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Sr. Pauline Logue

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The Treatment of Rape in Theology

Sr. Pauline Logue.

Lecturer in Moral Theology in All Hallows College, Dublin

When I first began to research the treatment of rape in theology some five years ago I was frequently asked what rape had to do with theology. That is not a question I hear today. Largely due to scandals in both church and state a theological response has been demanded to the serious question of sexual abuse. That response is underway. This article presents a brief summary of central theological issues that arise from an analysis of the experience of rape victims.¹ It presents an overview of the treatment of rape in traditional and mainstream theology and finally it examines the contribution of certain feminist theologians who address the issue of sexual violence. Its focus is primarily that of the rape of women.²

Theological Issues Arising From the Experience of Rape

Women's stories of rape reveal that the perceived reality and the experienced reality of rape differ considerably. Because of the tremendous difficulty women often have in voicing their experience of rape the perceived reality, unfortunately, tends to hold sway. Personal accounts of rape show immense differences but certain recurring themes emerge; a virtually universal fear of rape on the part of women and a personal sense of trauma, shame, guilt, denial and anger are commonly reported. Repeatedly such women insist that the physical rape is but one aspect of the total rape experience; the physiological, psychological, emotional and spiritual repercussions are equally significant and in some cases even more so. Clearly then, an exclusively physical approach to the question of rape is considered to be theologically inadequate.

Rape is not merely a personal phenomenon. In research on rape medical, legal, justice and religious systems come under close scrutiny in their ability to effectively silence rape victims. This silencing is achieved largely through a bolstering of time-old rape myths. One author, McColgan,³ outlines the role of embarrassment, humiliation, shame, manipulation and fear in this silencing. She insists that "the penalties for complaining are high". Media portrayal of rape equally proves disturbing. Analysis of the

¹ The term 'victim' is used hesitantly here since it is often called into question. It is viewed by some as a stereotypical label with a disempowering effect. The alternative term 'survivor' is often preferred. Many women who have been raped do, however, choose to describe themselves in this way.

² One disturbing aspect of this research is that the theological treatment of the rape of men is minimal even though both psychological and sociological studies of male rape are available and are on the increase.

³ A. Mc Colgan, *The Case For Taking The Date Out of Rape*, (London: Pandora 1996) 21

newsprint headlines and the general media message conveyed to readers is generally that victims of rape are beautiful women with sex appeal and that rapists are either mentally disturbed or are depraved monsters.⁴ Such coverage is clearly stereotypical.

One institutional form of rape is that of rape in war. As an effective and calculated weapon it serves to demoralise the enemy and features as a symbolic sign of victory. Rape in war is generally viewed as 'inevitable'. Researcher Aruan Gnanadason⁵ writes that a new war-rape terminology is evident. The use of adjectives such as 'front-line' and 'third-party' are used to normalise rape in war, despite the fact that the Fourth Geneva Council on The Protection of Civilian Persons in Times of War (1994) classifies wartime rape as a serious human rights violation.⁶ What is notable from a theological perspective is that, despite global awareness of the most horrific examples of mass rape in the World Wars, Mylai, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia and more recently in Albania,⁷ most theological explorations of 'Just War' theory fail to address the horror of rape in war at all.

So what then are the significant issues regarding rape from a theological perspective? A reading and re-reading of personal accounts of rape points to a number of theological issues, which are only referred to here. One fundamental issue is that of belief in God. For victims who previously have had a belief in a loving and protecting God, faith is often shattered. One victim exclaims: "The more I remembered, the more I realised that God did not care for me at all. If he didn't care for me, He wasn't who I thought He was. And who was He? It's been an incredible loss... I haven't been able to find a God I can believe in."⁸ Another common difficulty is that of imaging God as male and the dilemma of continued participation in the sacramental life of the Church where both language and images point predominantly to a male God. As one woman said, she could only feel at ease with a faith in an angel's presence. For her the notion of 'God' and especially 'God the Father' was much too threatening after the experience of prolonged incest.

Women's stories suggest to the theologian that re-examinations of anthropology, Natural Law theory and traditional theologies of suffering, sacrifice, redemption and reconciliation are a priority. Stories also indicate that deeper explorations of both the meaning of embodiment and of the theological significance of the violation of the human body are important. Victims also clearly challenge theologies of power asking that these theologies include a serious critique of the negative use of power in rape and furthermore they demand a dispelling of rape myths through a facilitation of truth-telling and justice. Finally, since many rape victims speak of a death or loss of self, theological and philosophical

⁴ Research indicates that both of these descriptions of the rapist account for a very small percentage of convicted rapes.

⁵ A.Gnanadason, *No Longer a Secret: The Church and Violence Against Women*, Risk Book Series (Geneva: WCC Publ., 1993)14-17.

⁶ Art. 27, Para. 2.

⁷ The mass systematic rape of Albanian women is graphically described by Christine Toomey in an article "Speak No Evil, See No Shame", *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 28/11/99, 32-40.

⁸ Cited in E. Bass and L. Davis, *The Courage to Heal* (London: Cedar, 1990) 156.

explorations of selfhood, identity and person-hood may be enriched by a closer listening to the identity issues arising in the case of rape.

Rape in Traditional Theology

In traditional and indeed contemporary mainstream theology, rape is examined predominantly from the perspective of Scripture and Natural Law. References to rape in Scripture are relatively few and the primary concern here is that of male property rights. In the Old Testament, for example, rape by an outsider is largely viewed as an act of aggression against male property, hence an act of hostility towards the males in a community. The rape of Dinah (Gn 34:1-31) and the rape of the concubine (Jgs 19:22-30) are classic examples. What is notable in these and other cases is that the violation of the woman *in itself* is not treated as an offense. Rape is also viewed as a crime against the community and a source of communal conflict.⁹ Further references to rape in the Old Testament include legal references. Take Ex 22:15-16. Here it is stated that in the case of the rape of a virgin the rapist is required to pay the 'bride-price' (*mohar*) and must also marry the virgin Dt 22:23-29 similarly describes how the rape of a virgin leads to a forcible marriage with no divorce and the payment of 50 shekles.

New Testament sources, on the surface, offer limited insight; rape is generally regarded to be subsumed under the general categories of adultery, vice or impurity. Theologian L. William Countryman¹⁰, however, creatively explores the links between New Testament views of morality and the wider discussion of rape. He re-visits the notion of property rights from the perspective of the Kingdom, speaking of the 'metaphorical space' which surrounds the human person which is the essence of being human. This space is that aspect of the self which we freely open out to others in relationship. When this is broken by violence such as rape the very possibility of being human is denied, at least temporarily. On this basis he insists that there is no sexual sin more serious than rape.

An analysis of rape in the Tradition proves interesting. Historian Sylvana Tomaselli¹¹ argues that Augustine's contribution is important in that he challenges the Roman practice of self-inflicted suicide after rape, by the victim, for the sake of honour; he insists that the sin is that of the rapist and that the victim remains chaste in the eyes of God. The single most significant theoretical influence however is that of Natural Law as developed by Aquinas and subsequent neo-scholastics¹². Natural Law theory when applied to the area of sexuality (the area in which rape is addressed traditionally) is clearly

⁹ J.R Halstead, "Sexuality" in C. Stuhlmüller, ed, *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (Collegeville, Mn.: The Liturgical Press, 1996)900-903 at 902

¹⁰ L. William Countryman, *Dirt Greed and Sex: Sexual Ethics in The New Testament and Their Implication For Today* (London: SCM Press Ltd.,) 1988, 36-38.

¹¹ S. Tomaselli, "Rape", in P. Barry Clarke & A. Linzey, eds., *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society*, (London/New York: Routledge, 1996)714-718 at 715.

¹² Aquinas *Summa Theologiae*, 11-II. Q. 154. aa 11.12.; See also R. Gula, *Reason Informed By Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (New York/ Mahwah: Paulist Press 989) 222-223.

'physicalist'. In other words, it looks to physical and biological structures when it identifies the end goal of sexual activity as procreation. Under this schema, sexual activities which may result in procreation are not considered to be 'contrary to nature' nor 'intrinsically evil'.

Rape, however unacceptable, technically fits this category since procreation is possible in its case. The logical fall-out of such a theory is that rape is somehow less grave morally than sexual acts which, by their physical nature, fail to allow for possible procreation, e.g. auto-eroticism, homogenital sexual activity, sodomy etc., which fall into the category of 'grave moral matter'.

Since historically Moral Theology tended to focus on 'grave' matters of morality, rape as a theological issue was largely ignored for many centuries. Indeed the treatment of rape throughout the tradition was narrowly confined to moral discussions related to contraceptive intercourse and abortion. These concerns remained consistent in the manuals of moral theology (1600-1960) and are still strongly reflected in treatments of rape in official teaching and mainstream theology. One most valuable contribution is that of E. J. Bayer¹³ who thoroughly traces the development of the theological treatment of rape in the manuals of moral theology. His concern is primarily the question of pregnancy prevention in the case of marital rape but his analysis provides much information that is of significance in a more general discussion.

Bayer points out that the theologian Sanchez, in his work *Disputationes de Sancto Matrimonio* (1606) was most likely the first theologian to seriously raise the question of rape in marriage. Two issues were at stake according to Sanchez. The first was the question of the moral right of the woman to expel the rapist's semen, through flushing or otherwise. If we remember that the ovum had not yet been discovered it is clear that the primary concern was that of abortion. The second moral concern was the violation of what was termed the *bimestre* period. This was a period of two months, instituted by Gregory IX when a newly married woman was not obliged to consummate the marriage since she had the right, during that period, to leave marriage and enter religious life. Sanchez sought to argue some defense of the right of a wife to expel semen if intercourse was forced upon her during this *bimestre* period. He was, however, more clearly convinced of this right to defense in the case of a raped, non-married, virgin woman and uses arguments regarding social shame in this argumentation.

By raising this as a theological question and by seeking a creative response, his theology might be regarded as quite innovative. Subsequent theologians, however, were to have a more restrictive position. Eventually the issue of rape went underground and remained so for a number of centuries until significant events, such as the discovery of the ovum and the mass rape of Belgian Congo missionaries in the 60's, brought it once more to the fore as a serious theological issue. In the last few decades the theological discussion in official teaching and mainstream theology has focused primarily on the examination of rape in Scripture, rape and Natural Law theory and ethics regarding contraception and abortion in rape cases. Questions of internal consent to rape and of the woman's right to self-defense

¹³ E. Bayer, *Rape Within Marriage* (London /New York: University of America Press, 1985)

are often raised. More recently, however, the social implications of rape, the sexual objectification of women and the violation of human dignity through the act of rape have featured as theological concerns in both official teaching and mainstream works.

Feminist Theology and Rape

Having its roots in liberation theology the feminist contribution¹⁴ begins, not with abstracts and principles, but with concrete experience, hence it more closely mirrors women's actual experience of rape than traditional examinations of the subject. The feminist examination of rape is clearly situated in a critique of society as a whole. Hence, patriarchal socialisation processes and the intimate relationship between religion and patriarchy form the background to most feminist discussions on rape. Significantly rape is not examined in the context of sexuality. It is morally viewed as a sin of *power* as opposed to a sin of sexuality and is explored from the perspective of truth-telling and just relationships.

Feminist authors take a more comprehensive approach.¹⁵ They too examine the Scriptural treatment of rape but highlight in their analysis the question of male property rights and the subordination of women. The story of Eve, the violent gang rape of the woman in Judges 19 and a selection of Pauline texts are frequently quoted, among others, to this end. Feminist theologians go on to challenge exclusively male images of God, which are viewed as restrictive and potentially harmful spiritually. Misogynistic texts in the tradition, particularly from the Church Fathers are highlighted (though sometimes in a selective manner). Formative religious stories are thoroughly critiqued (that of Maria Goretti in particular) and theological definitions of rape are scrutinised from the perspective of patriarchal intentions.

Most significantly, however, traditional theologies of forgiveness, suffering, ownership, and sacrifice are profoundly challenged as abusive to women and as positive supports for a rape culture. Feminist writers argue that traditional interpretations of suffering, sacrifice and atonement have led to the acculturation of women to accept abuse.

Authors such as Carlson Brown and Parker¹⁶, for example, describe Christian theology as an abusive theology that glorifies suffering. Rape it is insisted is not redemptive. In itself, it is a dealer of death. In feminist works theologies of ownership are strongly challenged also. Here case studies are referred to where rapists justify their acts of rape and abuse by reference to ownership of the victim. This is commonplace in marital and partner rape but evidenced also in cases of incest. One man arrested for

¹⁴ Its theology is praxis-reflection based. It uses women's experience as a primary category and serves women's liberation from oppression, in whatever form.

¹⁵ For an overview of feminist approaches to the question of rape and sexual violence against women see Schussler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland, eds., "Violence Against Women", *Concilium*, 1994/ 1.

molesting his daughter insisted: "She is mine. I produced her. I have a right to her before anyone else".¹⁷ For this reason feminist theology includes research on the psychological effects of ownership and the relationship between being owned and having no identity.

The key question of forgiveness is explored in some depth. Feminist theologians point out that victims' stories indicate that Jesus' mandate that we forgive those who wrong us, while true in itself, has been used manipulatively for the purpose of silencing. Such theologians seek then to articulate the complex relationship between forgiveness, truth-telling, mercy and justice and challenge strongly the pathology of a 'forgive-and-forget' theology or practice viewing it as both simplistic and dangerous. They insist that theologies of forgiveness or reconciliation require treatments that acknowledge their enormous complexities and that pastoral practices need to be founded on more developed and enlightened theologies

The importance of authentic human relationships is frequently stressed in feminist works. Theologian Carter Heyward,¹⁸ for example, insists that 'evil' is not some metaphysical reality but something profoundly personal, done from person to person, and that at its heart is a struggle for power. Her view is that victims of evil are rendered ineffective until they reclaim an authentic power. This power, she suggests, can only be recovered in genuine relationships. Insights such as these highlight the necessity of a supportive and loving community and this is very often shown to be significant in women's stories of post-rape healing. For this reason the importance of communal rituals of healing are regarded as central to any discussion on rape and reconciliation.

Concluding Comment

What is perhaps most striking of all in researching the treatment of rape in theology is the sore lack of dialogue between mainstream and feminist theologies. Cross-references are rare and serve very specific purposes and the overall sense is that both worlds are battling ahead in parallel rather than engaging in any real and helpful theological conversation. My hope is that a more in-depth, integral and comprehensive theology be pursued and that theological research on the experience of male rape, so minimally explored theologically to date, will be a priority in the future.

¹⁶ J Carlson Brown and R. Parker, "For God So Loved The World" in J. Carlson Brown and C.R. Bohn, eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: a feminist critique*, Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1989, 1-30 at 26

¹⁷ Cited in *Concilium*, op.cit. 47.

¹⁸ Carter Heyward. *The Redemption of God*, (London: University Press of America Inc., 1982) 162.