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Expulsions from religious orders, family, and minority wisdom

Joan Chittister | May. 4, 2011 From Where I Stand

The Jewish Talmud, one of humanity?s great sources of wisdom, has a format much of the rest of the world -- our world, certainly -- would largely reject. The Talmud, the rabbinical interpretation of Judaism?s basic laws, does not depend on majority votes. It preserves the general opinions and major conclusions as agreed upon by most of the rabbis of a given era.

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But the Talmud does more than that: It also preserves in every category the argumentation and conclusions of the minority position on the subject, as well.

Why, I wondered, would scholars of the Torah do such a thing -- admit the fact that there could be different views on a subject, all of them plausible, even among the rabbis themselves. After all, in my church, we are about certainty -- the certainty of authority.

We are not about doubt or idea development. We think that ?perhaps? and ?maybe? and ?for this time? are weasel words. We know the eternal answers to all future questions right now. Why bother to preserve other points of view?

?Because,? the rabbis answer, ?we may, as time goes by, come to see that it was those who held another view who, in the end, were more correct than we.?

Hmmmmm. Dangerous stuff, this Talmudic thinking.

But no more dangerous, surely, than an absolutism that makes heretics in every age who then are declared martyrs centuries later. Like Martin Luther, for instance. Or Galileo, for instance. Or Chardin, for instance.

Martin Luther and his followers were declared apostate for hundreds of years before Vatican II accepted the truth of his theological concerns. Galileo lived under house arrest for the remainder of his life for declaring that the earth revolved around the sun. Chardin was exiled from his Jesuit community because of his early research and conclusions in the arena of evolution. Mary Ward was forced into oblivion for declaring a woman?s right to create another form of religious life. In fact, the names of those who saw another piece of the truth and paid a terrible human price for pursuing it is legion.

The problem is that we may well be in the process of doing it again. This time one of the people with questions is Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois. His crime is questioning the role of women in the church. His punishment is expulsion from his community.

But never mind the crime. We learned from Martin Luther King, Jr. who denounced the laws of segregation and Gandhi who denounced the colonial control of India and Deitrich Bonhoeffer who denounced Nazism and Franz Jaegerstatter who denounced war and Edith Stein who denounced Hitler and Dorothy Day who denounced the

disenfranchisement of women that to hold a truth other than the official one makes a person the prey of the lawgivers. However wrong, however shortsighted those lawgivers may be. Behavior has consequences. We all know that.

No, it?s not the declaration of dissent and the fact that dissent has consequences that?s surprising. It?s the nature of the punishment that?s in question.

Roy Bourgeois, for instance, is being dismissed from his community. After 40 years of commitment and service. After 40 years of witness worthy of Maryknoll?s history. After 40 years of poverty, chastity and obedience to the highest ideals of the order, he will be dismissed from his community with no money, no family and no pension.

Why?

The fact is that Bourgeois? difference of opinion lies with the Vatican and its laws -- not with his community and their constitutions. The laws prohibiting women from being candidates for priesthood are not laws instituted by his religious order. So if the problem is with church law, then why is the Maryknoll community the one expelling him? And what does that say about the integrity of community, charisms, and commitment in general?

Membership in a religious community is defined by the congregation, its internal structures and admission criteria. Are religious who have given their lives to the needs and works of an order, made public vows to seal the relationship of one to another, and acted within the charism of the congregation at the mercy of outside pressure, after all? How prophetic, how communal is that?

Clearly, if the Vatican feels obliged to punish those who ask questions of present church practice -- as Martin Luther did about the selling of relics and indulgences, for instance -- then the Vatican is perfectly within its right to suspend a priest?s liturgical faculties or limit his public priestly functions. But what does that have to do with his commitment to his religious life?

After all, the Vatican did not expel pedophile priests or abusing bishops from the secular priesthood for violating children. In some cases, in fact, they protected the perpetrators repeatedly and even refused to defrock them -- civil law or no civil law. And are, apparently, doing it even now. Only behavior related to women?s issues, it seems, qualifies for expulsion.

Nor did religious communities routinely expel religious order men who were also pedophiles. Instead, rather than put them on the streets where they could be an even greater danger to children and to themselves, these religious congregations maintained their life-long consecrated commitment to these men, monitored their behavior, and nurtured their recovery within the community itself.

The church also expelled Mercy Sr. S. Agnes Mary Mansour from her order without the knowledge and permission of the superiors of her religious congregation, too. Agnes Mary directed a public office that was a pass-through agency for funds distributed to some public agencies permitting legal abortions.

But the Sisters of Mercy refused to honor the expulsion. Agnes Mary continued her relationship with the order, retired to their infirmary in her later years, died in the community and was buried in the congregation?s cemetery plot.

Our religious congregations, we say, are our religious ?family.? It is a word with meaning. Most of us have family members who moved beyond the family culture. Most of us have had to determine how to respond to that.

?Mary,? the old Polish father said to his wife, ?they?re our children. Whatever they do, wherever they go, this will always be their home. I will never deny them that for any reason whatsoever.?

From where I stand, this lesson about family may be something the church and its religious orders need to learn.

And while we?re thinking about it, we might want to consider the wisdom of the Talmud again, as well. After all, Roy just might be speaking a minority wisdom that may very well be found to be true some day.

In the meantime, we, too, might be well put to develop some respect for those among us who see farther and more clearly than we do the revolutionary implications of the Gospel.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a longtime contributor to *NCR*. Her Web column, *From Where I Stand*, is found on the *NCR* Web site: NCRonline.org/blogs/from-where-i-stand [2].]

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