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The Danger of Sacred Books

Proponents of the sacred nature of the Bible argue that the problem is not the book itself but the interpretation given to the word of God

By Alberto Arenas, Ph.D.

The Church of God Ministry of Jesus Christ International, an influential evangelical church of Colombian origin, has been the talk of the Colombian press in recent weeks following the emergence of a video where IDMJI's spiritual leader, Ms. Maria Luisa Piraquive, says that God allows discrimination against people with disabilities. She said her church has every right to prevent people with disabilities from reaching the pulpit because it is enshrined in the Bible. Indeed, in the Book of Leviticus (Chapter 21:16-24), the Lord tells Moses that any person who is blind, lame, maimed, hunch backed, with a broken foot or broken hand, or any other defect may not approach the altar so as to not profane the sanctuary of God.

This incident could be considered as an isolated fact, where not for three reasons: The first is that IDMJI is active in 45 countries and territories worldwide, including a significant presence in Mexico and Central America. The second is that the church has close ties to the Colombian political party MIRA (the creators of the church were the same founders of MIRA), and was the author in 2011 of one of the most important anti-discriminatory laws in Colombia, which does not make any mention of people with disabilities. The third is that the Bible is used to exonerate discrimination.

This last point deserves a detailed analysis since throughout its history the Bible has been used as justification for all kinds of human rights abuses. Proponents of the sacred nature of the Bible argue that the problem is not with the book itself but with the interpretation given to the word of God. In the particular case of IDMJI, advocates say

that a more altruistic interpretation of the Bible would claim that persons with disabilities have the same rights as people without disabilities.

The problem with this argument is that religious groups perform two types of readings, a literal and an exegetical one, according to their convenience and social and political ideologies. For example, with issues related to sexuality (e.g., homosexuality, prostitution, artificial contraception), Christian leaders have taken a more literal and dogmatic line, but for other issues they have either chosen to ignore them or simply have minimized passages of the Bible that they have decided are irrelevant or minor (e.g., 1 Corinthians 11:14. "Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?").

The same IDMJI has decided to be more generous and liberal in interpreting aspects of the Bible that suit it, as the ordination of women, which incidentally allows for Ms. Piraquive to be a senior pastor—something that would not be accepted, for example, by the Catholic Church. For this topic Catholicism has decided to give a textual analysis and clings to passages like the one below, when God speaks through St. Paul and says (1 Corinthians 14:34-35):

"Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."

And of course, these exegetical variations and tendencies to be more absolutist only with regard to certain topics extend to all world religions with books that have been given a sacred character: The Torah, the Koran, the Vedas, the Book of Mormon, the Avesta, etc. These books are considered by believers either as fully divine (literally written by God, as in the case of the Qur'an) or divinely inspired (like the Bible), but in any case questioning is not allowed beyond the level granted by the orthodoxy of the group. Everything that is contained in the holy book, either literally or interpretively, is by definition unequivocal and cannot be appealed.

And therein lies the great danger of sacred books: Given that believers consider these books to contain the word of God, they are viewed as inevitably inerrant, despite containing aberrations such as those passages about people with disabilities. This ends up denying that the interpretation of the book is in fact a response to the particularistic interests of its theological leaders, as well as to their social and political leanings.

I think that a healthier response would be to take away from these books their element of sacredness—after all, they were written by human beings—and treat them as guidebooks that ponder about the most transcendental issues of humanity. It would be more beneficial to the individual and the community that religions debate openly the important topics of society in a respectful manner, and use the scriptures as a key but supplementary source in making decisions. This inevitably requires an interpretation, but every parishioner, based on his or her own conscience and not that dictated by ecclesiastical authorities, should do this.

I am aware that such a proposal could be seen as blasphemy by the more intolerant individuals of religions with holy books. However, my proposal seeks to consider sacred books for what they pretend to be: Treaties of love about all of humanity and about all living things. But like all treaties, they should be considered as fallible and subject to an open and frank dialogue about their strengths and weaknesses.

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