

One God is Not Enough

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There is a curious story told early in the book of Genesis, one that has puzzled generations of readers over long centuries. According to the tale, after Adam and Eve had been convicted of pilfering fruit and had been expelled from the Garden of Eden, Eve gave birth to two sons, Cain and Abel. The boys grew up together, and in time chose different career paths. Cain became a farmer. He devoted his life to growing grain and vegetables, and improving the quality and the yield of the plants under his care. Abel, on the other hand, became a shepherd, focusing his efforts on the care of his flocks. Undoubtedly, each of the boys regarded the lifestyle of the other as somewhat second best, but they remained brothers, living together in relative peace as a family.

The day came, according to the story, when Cain and Abel each decided to make an offering to Yahweh, the creator of the heavens and the earth, the source of all that lives and moves upon the earth. Cain selected the very best from among the first fruits of his fields and prepared them as an offering to God. Abel chose the best of his flocks and prepared his own offering to God. And then a curious thing happened. Yahweh, it seems, was a carnivore. He accepted Abel's meat offering, and rejected Cain's vegetarian alternative.

Not being very skilled in human relations, Yahweh seemed surprised and somewhat taken aback that Cain reacted badly to this abrupt rejection of his gift. Instead of offering any explanation, God responded defensively by saying, in effect, "So I don't like broccoli, what's the big deal? Get over it! Grow up and get a life and everything will work out fine."

Cain, needless to say was not mollified by having his rejection compounded with a scolding. He brooded about the experience, and his anger and resentment grew into fury. At last his frustration and rage became greater than he could manage, demanding an outlet. And so, he invited his younger brother to go for a walk with him, and while they were alone, Cain murdered his younger brother.

Cain's punishment was that God exiled him to a far country and cursed him with a black thumb so he would never again be successful with house plants. Cain wandered off to that far country, where he founded a city and became the progenitor of all those who master music, and who invent and master the making of iron--in short, his line was responsible for the development of those arts and crafts which we define as civilization.

For centuries, people in the Western world have read this curious tale and have focused

on Cain as the protagonist. Here was the story of the first murder, the beginning of a long and bloody page in human history. It grew out of jealousy between two brothers who were competing for the attention and approval of the ultimate authority figure, Yahweh himself. With twenty-twenty hindsight, we read a kind of tragic inevitability into this ancient account. We have seen in this story a suggestion of some innate and inescapable flaw in human nature which compels us to murder each other for good reason and for bad, a terrible genetic heritage which seems to justify the dogma of original sin.

This is not the only story in the book of Genesis about conflict between brothers, conflict which is exacerbated and magnified by the peculiar understanding of God which is reflected in that ancient tale. There is the story of the twins, Esau and Jacob. From birth the two boys were very different and they grew into different life-styles. Esau, was a man's man, big and strong and hairy, a hunter who delighted in the out-of-doors and was often gone from the family tent. Jacob was small and slight, smooth of skin, his mother's favorite, a real home-body. When their father, Isaac, had grown old and blind and near death, it came time for the patriarch to give his blessing to his eldest son. Jacob, the younger of the twins, schemed with his mother to trick the old man. In the end, Isaac gave the blessing to Jacob.

When Esau returned from hunting and went into his father's tent to receive his birthright, Isaac, realizing he had been tricked, could only weep. Esau cried out to his father, "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father." But Isaac could only shake his head sadly. There was, you see only one blessing and it had already been given to sly, scheming Jacob. Esau had become an outcast, condemned to live "far from the earth's riches." And Esau, from that moment, hated his brother, and swore that as soon as the period of mourning for their father had ended, he would murder Jacob.

The fascinating thing is that there is little in either of these tales which causes shock to the modern reader. Somehow, the story of murderous jealousy between two brothers seems to us to be an accurate description of the human condition. In this world some are accepted and some are not. In this world, some are blessed and some are not. Some are gifted and talented and some are not. Some are accomplished schemers and some are not. The world is divided between the haves and the have-nots. And these inescapable disparities inevitably engender jealousy and envy which too often lead to violence and murder. That is the way we are. That is the way we always have been. The words of God to Cain remain true: we must remain ever vigilant against the sin which crouches by our door.

In a recent book, "*THE CURSE OF CAIN, The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*" Regina Schwartz takes a look at these ancient stories and casts a different light upon them. In a subtle shift of focus, she invites us to confront other questions about this myth which has influenced and shaped the western world in ways which are both obvious and not so obvious. Schwartz invites us to focus not on Cain or Abel, Jacob or Esau, but upon God, and his role in the mythic tragedies. There is, in the story of the first brothers, no reason given for God to accept one offering and to reject the other. There is no suggestion that Cain had reserved the best of his harvest for himself and given God the culls and the

seconds. Each of the brothers had taken the very best he had and had offered it with sincerity. God, without explanation, accepted one and rejected the other. Then, when Cain seemed hurt and confused and angry, Yahweh offered no explanation, but seemed to blame Cain, suggesting that he had an attitude problem and if he took himself in hand, maybe someday his offerings would prove acceptable.

Anyone who has ever parented children or even been a sibling knows instinctively that this is a recipe for disaster. But Yahweh, the maker of heaven and earth, Yahweh, the omnipotent and omniscient, seemed not to care. Indeed, hidden beneath the words of the story is the hint that may have God deliberately provoked Cain to murder. Schwartz invites us to think about the implications of this story and what it suggests, not about Cain and human nature, but about the God of the Western World and the historical consequences of the religious and cultural attitudes based on that God.

Schwartz asks us to think about that story of how Jacob cozened the blessing from a blind and befuddled Isaac. She does not focus on Jacob's cunning, or Esau's guileless trust. Rather, she asks, "Why was there only one blessing?" Why could not Isaac love his sons equally? Why could he not bless them both? What was the source of this culture of scarcity which decreed that in embracing one brother, the other brother must be cast out?

Over and over again, Schwartz drives the questions: Why is one offering accepted and the other rejected? Why is there only one blessing? Why are brothers, who are the mythic progenitors of tribes and nations and peoples, always forced to compete with each other? Why are they forever driven to violence in relation to each other? What would have happened if God had accepted both offerings--the fruit from Cain's garden *and* the sheep from Abel's pasture? What would have happened if Isaac could have believed in a universe of abundance, in which there is a blessing for every child and Esau and Jacob had both been blessed?

At last she asks, "What kind of God is this, who chooses one over the other?" And then she answers her own question: "This God, who excludes some and prefers others, who casts some out, is a monotheistic God--monotheistic not only because he demands allegiance to himself alone but because he confers his favor on one alone." A culture derived from a vision of a monotheistic God, she suggests, creates a vicious circle in which we still live. There can be no multiple allegiances. There can be only one God and only one Chosen. Someone must always be rejected and excluded and cast out; the experience of rejection inevitably engenders frustration and rage which is often expressed in violence and murder. The world of monotheism is a world of scarcity. There is only one truth; there is only one blessing; and therefore, there can only be one winner in life, and existence is endless struggle and competition, brother against brother down through the centuries until the present moment.

This understanding is so much a part of our fundamental assumptions about the world that it seldom occurs to us that this view of reality may be a consequence of our shaping mythology, rather than a description of ultimate TRUTH. Struggle and competition are good things, aren't they? At least that is what we've always been taught. The riches of the

earth are limited and often there is not enough to go around. Human beings do not have equality of skill and ability so it is inescapable that some will succeed and some will fail. Not everyone can be blessed. The Genesis myth simply describes reality.

But what if it is not reality. What if we began with a different myth, a story about a world defined not by scarcity but by abundance. In a world defined by abundance, Cain, the farmer, would make his gift to the Goddess, the mother of all living things, and she would accept it and in her acceptance reaffirm that Cain, though different and endowed with unique gifts and abilities and interests is, nonetheless, worthy of acceptance and love. In a world defined by abundance, Abel, the shepherd, would make his gift to the Lord who is the Great Shepherd, and it would be acceptable and Abel would know that he too, with his special gifts and interests and abilities was accepted. In a world defined by abundance, Jacob would not need to scheme to steal his brother's birthright, for Esau and Jacob would be prized for the different gifts they incarnate and there would be a blessing for each of them. In a world defined by abundance, God would not be limited to one shape, one form, one concept, one understanding or one people. In that world the divine would be encountered everywhere, in myriad forms and shapes and concepts. There might be as many Gods as there are people who seek and incarnate the sacred, and there would be no right vision of God, no wrong vision of God, no orthodoxy, no heresy, no circle that excludes. In a world of abundance there would be no struggle to win a scarce blessing; the struggle would be to incarnate the sacred as fully as possible in each life, in every moment.

Reading Professor Schwartz's book, I found myself remembering another small volume I had read years ago. Entitled FINITE AND INFINITE GAMES, this book by James Carse seeks to understand the attitude toward life which has emerged from the dominant myth of western culture. Carse talks about the difference between those who see life as a struggle the goal of which is to triumph, to win, to come out on top, and those who see life as a game the goal of which is to sustain, to continue the process. He suggests that in our culture, the dominant paradigm focuses on winning the game, however we choose to define the game. What matters is how the game ends and who is on top when the game ends. In that paradigm, there can be only one winner, only one victor, only one chosen and all the rest, by definition, must be second-best losers.

The curious thing about this set of assumptions is that they focus not really on the game, but on ending the game. The winner is the one who has the most points, the most toys, the most awards *when the game is over*. And power is defined by the ability to end the game when one has the advantage. In this world, the game must be finite, must be endable, must be limited if it is to have any point.

Carse asks what it would be like if we focused not on the end of the game but on the game itself. What would it be like if we really believed that "it matters not if we win or lose, but how we play the game?" What if we assumed that the goal was not to end the game while we are winning, but to keep the game going indefinitely, so that everyone could participate and enjoy the interaction which is life? This would be an infinite game, one which need never end, one which contains within it infinite possibilities, one in

which power is defined not by domination, but by our ability to assist each other to reach our fullest potential that together we might sustain the game which is life. Eloquently, Carse pleads with us to change the dominant paradigm, to see the world in a new way. By seeing life as an infinite game, we might unlearn the culture of scarcity which has led us to murder each other and rape the planet in an effort to win.

In reflecting on both of these books, I find myself tantalized by the vision they offer of a different world--a world of multiple allegiances, of differing insights, of ample blessings, a world in which no one can succeed unless all succeed, in which no one wins alone, in which success encompasses all, in which there are always other possibilities, a world defined not by scarcity and single vision, but by abundance and diversity.

I also confess that I find myself saddened by the enormous distance between that vision and the reality we have created out of our narrow determination to win the finite game and to live in a culture of scarcity. Every aspect of our lives seems focused on winning the finite game, on proving that we have been chosen by the one true God. We are convinced that there is never enough to go around, and spend our lives amassing the tokens which will prove, in the end, that we have won, that we were the chosen, transforming luxuries into necessities in order to justify the game we play. And in the process we justify and make ourselves complicit in the practices which result in violence, murder and mayhem.

What would it take to change our culture from one of scarcity to one of abundance? What would it take to transform us from players of finite games to participants in the infinite game? Nothing less than the emergence of a new foundational myth. Regina Schwartz suggests it is time to "open the biblical canon...and by that I do not mean some partial commentary of sanctified unalterable authoritative texts, but a genuine rewriting of traditions: new creation stories, new exoduses, new losses, new recoveries of what is lost....The old 'monotheistic' Book must be closed so that the new books maybe fruitful and multiply." In short, Schwartz calls for us to abandon the finite game and renew our participation in the infinite game of multiple vision and endless possibilities.

When I was in the fourth grade, all those long years ago, I was introduced to the study of anthropology, pre-history and ancient history. I remember my teacher, in discussing the evolution of religious ideas, suggesting that one clear evidence of the superiority of any culture or civilization is the abandonment of polytheism and the emergence of monotheism. One God, she seemed to suggest, is *a priori* evidence of cultural superiority. What she seemed not to know and I did not learn until later, was that Dr. James Breasted, the same man who had written the text we were using, had once said, "Monotheism is imperialism in religion."

Much as I appreciate the manner in which my fourth-grade teacher opened my mind to the vast history to which we are heirs, I am now convinced that Breasted was right, and my teacher wrong. We have paid a terrible price for the single visioned world of scarcity symbolized and created by the emergence of the single God who would tolerate no competitor, who turned a deaf ear to the plea, "Do you have only one blessing, my father?"

Bless me, too, my father;" the single God who had only one blessing, only one vision, only one truth to give to the all the children of the earth. That price is being paid in Palestine and in Ireland and in Bosnia and around the world as men and women struggle for the limited blessings of a limited world and its limiting God. In truth, in this world of complexity and diversity, one God is simply not enough. It is time to rewrite the old myths, to tell new stories, and to sing the glories of a world of abundance, in which we all are chosen, in which we all are blessed, and in which we all are participants in an infinite game.