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The American Academy of Religion's New Theme -Sadomasochism

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The annual program of the American Academy of Religion [AAR] increasingly reads like a catalog of perversities, with the latest bells and whistles of sexual fanaticism presented as subjects for serious academic investigation. As a matter of fact, the AAR and similar academic guilds have become playgrounds for academic titillation, with papers presented as barely-disguised pornography.

It was not always so. Up until 1964, the group was known as the National Association of Biblical Instructors. But eschewing anything at all having to do with "biblical," the professorial group soon launched itself in a new direction, considering the various manifestations of "religion" as a focus for dispassionate, supposedly objective, and academically respectable research. No sane observer of the goings-on scheduled for San Antonio in November would associate this group with anything formerly called the National Association of Biblical Instructors. If anything, it appears that instruction in perversity is now the order of the day.

Consider, for example, the "Gay Men's Issues in Religion Group." In the call for papers issued for the group, the following statement was offered as direction: "The Gay Men's Issues in Religion Group explores the intersections between the gay male experience and forms of religious discourse and practice. This year, we are particularly interested in receiving proposals for papers and panels on the following topics: Transgenderism, Its Construction and Religious Dimensions; Queer Theory and Its Relevance to the Religious/Spiritual Lives of Gay Men; Queer Latino/A Theologies and Spiritualities; S/M, Submission, and the Spiritual Dimensions of Power. We also see proposals on topics not listed here, and from all religious traditions. Submissions by Latin American scholars are especially encouraged." It would seem that the paper most likely to be accepted for presentation would be something along the lines of "A Latin American Approach to Sadomasochism as a Way of Understanding Queer Theory and Encouraging Transgenderism in All Possible Religious Dimensions." But then, truth is always stranger than fiction.

According to the AAR program, the Gay Men's Issues in Religion Group will "consider various intersections between a particular type of sexual experience/encounter and religious traditions. The sexual experience in question involves some kind of sadomasochistic or bondage/dominance practice (sometimes also referred to as 'leather sexuality'), and while not by any means restricted to gay male experience, it nevertheless offers a particularly potent location for reflecting on gay men's issues in religion." Buckle your seatbelt.

As this group meets, Julianne Buenting of Chicago Theological Seminary will present a paper entitled "Oh, Daddy! God, Dominance/Submission, and Christian Sacramentality and Spirituality." As she explains, "This paper explores

BDSM (bondage/dominance, sadomasochism) as potentially transformative encounter in relation to themes of trust and surrender, suffering and pleasure, self-shattering and self-donation found in Christian sacramentality and mystical spirituality.” No kidding. Later, she advises that a particular focus of her paper will be “the characteristics and role of the dominant (top/master/daddy) as these relate to Christianity’s use of dominant imagery for God.”

In the same session, Timothy R. Koch of New Life Metropolitan Community Church will talk about “Choice, Shame, and Power in the Construction of Sadomasochistic Theologies.” As Mr. Koch explains, “The pattern of sadomasochism involves “the removal of a masochist choices, making it possible for both masochist and sadist to proceed in a spiritually powerful state of relative shamelessness.” His paper will also “explore three episodes where these elements come to the fore: the Garden of Eden; the Crucifixion of Jesus; and the Inquisition.” Did you catch that? The American Academy of Religion is sponsoring a supposedly serious discussion of whether the crucifixion of Jesus is a representation of divine sadomasochism.

Justin Tanis of the Metropolitan Community Church is slated to present a paper entitled “Ecstatic Communion: The Spiritual Dimensions of Leather Sexuality.” According to Mr. Tanis, who is elsewhere identified as a leader in transgender theology, “Spirituality plays a role in the lives of many contemporary leathermen and there is a strong interest in spirituality in segments of the leather community.” He will “look briefly at the ways in which leather is a foundation for personal and spiritual identity formation, creating a lens through which the rest of life is viewed.” There is still time to sign up for the meeting if you care to know more about Mr. Tanis’s belief that individuals have a right “to erotic self determination with other consenting adults,” that would include sadomasochistic practices.

Also attending is Ken Stone from Chicago Theological Seminary, who will present his paper entitled “‘You Seduced Me, You Overpowered Me, and You Prevailed’: Religious Experience and Homoerotic Sadomasochism in Jeremiah.” According to Mr. Stone, “Biblical scholars have recently suggested that the covenant between Israel and Yahweh can be understood in relation to dynamics of sadomasochism.” Really? Mr. Stone intends to look at Jeremiah 20:7-18 as a passage “in which Jeremiah not only accuses Yahweh of overpowering him but, as scholars have long noted, uses the language of sexual seduction to do so.” Rather than considering the passage as the presentation of a symbolic “rape” of Jeremiah, Mr. Stone will “consider whether the presence in this passage of, on the one hand, overpowering and humiliation; and, on the other hand, religious possession by and worship of the one who overpowers, can be construed more usefully as a kind of ritual S/M encounter between the male deity Yahweh and his male devotee.”

While the AAR meets in San Antonio, other of its study groups will be hard at work. A group considering the legacy of Michel Foucault will hear a paper by Geoffrey Rees of the University of Chicago, “Is ‘Sex’ Worth Dying For?” exploring the theological implications of Foucault’s theory of sexuality. According to Mr. Rees, Foucault’s theory of sexuality “specifies a point where contemporary theological discourse of sexuality merits critique.” As he explains, “Appeals to God when focused in ‘sex,’ are attempts to ascribe an absolute status to contingent forms of self-understanding.” Accordingly, Mr. Rees proposes a theology of sexuality that is informed by Foucault’s famous postmodern theory of sexuality, and thus, he is led to question “the finality of any definition of sex identity.” This session is a fitting addition to the work of the Gay Men’s Issues in Religion Group, since Foucault, a devotee of homosexual sadomasochism who died of AIDS, becomes a crossover symbol for both sessions.

While the AAR and its various groups are championing sexual perversity and the legacy of postmodern philosophers like Michel Foucault, the group also makes clear what it understands to be unhealthy sexuality, which is to say Christian morality.

A special session will combine the Men’s Studies in Religion Group and the Childhood Studies in Religion Consultation. The two groups will meet together to consider the theme, “Making of Boys: Religion and the Gender Construction of Boys.” As the organizers announce, the session will examine “the impact of religion and religious practices on boys’ ways of being and behaving and our shared notions of boyhood.” In that session, Susan Ridgely Bales of Carlton College will present, “Training Christian Soldiers: An Analysis of James Dobson’s Approach to ‘Bringing Up Boys’ from 1970 to 2003.” Ms. Bales wants to discover the root of Dobson’s concern about America’s boys, “particularly in terms of their sexuality and their crucial role in the future of Evangelicalism and the nation.” According to her analysis, Dobson’s writings reveal “constant warnings about homosexuality that grow ever louder and over time these warning(s) have been paired with warnings against male violence and alienation.” Ms. Bales states that her intention is to help the group “understand the emphases and desires of Dobson and the other members of Focus on the Family as they search for ways to create Godly families in what they believe is an increasingly secular world.”

Ludger Viefhues of Yale University lacks Ms. Bales' subtlety, presenting a paper entitled "On Grace, Sissies, and Exploding Manholes: Normative Masculinity and the Impossible Theology of Boyhood of Focus on the Family." This paper is not for the faint-hearted. Mr. Viefhues considers Focus on the Family's "rhetorical constructions of two distinct homosexualities" and the group's understanding of boyhood as "being in a permanent crisis mode." In such a mode, "the Christian boy has to learn to navigate in his body the conundrum of agency typical for Christian theologies of grace," argues Mr. Viefhues. The boy "has to be actively engaged as a leader and aggressor in the world and passively submissive toward God." According to Mr. Viefhues, "this means that the boy has to be both masculine and feminine, thereby making his body the landscape in which the tensions of self-power and other-power are played out." Still following?

Susan Ridgely Bales is concerned that Focus on the Family—and evangelical Christians in general—are concerned for creating godly families "in what they believe is an increasingly secular world." If only America's parents could read this year's program of the American Academy of Religion. If America's moms and dads took one quick look at this program, they would hide their sons away from anyone having anything to do with the American Academy of Religion—and for good reason.

This review of the 2004 program for the annual meeting of the AAR serves as a powerful and sobering reminder that the homosexual movement has triumphed in the world of higher education, taking the academy by storm and transforming America's academic culture into an engine for sexual revolution. Writing over ten years ago, Jerry Z. Muller explained that "what was once a private disposition has now become the stuff of public identity and ideology." As he continued, "No doubt the academy has always had its share of distinguished practitioners of sexual and other offenses. But while the practitioners of, say, adultery have not sought openly to proclaim the virtue of seduction or the intrinsic merit of infidelity, the practitioners of what has long been considered at best a disability and at worst an abomination have increasingly banded together to proclaim their practice as praiseworthy, and to demand that others do so as well. What is new is not only the increasing public acknowledgement of homosexuality or the increasing scholarship about homosexuals. What is most important is the rising demand for public recognition and respect for homosexuality as such. There is a growing body of literature by academics who define themselves as homosexuals, and who make homosexual identity into a perspective from which our culture is to be evaluated." What was already true then, is today the reigning reality on America's college and university campuses.

Reviewing last year's AAR meeting and program, my colleague Russell D. Moore commented, "The AAR is not a religious society, but a mission field." Pointing to the AAR's fascination with sexual perversion, he commented: "This is what passes for Christian scholarship these days in the guild. And, just like Athens, there are always 'scholars' willing to stand agog at the newness of it all. But, of course, there's nothing really new here. It's just a return to Canaanite fertility religion—with a vengeance. It's a sad demonstration that where biblical authority is discarded, we are left for our increasingly distorted passions to govern us instead."

What was increasingly distorted then is even more distorted now. Where will all this end? Robert A. J. Gagnon of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary asks: "One wonders what is next for the Gay Men's group at AAR: the promotion of incest, pedosexuality, and bestiality? There is certainly little or nothing in the presenters' theology that would lead away from such ultimate absurdities. There is no understanding anywhere here of the notion of structural prerequisites to sexual relationships. Eroticism and sexual intercourse is nothing more than greater intimacy. The conclusion following from the premise is inevitable: then intimacy with one's parents and children should be ever open to the 'logical' progression of sexual intimacy. For sexual intimacy is for the presenters merely more love. Spread it around."

The world of theological education is now firmly divided between confessional institutions that stand without apology for historic Christianity, and the greater portion of the academy that includes theological seminaries, divinity schools, and university religion departments that are running head over heels toward an open embrace of absolute moral relativism and the celebration of unfettered sexual perversity. Need proof? Just look at this year's program for the American Academy of Religion. Read it and weep.

