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India: Another day, another rape

Phyllis Zagano | Jun. 4, 2014 Just Catholic

Half of India lacks bathrooms [1]. In rural Uttar Pradesh, poor women use the same fields of sugar cane or mint that by day provide them work. Not long ago at bedtime, two teenaged girls went out and did not return [2]. Their fathers found them the next morning, hanged by their head scarves from a mango tree.

Yes, they were dead. Of course, they were raped.

Two hundred million persons live in their huge northern state of Uttar Pradesh. In the complexities of the caste-bound culture [3], the two Shakya girls were lower than the three young Yadav men who raped and murdered them. Uttar Pradesh is controlled by the Yadav.

Now there is great hue and cry [4], the people protest, the government declares an investigation. Two local constables, whom the victims' families say ignored their nighttime pleas for help, have also been arrested [5]. These facts are new, unfortunately, the storyline is not.

Rape is sport for some in India. Less than a year ago, three cousins tricked and trapped a 22-year-old nun in Odisha [6] and raped her for a week. A few months ago courts found five men guilty of gang raping a young photojournalist [7] in Mumbai.

Yes, the church has said a word or two. One of Pope Francis' advisors, Cardinal Oswald Gracias, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, named rape "physical and emotional terrorism." [8] The bishops' conference called for a "change in attitude" toward women.

That is not enough. In fact, it is nearly nothing.

> Memo to Cardinal Gracias:
>
> Please state firmly and clearly that women are made in the image and likeness of God. Referencing and reverencing the Almighty will address the patchwork of religious beliefs across India. For the 24 million Christians among the 1.2 billion populace, please state specifically and forcefully that women can image Christ. Your own website presents [9] "India's shame: female genocide, aborted before birth, poisoned, drowned, stifled, deliberately neglected, burnt for dowry, sacrificed in childbirth, killed in sickness and starved to death." Unless and until you teach the sacredness of all persons, nothing will change. It just won't.
>
> Do you fear that if you say women can image Christ there will be huge numbers of women storming seminaries demanding to be priests? That does not seem quite likely in your culture, but, even so, would that be so terrible? You know, of course, that women have and can again be deacons, ordained to minister in persona Christi servi. What do you care if theologians start jumping up and down about priesthood once women are returned to the diaconate? The church

> teaches it does not have the authority to ordain women as priests. Do you not believe that?
>
> The choice is yours. In Rome, over at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Gerhard Müller says women cannot image Christ. That attitude is just too nasty to behold. It's not theology. It's misogyny. Not only that, it spawns the sickness underlying each and every disrespectful action toward a woman. You know exactly what I am talking about. Please use your influence on behalf of the women of India and of the world whose lives depend on Christian teachings being honestly taught. Until you do, nothing you say will have any merit.

It is really that bad in India. The stories melt into each other. Some are half-remembered or not recalled at all. Was it five men in New Delhi, and three girls in Bangalore? Or was it the other way around? Were they sentenced; did they go free? Are the girls dead or are they living shunned by fellow villagers [10] in a life of lonely poverty? Did I hear that one committed suicide? Or maybe that was in Pakistan or Yemen. Or was it Syria?

We know the latest outrage was in Uttar Pradesh, India, where the Taj Mahal and two other World Heritage Sites [11] command millions of visitors each year. Uttar Pradesh is the state where Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, was born. It was Nehru, in fact, who said India would not prosper until every house had a proper toilet [12]. Nehru died in 1964. Indian women still fear the call of nature, and so much more.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and winner of the 2014 Isaac Hecker Award for Social Justice. She will speak June 9 at Holy Family Church, South Pasadena, Calif., and Sept. 18 at the University of St. Francis in Joliet, Ill. From June 9 to July 8, she will conduct a free online seminar about women in the diaconate based on the books Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future [13] and Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches [14]. Seminar registration is now open at http://people.hofstra.edu/phyllis_zagano/MOOS.html [15]]

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