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Book Review: Vile Bodies-Adrian Thatcher

Revd Brian Talbot writes:

Adrian Thatcher (2023) *Vile Bodies: The Body in Christian Teaching, and Practice*
 (London: SCM Press) 278 pages

Adrian Thatcher came to the Conference Ministers' Seminar and gave a talk about his book *Vile Bodies*. Robin Wooldridge, SOLCe's Director of Learning, bought a copy and asked me to review it.

Thatcher is an Anglican priest and a retired visiting Professor of Theology at Exeter University. He belongs to Modern Church which is the liberal wing of the Church of England and other British churches, and challenges evangelical Anglicans in matters of theology and Biblical interpretation. Thatcher has been reading, “teaching, preaching and researching theology for more than 60 years”. Thatcher argues for sexual and gender justice and challenges the patriarchy, misogyny and sexism of the Bible and in Church teaching. He quotes an anonymous author who asks how Israelite morality is applicable to today.

Thatcher’s book is a difficult read because he highlights all the unholy parts of the Holy Bible, such as sex with slaves, including children. (Deuteronomy 20:14; 21:10-14; Numbers 31) It is also a difficult read, not only because it is written from an academic perspective, but because of the spiritually painful topics such as hatred of women, male toxicity, slavery, white supremacy, racism, spiritual abuse, discrimination against sexual minorities, the abuse of power, religious imperialism and superiority, paedophile priests and wife-bashing in Christian marriages, especially those of clergy. Underlying such painful subject matter is the demeaning and vilifying of human bodies due to the uncritical use of the Bible and church tradition. An example of male toxicity is ‘the ordeal of the bitter water’ (Numbers 5), which “contains assumptions that sustain and justify male jealousy and coercion”. A husband just has to be jealous or suspect his wife of adultery (Numbers 5:14, 29). Another example, underlying the thinking of convicted Irish paedophile priests, there is not only a sexually naivety and woeful dismissal of others’ needs, but also a too narrow definition of adultery, and a lack of self-awareness. With regard to violence against spouses, Thatcher argues that underlying this is the belief that the two genders are “two distinctly different beings”, instead of both being human beings. In the history of Christian thought, Chrysostom and Laurence Hispanus were opposed to beating wives, while Augustine and Huguccio of Pisa accepted violence against wives. Gratian in 1140 proposed the ‘rule of moderate chastising’, which became canon law. Any “mealy-mouthed exhortations about forgiveness”, the need for suffering to follow Jesus’ example (1 Peter 2:21) and the indissolubility of marriages doesn’t help a spouse in a violent Roman Catholic marriage, or any marriage. It ignores the sin of coercive control. Thatcher suggests that sacramental life is not just in marriage but in daily life. In Orthodox Christianity they recognise ‘dead’ marriages, and so will re-marry people, sometimes twice. Thatcher reminds us of another stain on Western Christian theology, that of Luther’s anti-semitic tractate on the Jews, in which he argued that all synagogues should be burned down, all Jewish books should be burnt, and all Jewish worship should cease. Thatcher is not afraid to ask difficult questions like: Is theology itself a system of a mistaken purity, striving to avoid contamination from past vile deeds, doctrine, and bodies?

Thatcher’s contention, with which I agree, is that there are passages in the Old Testament, which encourage low self-esteem and poor body-images for men and especially for women. For example, nocturnal emissions and monthly periods, sex slaves, rapists obligated to marry their victims, women as property, ethnic cleansing and so on. This results in people being vilified, people in charge controlling others by interpreting and applying the laws,

and the production of “abusive theology”. Thatcher argues that the purity laws are divisive and degrading. They create “religious elites”, who are “almost inevitably self-congratulatory, priding themselves on the differences between them and everyone else. That is how disdain and contempt arise, and once arisen, can quickly escalate. Purity and misogyny go hand in hand.” Thatcher argues that there are no regulations in the Bible about incest with a daughter.

Thatcher is concerned about weaponising theology “to smash inconvenient others” by justifying “prejudice and violence”. Abusive theology “does not allow the human person to engage in appropriate self-care.” It “encourages self-hatred, shame, guilt and so on” and it “saps the ability to self-affirm and diminishes the requirements to love God and neighbour.” Abusive theology is partly created by emphasising the literal text of the Bible over the living, personal Word of God, and also ignoring more positive passages in the Bible, such as both genders were created in the image and likeness of God, human bodies were created “very good” and they are the temple of the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). There are supposed to be no divisions in Christianity: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) Another factor in the creation of abusive theology is the transposition of Israelite culture into the 21st century, such as the mistreatment of women. He argues that the Bible trivialises rape, regarding women as property and female virginity as a commodity. Thatcher laments the “appalling and never-ending violence against women in contemporary life, which is partly a continuation of the misogyny that was authorised by certain biblical texts and what pious male theologians did with them.” Thatcher argues that misogyny fuels patriarchy which justifies all sorts of institutional sins such as slavery, anti-semitism, white supremacy, racism, paedophilia, spiritual abuse, marital and domestic violence, discrimination against sexual minorities, the abuse of power, religious imperialism and superiority, and so on. Notice the phrase “institutional sins”. So much of theology restricts sin to what the body does sexually, or what the body desires. Thatcher’s major concern is abusive theology caused by “concepts of a punitive God, the Virgin Mary, the ambivalence of the cross, a sin-centred theology, and so on.” Women suspected of being witches, Jews, Muslims, non-Caucasian people are all “victims of abusive, discriminatory theology”.

Thatcher argues that there are voices in Christian theology such as “feminist, queer, black, liberationist, womanist, political, and post-colonial”, that challenge the Biblical views of ‘vile’ bodies of “those of a particular sex, race, religion, tribe, sexual orientation, disability or age.” It is about reading “our own tradition through critical eyes”. Thatcher argues that paedophilia, misogyny and other sins of the churches are caused by a “theology that distorts attitudes to their own bodies and those of their victims.” Thatcher quotes James Cone’s “analysis of the complete failure of white theology to deal with racial violence is of particular interest here because of the vilification of black people its matching failure to engage in self-criticism, its indifference to suffering, and its abusive character.”

Thatcher mentions misogynistic comments made by the early Christian Church Father Jerome, who regarded celibate women as male, or as good as males! Jerome was a very keen believer in the perpetual virginity of Mary, and was abusive to people like Helvidius, who pointed out that Jesus had brothers and sisters. (Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55) So devoted to Mary's virginity was Jerome, that he believed that Jesus was not born naturally, but passed through the womb wall and then the stomach wall! (In the New-Church we would argue that all angels are perpetual virgins, in a spiritual sense of being open to the influence of the LORD, so Mary is a perpetual virgin in this meaning. (Revelation 14:4; *Secrets of Heaven* 3081:1; *Apocalypse Explained* 252:8; cf. *Minor Spiritual Experiences* 4643; *Love in Marriage* 155:3)) Roman Catholics also believe that Mary and Joseph never consummated their marriage, and so it was believed to be "the perfect marriage". That is for Roman Catholics, the perfect marriage is sexless. For another Church Father, Tertullian, "Women are the devil's gateway", relying on a very literal interpretation of Genesis 3, and women have no sexual desire.

Thatcher argues that if we start with the premise that a loving, wise God has created "sexual diversity", we don't need to internalise disgust. Unless we own and expunge "'vilifying' or 'visceral'" Christian teachings about bodies, rape and abuse crises will continue unchallenged. (I would acknowledge that the Bible's misogyny is a contributing factor to rape and domestic violence, men generally being bigger and stronger than women is another contributing factor.)

I would suggest that there is more to "the systematic distorting of the Islamic faith in Christian propaganda." Thatcher accepts that Muslims have been "unquestionably expansionist", but doesn't mention Muslim propaganda. Quoting Heng's comment "The 'real meaning' of the text becomes controlled by calumnies and falsehoods invented by Christians" seems a bit one-sided. Thatcher is "appalled" by jihadist atrocities and "enraged by" Muslim patriarchy, but some Muslims "are enjoying 'reformed' versions of Islam already."

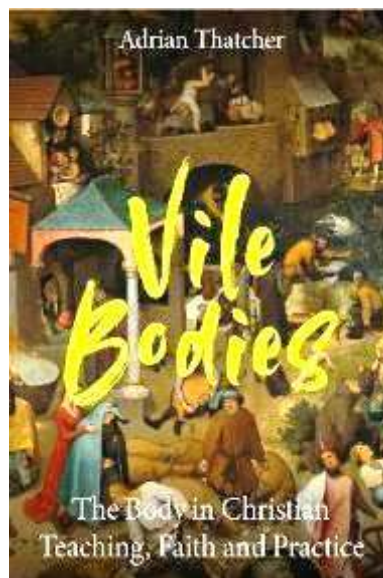
I profoundly agree with Thatcher about humility: "The arrogance of James and John, believing themselves adequate to be co-rulers with Jesus in his earthly kingdom was met with a rebuke 'whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant' (Mark 10.43). The need for humility as a Christian virtue, well attested in the NT, is not confined to the realm of the personal. It applies also to humility of thought, finding grace through deep listening, swapping certainties for tentativeness, while retaining confidence in our own inherited but chastened faith. Humble service is likely to be more effective than triumphant proclamation." I am impressed with Thatcher's humility. He describes himself "as a chastened theologian". He is willing to admit, quoting Robert S. Jones, that the Western Christian church have been guilty of "the white Christian shuffle", which is basically "the desire for quick repentance". Thatcher then lists issues in which the Western Christian Church has not expressed deep enough repentance, nor shown by their actions that they are really serious, such as spiritual abuse, paedophilia, racism, homophobia, gynophobia, and so on. He asks how the church could "become infected by belief in our

own supremacy and inoculated against self-criticism.” “Our ‘silence is violence’, akin to the violent silence that routinely follows reports of *sexual* abuse in the churches” Thatcher tries to get behind white supremacy, and suggests that it is due to “a sacralized version of identity politics”, but having a Christian ‘label’ or ‘persona’ does not disguise “That need for control and, dare I say, domination is one major factor that leads to the false notions and stereotypes that are the foundations of white supremacy’.” “Religious fundamentalism abhors complexity.” Liberal theology advocates “empathy that extends to all people and the earth itself”; a more worthy representation of Jesus”; “a larger and properly divine concept of God who as Spirit is always present and discoverable among all peoples and creatures; and “seeks to rethink doctrine positively and constructively.

I would suggest that we in the New Church need to ask ourselves whether there is abusive theology in our teaching and preaching. Some might point to an over-reliance on Ministers. This could be deemed hierarchical abuse, whereby ministers or priests dominate, and laity can teach kindness, (*Secrets of Heaven* 6822) yet Peters teach or instruct or preach! (*Apocalypse Explained* 314:5; 482:3; 820:6; *Apocalypse Revealed* 383; *Doctrine of Wisdom* 132 (= 3:3)). Some might argue that non-heterosexuals, singles, widows and widowers, suffer because of our over-emphasis on heterosexual marriage at the expense of marriage love in individuals, and the deeper levels of marriage, such as being married to the LORD, and the marriage of hearts and minds, which even individuals can possess. Some might argue that we hold too tightly to our unique, distinctive teachings, which can result in insularity and sectarianism. Our over-reliance upon the internal historical sense, which describes such as Protestants and Roman Catholics, could make us look for sin outside ourselves, whereas the internal sense talks about the sin inside us. Some might argue that Swedenborg interprets the Word mainly for ‘spiritual people’, (cf. *Secrets of Heaven* 266; 568:2) and it is very rare that he interprets it for ‘heavenly’ or ‘celestial people’. (*Secrets of Heaven* 4434:9; 4823:2; 8337:1; cf. *Secrets of Heaven* 2069:5; 2088:2) If we’re too spiritually orientated, in that we emphasise that males must be intellectual and females affectional, we ignore celestial or heavenly people, in whom males are affectional and women are intellectual! Some might argue that anti-homosexual preaching and teaching, actually affirms the “inherent disposition” or “character” of the Israelites and their superficial, worldly, patriarchal, toxic male views, and ignores the “face and hands” or “the genuine external sense” of the Word. Swedenborg tells us that the Bible would have been written differently if it had been produced in a different culture. (*Secrets of Heaven* 2520:5; 10453; 10461) Sadly Swedenborg doesn’t spell out what we can take as absolutely literally true, and so there will be different Swedenborgians interpreting things differently. However, we do know that some rituals were commanded by God, which New Church people would explain as God permitting or allowing them, because of the beliefs and culture of the Israelites, such as circumcision, animal sacrifices and the Israelite belief they were the chosen race, and yet they weren’t. Swedenborg says that punishing a family for the sins of one of its members, is a law of hell! (*Secrets of Heaven* §5764) This can be logically extended to laws which don’t encapsulate the Golden Rule, or the Two Great Commandments, or the Beatitudes, or loving enemies, and so on. Another teaching to ponder is the new church will be superficial in the beginning. (*Apocalypse Explained* 403:15) Each of us has to answer that question for ourselves.

“We will keep our bodies after we have died”, or “our genitalia would remain behind in the grave” will amuse Swedenborgians who believe that we don’t need our physical bodies after death, and that we will have genitalia in the after-life!

In closing, Thatcher talks of appealing to tradition: “It is patriarchal, and sexism is its long-running justification. From patriarchy comes hierarchy, and from hierarchy come the vile activities that have been reference in this book – slavery, misogyny, racism, colonialism, homophobia, androcentrism, abuse, and so on. Repeating tradition, instead of endlessly refining it, repeats the evils associated with it.” (249)



<https://scmpress.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9780334063605/vile-bodies>