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*A view from Val des Monts*

*Gatineau Monde lecture series*

# Is the Bible immoral?

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The Immoral Bible, that was the title of the talk given by Normand Rousseau to Gatineau Monde on November 12 at the Maison du citoyen. It's also the title of one of his books. Rousseau, who has a master's degree in religious science, describes himself as "pure laine" with a Catholic education.

Rousseau said he wrote his book because he was unable to find any others that exposed the Bible's immorality. As an example, he cited a passage in the Old Testament where the Law of Moses calls for homosexuals (an "abomination") to be stoned to death. When he asked a rabbi if it is right to stone people to death, the rabbi responded in shock. Yet, we are told that God inspired the Law of Moses. We therefore have the interesting situation where Jews, Muslims, and Christians, who all defer to the Law of Moses, supposedly, find themselves today in opposition to the Bible. He also called attention to the Book of Joshua, wherein Joshua's army conquers various peoples and slaughters them all.

According to Rousseau, the major problem with the Bible comes from its canonization, indicating that it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Hence, he argued, the work as a whole is sacred—no picking and choosing. Here he mistakes the position of the Roman Catholic Church. In addition to the Bible, the church also relies on its history, revelation, and tradition. By contrast, during the Reformation Martin Luther stuck with the Bible as the literal word of God. Protestants have by and large changed to greater flexibility, and the wiggle room that the Catholic Church gave itself moved it beyond the literalism of Martin Luther. Since, it has been able to make peace with Galileo and even Darwin.

Then there is the matter of equality of the sexes, which is not supported by the Bible and slavery which is. Rousseau cited 1 Peter 18, where servants are told to be submissive to their masters, even if beaten. And the tenth of the Ten Commandments directs us not to covet a neighbor's slave. When, in 1839, Pope Gregory XVI condemned slavery, he was, Rousseau argued, condemning the Bible! Rousseau acknowledged that there are anti-slavery passages in the Bible but argues that the overwhelm-

ing thrust is in favor.

He also took on the Qu'ran, which calls for adulterers to be stoned to death and supports slavery for women and children. He noted that Mohammed had had 600 Jews beheaded in one day.

So what can we make of Rousseau's position? The key to a critique of it is found in his reference to the major thrust on slavery. In fact, the Bible is not a single book. It is the work of many people over many centuries. They have different points of view, sometimes completely in opposition to one another.

Let's look at some examples. The story of Abraham and the arrested sacrifice of Isaac conveys the message that human sacrifice is forbidden. The practice was not unknown to the Hebrews, as it was common among their Canaanite neighbors. Yet, later in the Book of Judges, we come to the story of Jephthah, who sacrificed his daughter in payment to God for a military victory.

Another example is the conflict between Leviticus and the Book of Ruth. The dietary laws of Leviticus made it difficult for the Hebrews to share hospitality with others. The goal was to keep them separated from other nations. By contrast, Ruth was a gentile, and when her Hebrew husband left her a widow, she declares, "Your people will be my people and your God shall be my God." And Ruth was an ancestor of King David.

To put the matter simply, yes, you can find immorality in the Bible. You can also find sublime passages. It all depends on the particular author.

While the Qu'ran is different from the Bible in that it is the work of one man, there are passages such as those that Rousseau cited, but there are others. Mohammed charges the faithful that to kill one innocent person is as reprehensible as killing the whole human race. And as for tolerance, "Your religion for you and mine for me." Among Muslims, those who interpret the Qu'ran in a more gentle fashion claim the pertinence of the whole work, while others who take a hard line argue that the later surahs cancel out earlier ones.

Essentially, Rousseau cherry-picks and fails to take into account the diversity especially of the Bible.