

Chapter 15. Women.

*A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.*¹ The Bible

*And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, and let them wear their head-coverings over their bosoms, and not display their ornaments except to their husbands or their fathers . . . and let them not strike their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may be known.*² The Koran

The role of women in modern society is still evolving. In 1920, the United States amended the Constitution giving women the right to vote. In 1964, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race. In 1965 a Supreme Court decision legalized birth control for married couples in all states and seven years later the right was extended to unmarried couples.³ In 1972 Congress adopted Title IX which prohibits sex discrimination in education, including athletics, resulting in a surge in women's sports. The first female U.S. Supreme Court Justice was appointed in 1981. Hilary Clinton was a leading presidential candidate in 2008.⁴ Although women have not yet achieved full equality, their right to do so is now generally accepted.

Religion, with its scriptures written by men and fixed in time, lags far behind the social changes in the role of women. The most shocking examples of inequality come from Muslim countries. In America's ally, Saudi Arabia, Islam is the official religion and women suffer. Women are effectively treated as minors and need the permission of a male relative to access the limited rights available.⁵ Men are allowed to have multiple spouses, women are not. Women are not allowed to drive or vote. Restrictive costumes are required for women who go out in public. Women are limited in their access to public places, their opportunity for education or employment, and their ability to travel. Violence against women and spousal abuse is common.⁶

In other Muslim countries, women are virtual slaves. Burqas are required, education is denied, child marriage accepted, and honor killings conducted. A 2008 movie, *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, shows the horror that some Muslim women face. Based on a true story, it tells of an Iranian woman whose husband wants to marry a 14-year-old and no longer wants to support her. So the husband falsely accuses his wife of adultery and villagers dutifully bury her waist deep in dirt and stone her to death. Her father, husband and two sons participate in

the stoning.⁷ It is hard to see the religious fundamentalism described in that movie being much more advanced than the Stone Age.

With Stone Age logic, leading Iranian cleric Hojatoleslam Kazim Sadeghi⁸ recently claimed, “Many women who do not dress modestly lead young men astray, corrupt their chastity, and spread adultery in society, which increases earthquakes.”⁹ The statement would be laughable if he were not a high-ranking Muslim leader in a 98% Muslim country with more than 67 million inhabitants.¹⁰

In the brutal world of the primitive past, men succeeded in dominating women through force, but in the modern world of tools, technology and information, women can stand shoulder to shoulder with men. It is crazy to allow a primitive ethic and ancient texts to dictate sex roles in the modern world. Yet religion drags ancient roles and superstitions forward and applies them today.

Look at any photo of the streets in Muslim countries. They are crowded with men, women are absent. One must wonder, where are the women and do they want to be there? The photo is even more troubling when it comes from Iraq or Afghanistan where U.S. tax dollars prop up the government. American taxpayers are paying for regimes that subjugate women. The religiously justified dominance of Muslim men over women troubles most any Western person who observes it, even Western religionists. There is little disagreement among Americans that Muslim women lack equality. However, there is little recognition that the dominant religion in America contains similar ancient myths. The Bible is full of quotes relegating women to second-class status.

Although some religious sects accord women respect on par with that of general American society, you do not need to look very far to find a group that does not. The Catholic Church claims about 25% of Americans (more than 58 million people) as members.¹¹ But the Catholic church resolutely refuses to allow women to take leadership roles. Only men can become priests and they are referred to as “Father.” Catholic doctrine also denies members the right to birth control. Birth control was key to allowing sexually active heterosexual women to time their families or choose not have a family at all. Birth control has been called a primary cause of the “sexual revolution” of last century and similarly is a major factor in women stepping successfully into the workplace and achieving closer parity with men.

The Bible has many negative statements about women, for example:

*A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.*¹²

* * *

To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."¹³

* * *

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.¹⁴

It is not just Muslims and Christians who are unfair to women. Traditional Judaism sees women who are menstruating as impure and forbids contact with their spouses for seven days thereafter. The same text is part of the Old Testament of the Christian Bible:

When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening.

Anything she lies on during her period will be unclean, and anything she sits on will be unclean. Whoever touches her bed must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he will be unclean till evening. Whoever touches anything she sits on must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he will be unclean till evening. Whether it is the bed or anything she was sitting on, when anyone touches it, he will be unclean till evening.

If a man lies with her and her monthly flow touches him, he will be unclean for seven days; any bed he lies on will be unclean.

When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period or has a discharge that continues beyond her period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge, just as in the days of her period. Any bed she lies on while her discharge continues will be unclean, as is her bed during her monthly period, and anything she sits on will be unclean, as during her period. Whoever touches them will be unclean; he must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he will be unclean till evening.

When she is cleansed from her discharge, she must count off seven days, and after that she will be ceremonially clean. On the eighth day she must take two

*doves or two young pigeons and bring them to the priest at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. The priest is to sacrifice one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering. In this way he will make atonement for her before the LORD for the uncleanness of her discharge.*¹⁵

The rules about menstruating women are further evidence that the scriptures are written by men and fixed in time. Even most of the religionists who believe the scriptures are the “inerrant word of god” disregard these requirements. However, some traditionalists still follow the strictures. An Israeli-based women’s health guide instructs:

*A woman enters the ritual status of niddah when she experiences uterine bleeding not due to injury. . . . Jewish law forbids all physical contact (not only intercourse) between a husband and wife while she is niddah. Certain other behaviors are forbidden as well—for example: passing objects to each other, sitting on the same surface, sleeping in the same bed, eating from the same plate, and seeing each other undressed.*¹⁶

The men who wrote the scriptures had limited understanding of menstruation and responded superstitiously. For even some to allow these superstitions to hold sway in modern times simply because they are in the religionists’ books of myths is unjustifiable.

As with so many other issues, religionists are not satisfied with keeping their superstitions to themselves. They use their position of power to apply their rules to everyone. An example of this is the defeat of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The Equal Rights Amendment, which finally passed through both houses of Congress in 1972, provided forthrightly, “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.”¹⁷ Initially, the Amendment had broad public support. The Amendment needed 38 States to ratify it to become part of the Constitution. The original deadline of seven years was extended to ten, but the time passed with only 35 States ratifying the Amendment.¹⁸ The States which did not ratify the amendment cluster around the “Bible belt” of the South, with the addition of the heavily Mormon¹⁹ western states of Utah, Arizona and Nevada.²⁰

A leading opponent of the Equal Rights Amendment was religionist Phyllis Schlafly, whose Eagle Forum notes, “We support the sanctity of human life as a gift from our Creator, as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence” and then boasts, “Eagle Forum successfully led the ten-year battle to defeat the misnamed Equal Rights Amendment with its hidden agenda of tax-funded abortions and same-sex marriages.”²¹ The Mormon Church was key to

defeating the Equal Rights Amendment in Utah, as well as supporting anti-Amendment activities in Florida, Nevada, North and South Carolina, Missouri, Illinois and Arizona.²² Christian groups like the “Concerned Women of America” also worked hard to defeat the Amendment.²³ Conservative Catholics joined the opposition because of their fear the Amendment would encourage abortion.²⁴ Jumping aboard, Pat Robertson, Former Republican presidential candidate and founder and then President of the Christian Coalition, said unbelievably, “The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.”²⁵ Robertson’s statement would qualify as comedy if he were not at the time President of the 2.5 million strong Christian Coalition,²⁶ founder and Chairman of the Christian Broadcasting Network,²⁷ and then as now, host²⁸ of TV’s “The 700 Club,” which is viewable in 95% of the television markets in the United States,²⁹ and seen by as many as 200 million people a year worldwide.³⁰ With statistics like these in mind, Robertson’s statements are terrifying.

Just as with the defeat of gay marriage in California in 2008, a coalition of conservative Christians and Mormons used time, money and manpower to change a generally positive public opinion into a negative one. Equal Rights Amendment opponents claimed it would force women into military combat, require recognition of gay marriage and even result in the sexes having to share the same bathroom.³¹ The conservative religious coalition succeeded and the Amendment died.

Looking at the most and least religious states, their relationship to the Equal Rights Amendment is predictable: the eight most religious did not ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, while the eight least religious did.

State	Religion Ranking	Ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment
Mississippi	1	No
Alabama	2	No
South Carolina	3	No
Tennessee	4	No ³²
Louisiana	5	No
Arkansas	6	No
Georgia	7	No
North Carolina	8	No
Vermont	50	Yes
New Hampshire	49	Yes
Maine	48	Yes
Massachusetts	47	Yes
Alaska	46	Yes
Washington	46	Yes
Oregon	45	Yes
Rhode Island	44	Yes

The driving force behind the death of the Equal Rights Amendment was religion. Absent religion, what organized group had the power to change the public's support for equality? Absent religion, what basis is there for failing to recognize women as full, equal, valuable human beings?

Religionists have a problem. If they are true to their scriptures, women are not equal. If they accept that women should be equal, they are ignoring their scriptures, just like they ignore the scriptural endorsement of slavery. This may offer a wedge into religionists' beliefs. If they believe women should be equal and chuck their scriptures, where else do their scriptures fail? Are they against slavery? Are they for equal rights for gays? Do they believe in evolution? If the scriptures are wrong in so many places, we can justifiably ask why they do not dump the whole thing and become atheists.

Religious scriptures, written by men and fixed in time, have not kept pace with the changes in women's roles in modern society. Allowing ancient texts to dictate the treatment of more than one-half of the world's population is unjustifiable and wrong.³³ The subjugation of women is a major problem with religion.

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33. On a personal note, I wonder if the men who subjugate women had mothers? Perhaps this is colored by my respect for my mother, but I still wonder. For example, Catholic priests may not know women as wives and lovers, but they all had mothers. How can they look their mothers in the eye and say that women are less valuable than men? I wonder even more about Muslims in countries where women are treated like property. How can a Muslim man tell his mother that her testimony in court is only worth half that of a man? How can he subject a woman to violence and abuse and still face his mother? Does religion and tradition have a stronger hold on these men than respect for the woman that bore them? I suppose the answer is sadly, yes.