

Editing the texts

Episcopal minister wants revision of Christian liturgy to remove anti-Semitism

On perhaps one-third of the Sundays in any given year, “most Christian congregations hear passages taken from the New Testament...that discredit Jews or Judaism....Many Christians have acknowledged that, heard year by year over the centuries, readings such as these might have helped to lay the groundwork for the Holocaust, and continue to help fuel anti-Semitism even today.”

This statement by the Reverend Susan Auchincloss on her website, <http://faithnotfault.org>, explains why the retired minister, formerly at St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church in Woodstock, wants to revise the language of the Christian liturgy. She invites people to sign a petition suggesting that certain lines of the Revised Common Lectionary, which prescribes the Sunday readings, be restated or retranslated to remove their anti-Semitic implications.

Auchincloss emphasizes that she’s not interested in changing the Bible. “Most people don’t read the Bible, and if they do, they’re probably serious students who will ask questions and wrestle with what they read. The Bible is not the place where prejudice is generated and sustained.”

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At Sunday services, on the other hand, there tend not to be opportunities for listeners to question the words they hear. Since Auchincloss has begun her campaign, several people have told her they’ve never noticed prejudicial texts. “But they are there,” she says, “so that means readings are going in on a subconscious level, forming attitudes and creating bias without your ever even knowing it’s happening. In most churches, as soon as you read a passage, the reader concludes with these words: ‘The word of the Lord.’ It’s like putting a halo around this invidious language.”

She gives the example of Chapter 9 from the Gospel of John, where the Pharisees question the parents of a man blind from birth who was healed by Jesus. The parents refuse to confirm

that Jesus did the healing “because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders,” according to the New International Version of the Bible.

A more accurate reading, says Auchincloss, would state, “because they were afraid of the religious authorities.” She points out that Jesus was not opposed to Judaism but to ossified practices that had lost their spiritual essence over time. Substituting the word “authorities” would underline the challenge of any movement that confronts hidebound religious attitudes, which have recurred periodically throughout history, even within Christian denominations.

Auchincloss grew up in Wisconsin, attended a seminary in Berkeley, and worked in Washington, D.C., and Prague, following her husband’s job opportunities. She was pastor of a church in



VIOLET SNOW

Reverend Susan Auchincloss

Rockland County for eight years before she retired, then came out of retirement three years ago to serve as interim pastor at St. Gregory’s. Now that she has retired again, she has time to address an issue that she feels passionate about.

Her initial awareness of the problem came from the book *Constantine’s Sword*, by James Carroll, which traces the history of Christian persecution of Jews in Europe through the centuries. “It was a staggering mountain of information to confront,” she says. “I didn’t realize how intense and widespread the persecution had been.”

One day, a parishioner brought her Jewish husband to a Good Friday service at Auchincloss’s church. “As I sat and listened to the readings, I was listening through his ears,” she remembers. “I was appalled. I knew it was false, that claiming the Jews

were responsible for Jesus’s death was a polemical and unfaithful way to describe an extremely complex, nuanced historical situation. Yet people have died because of that attitude.”

She began to offer alternative readings in her services, drawing from versions of the Bible that have addressed issues of anti-Semitism.

Recently, she submitted an article to a national Christian journal, explaining her viewpoint and calling for reform. The article was rejected, even after Auchincloss made revisions. “I don’t attribute that to indifference on the journal’s part, but to my failure to present my case in a stirring way,” she remarks.

Since then, she has created a website and a blog. She has created an online petition directed toward the group of scholars from various denominations who create the Lectionary, a three-year cycle of selected Bible readings that are delivered each Sunday in churches around the country. She trusts that, if the number of signatures gets up into the hundreds, the authorities will have to pay attention.

While she has observed that officials at the upper levels of the denominations recognize the harm done by language that denigrates Judaism, she feels the texts will not be altered until “the people in the pews and the parish clergy demand the change we all want.”

The Lectionary has already been revised to eliminate sexist passages, such as those that say women should be silent in church. Lines referring to “brothers” have been changed to include “brothers and sisters.” Auchincloss seeks the same sensitivity toward Jews.

“I’m a passionate Christian,” she says. “I love my faith. But I don’t think we do ourselves justice when we consider ourselves better than another faith. We look pathetic. It suggests Christianity lacks sufficient merit based on its own faith and practice.”

Furthermore, she sees anti-Semitic language as a form of violence. “You can bully people by your words, by putting them down. We’re contributing to making our society more violent. If you would prefer to live in a harmonious, compassionate world, you have a vested interest in seeing this change. I’m just starting, but I’m going to keep going and going and going.”++

Violet Snow

Visit <http://faithnotfault.org> to learn more, to sign a petition encouraging removal of anti-Semitic language from the Revised Common Lectionary, and to read suggestions for amending liturgical readings.

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