hardly anyone believes—for example, the edict in Matthew 5:27 that to look at a woman lustfully is the equivalent of committing adultery with her in one's heart. Or the even more ridiculous teaching found later in verse 32 that whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Clergy silence implies that educated clergy accept the Bible as the inspired word of God. Clergy silence is a deception practiced on practitioners who are taught not to question but to "hear and obey" (even though they do neither). Clergy silence is, in the language of the church, a sin of silence. **fi**

Notes

1. For a discussion of the ways in which Hebrew creation tales relate to the creation mythology of surrounding nations, see Gerald A. Larue, *Ancient Myth and Modern Life* (Long Beach, Calif.: Centerline Press, 1988), Chapter 2.

2. For information on secularism in ancient Israel and the Bible, see Gerald A. Larue. *Freethought Across the Centuries* (Amherst, N.Y.: The Humanist Press, 1996), Chapter 7.

3. Gerald Larue, *Freethought Across the Centuries*, Chapters 8 and 10.

4. *Sin* is not a term in common use among freethinkers. It is not that we don't make mistakes, commit errors, say or do the wrong thing; it is just that we don't believe that our actions have offended some "higher power." We don't need to confess our misdeeds to a priest, repent, and do penance. Nor do we need the blood of a human sacrificial victim to wash us clean. We are far more in harmony with the Greek word *hamartia* (commonly translated *sin* in the New Testament) which is taken from the root *hamartano*, which means "to miss the mark." Humanists readily admit that they sometimes "miss the mark" or, more simply, "blow it!" But to shoot an arrow and miss the mark does not call for the need to beg forgiveness from a deity; rather one tries to remedy the situation, apologize if we have offended someone, then try again in the effort to score a bullseye. It is in this sense of "missing the mark" or "blowing it" that I accuse the learned clergy.

5. Sharon Doyle Driedger, "Is Jesus Really God?" *Maclean's*, Dec. 15, 1997, pp. 40-44.

6. Randel Helms, *Gospel Fictions* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1988).

7. Mr. Phipps is not the first liberal clergyman to embrace critical biblical analysis. Others, like Bishop John Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) have made similar statements. But Phipps is a parish minister who must live with his parishioners on a day-to-day basis and preach to them every Sunday.

8. See the pamphlet "Secular Humanist Viewpoints: Are the Ten Commandments Relevant Today?" by Gerald A. Larue, published by the Council for Secular Humanism, Amherst, N.Y.