

Todd's Vagina Monologue **The Religious Hatred of Women**

November 29, 2009

By

Todd F. Eklof

I'll begin with a rhetorical question; do you think it's fair to summarize religion as the institutionalized hatred of girls and women? Those organizations we classify as religions often do seem to be the institutionalization of a lot of humanity's worst inclinations, like greed, oppression, and ignorance. *Religion* itself is also a huge umbrella term and it would seem to be a mistake to blanket everything in its class as the same. I do consider Unitarian Universalism a religion, and would describe myself as a deeply religious person, yet I don't consider either to be overtly sexist. Still, generally speaking, I wonder if it's accurate to characterize most religion as misogynistic and sexist? Or let me put it more directly, does religion exist to justify the oppression of women? Is that what it's really all about?

From the outset I should admit that in framing the conversation this way I'm setting up a bit of a false dilemma, asking us to consider *either this or that*, either religion is sexist or it is not. My own exploration of religion, however, has led me to view it as something that exists between two poles, between what we might call *functional religion* and *dysfunctional religion*. In brief, dysfunctional religion is that which leads us to reject the reality before us by justifying our delusions, and functional religion is that which makes us more aware of reality by awakening us from our delusional states of mind. In the West, dysfunctional religion makes us ashamed of our bodies, desires, and senses, and sees the world, which is the only reality we have, as something that is fallen, sinful, and, therefore, untrustworthy. Stay away from the world. It's no good. God is going to destroy it. In the East, dysfunctional religion also rejects the world by considering it all an illusion that causes us to suffer by clinging to it. The more detached we become from the world and our feelings about it, the healthier, they suggest, we become. Functional religion, by contrast, is represented in the West by those creation type of spiritualities that tell us the world is good because it reflects the creator and that every person, indeed, every creature, is made in the image of God. "Every creature is a word of God and a book about God," said Meister Eckhart. And in the East, functional religion is represented by those traditions and practices that move us toward more enlightenment, awakening, and greater awareness of this world.

So, where women are concerned, functional religion is that which recognizes them as real people deserving of equal rights, and dysfunctional religion is that which sees them as less-than-human-second-class-citizens. Unfortunately, throughout history and to this day, there seems to be a lot more dysfunctional religion going on when it comes to the treatment of women. Dysfunctional religion enables us to justify what we know in our hearts to be evil by attributing our unjust behavior to the will of God. I attended a wedding many years ago, for example, during which the Southern Baptist minister officiating told the bride that she must submit to the will of her new husband because that's what the Bible says. "I didn't write it," he seemed to apologize, "If I had

written it, it might say something different, but you must submit to your husband because that's what God commands." The fact that he felt a need to incredulously apologize for this instruction tells me he knew, somewhere in his heart, that what he was saying was bullshit—that it didn't jive with reality—yet he justified his delusion by blaming it on God anyway.

In *The Chalice and the Blade*, feminist historian, Riane Eisler actually has a chapter called, "Reality Stood on its Head," in which she discusses this absurd and obscene attempt by patriarchal religion to all but deny the existence of women by segregating them and denying their equality. "Why," she asks, "would anyone try to deny the most powerful and obvious of human relationships?"¹ She goes on to cite an example from *Oresteia*, the famous Greek Drama in which Orestes is on trial for the murder of his own mother. In the end he is acquitted after Apollo comes to his defense by arguing that, "The mother is no parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the new planted seed that grows."² As proof that woman is but a human incubator, this dominator god of war, presents Athena, the daughter of Zeus who was born out of his head. "There is no mother anywhere who gave me birth..."³ she decried. And so, since Apollo successfully proved a child is not related to its mother, Orestes was acquitted on the grounds that he could not have killed his mother since he didn't have one to kill. The play ends with the chorus singing, "Gods of the younger generation, you have ridden down the laws of the elder time, torn them out of my hands..."⁴

The "laws of the elder time," to which they refer, are those more ancient beliefs in which women were honored and revered, at least as equals, who had the mysterious power to create life from within themselves. But this is not the first time we've seen "reality stood on its head." In the Abrahamic creation story, common to three major world religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—Woman is born of Man, taken from his side and fashioned out of his rib. In this sense, mythology does what reality cannot by making the male the originator of life. And to this day, our children reflect this bias by carrying the names of their father's, not their mother's. And those children, especially sons, who don't have their father's names, have traditionally been treated despicably. In Christianity, in particular, Jesus, the Son of God, was born from a woman whose vagina had never been penetrated, which is not unlike the story of Buddha's birth, who is said to have come out of his mother's belly button rather than through her vagina. The vagina is seen as something impure that God's cannot pass through, and women are cursed for having one. Instead of being praised, as in the "elder time," for birthing life, they are blamed instead, as in the examples of Eve and Pandora, for birthing only evil into the world.

¹ Eisler, Riane, *The Chalice and the Blade*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1987, 1995, p. 78.

² Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1953, p. 158.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

Tragically these delusional beliefs have not only caused so many to deny reality, they have also shaped reality in a way that is especially cruel and unjust to girls and women. In many Hindu countries, women can only become completely human through marriage, and should a woman's husband die before her, she is considered half-human, and may be burned with him on the funeral pyre, or else live out the remainder of her days as an untouchable, forced to survive through prostitution or begging.

Just last week I had my first occasion to be present inside an Islamic Mosque during prayers. I was astounded to discover, upon my arrival, that there were two separate entrances, one for men, and one for women, along with separate stairwells to the different floors. Every room was divided by 8 foot high patricians so that the men and women could never see each other, and the women, of course, had to keep their heads covered regardless. No matter how often I hear this practice explained as a form of respect, even by some of those women forced, in some cases, to cover all but their eyes in public, I cannot escape the fact that the universal human expression of shame is to hide our faces. Indeed, the word sham is the very root of the word shame, that is, the very name of the veil by which women cover their faces is a symbol of shame.

Far worse than this segregation and shame, however, is the genital mutilation of women around the world in the name of religion. Although it is now outlawed in many countries, Amnesty International estimates about 2 million girls in 28 countries have their sex organs mutilated every year in the name of religion. This abuse, in the name of God, justified as righteousness, is but one extreme way in which our misogynistic religions have terrorized and mistreated women for thousands of years.

But before we start thinking how much better we are here than in some of those barbaric Muslim countries, keep in mind that it wasn't until well within many of our own lifetimes, in 1976, the Bicentennial of our supposed freedom, that the first law making it illegal for husbands to rape their wives was passed in Nebraska. And it took another two years, in 1978, before it became illegal for employers to discriminate against pregnant women. And if you don't think we make our women cover up their faces in public, why are there so many successful makeup companies around? You turn on the TV or go to the movies and there's man on man violence everywhere, even in cartoons and children's stories, but it takes Janet Jacket flashing her breast on TV for a split second to get congress to levy fines and change laws. Today there are also many places where it is still considered obscene, if not illegal, for a mother to do what is most natural and beautiful, nurse her hungry child. And many women are still fighting for equal pay and equal opportunities in the workplace. Some we may not think our society segregates, shames, or mutilates our females, but it still manages to severe many of them from the full benefits of our society in more subtle fashion.

And there are still many who would justify this discrimination in the name of religion. Just a few years ago, in 1998, for example, the Southern Baptist Convention, representing 16 million Americans, adopted a resolution requiring women to "graciously submit" to their husbands, and, a year later, affirmed their policy prohibiting women from becoming ministers. This idea that women ought to remain subservient to men is based

upon a passage attributed to the Apostle Paul stating that, "Wives should be subject to their husbands as to the Lord, since as Christ is head of the Church and saves the whole body, so is a husband the head of his wife; and as the Church is subject to Christ, so should wives be to their husbands, in everything."⁵ And the Southern Baptist aren't alone in this interpretation. According to his seminal work, *Catholicism*, Richard McBrien explains the sacrament of marriage as, "The sacrament by which a man and a woman are united for life in a covenantal relationship modeled on the union of Christ and the Church."⁶

Sadly, what neither the Southern Baptist nor Catholics, nor many others understand, is that the letter to the Ephesians, upon which this "model" of marriage is based, is one of half a dozen letters falsely attributed to Paul, and was actually an effort to negate what Paul had authentically stated in his letter to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, *male nor female*, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."⁷ No matter what else you might think of Paul, given that he is the true founder of Christianity, and he seems to have completely dismissed the genuinely transformative teachings of Jesus, his personal vision of a religion of equals was extraordinarily profound. In fact, some of his followers took this instruction so seriously that they began cross-dressing, or, more precisely, cross-hairdoing. Some men were wearing their hair like women, and women like men, which sparked a bit of controversy among the early church. Yes, some of the first drag shows took place in the early Christian churches. So this is the problem when people actually begin looking at each other as equals, they become equals, and those who wish to maintain the dominator system of society must counter with religions that convince us it is our duty to segregate and separate ourselves from our others because they are a different gender, or a different color, or from a different country, or have different beliefs, or a different lifestyle or sexuality.

You see, if we can convince ourselves that God is behaving a certain way, then we are justified in behaving the same way. The ancient Aryans, for instance, believed their god Indra roamed about the heavens in his war chariot raiding the other gods, which gave them permission to actually roam about the countryside raiding other villages. Likewise, if God is seen as a male dominator, as a patriarchal authoritarian, then we are justified in fashioning a patriarchal society.

Yet, there is something in each of us, that knows better, just as the Baptist minister knew what he was saying to the young bride was BS. We have in us the law of the heart and flesh that lets us know the difference between right and wrong based solely upon our own experience of pain and pleasure. And as we develop our social skills we naturally seek the same for those around us, good things and experiences, which is the basis of the universal Golden Rule. But it is difficult to follow this law of the flesh when our religions counter our innate feelings of mutuality and kindness by telling us our flesh is sinful, our hearts are impure, and our bodies are shameful, convincing us to give up our

⁵ Ephesians 5:22-23

⁶ McBrien, Richard P., *Catholicism*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1994, p. 1244.

⁷ Galatians 3:28

innate law, the law of the heart, in favor of man made stone cold laws. Indeed, the prophet Ezekiel understood the injustice of such justification when he wrote, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and it is by this spirit that you will know my precepts and follow my commands."⁸

And so the flesh, through our senses, shows us the truth of what is right before us, no matter how much our religions seek to stand reality on its head. And the reality is that women are our mothers, and our sisters, and our partners, and friends, and, especially our equals no matter what our gender. No matter how many ridiculous myths there are about virgin births or bellybutton Buddhas, or pompous preachers telling us God, who just so happens to be a male, has put men over women, we know, in our hearts, what, as Micah, another Hebrew prophet declared, is right, "but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your religion."⁹ Yet, I cannot help but be just a little proud to be part of a liberal religious faith that was the first denomination to ordain a woman, Olympia Brown, just prior to the start of the Civil War. And today fifty-percent of our pulpits are held by women ministers, and nearly sixty-percent of our seminary students are female. Our faith has proven, despite human history, that it is possible for religion to be truly functional by bringing us back to the reality before us, that we are all created equal.

⁸ Ezekiel 36:26-27.

⁹ Micah 6:8.