

Religions Respond to Violence against Women

September 30 2013

Introduction



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Welcome to this discussion. The changing roles of women and men, and thus their relationships, are a leading issue for our era. New roles for women are part of the courage to hope for a better future where the ideals of equality among all peoples and human dignity are truly lived.

These are not simple issues because they involve profound changes in many traditions. They affect every human being from the time they awake until they sleep. They affect the shape and behavior of families, the foundation of society. I would argue that relations between men and women involve more energy, more ethical challenges, more demands than any other human relationship. Thus they are central to religious beliefs, traditions, behavior, and leadership.

In the work that the Berkely Center at Georgetown and the World Faiths Development Dialogue have done over eight years on religion and development, one issue has emerged more than any other. It is how religious institutions address the changing roles of women and men. Religious institutions tend to describe themselves as guardians, protectors of women. Feminism is often a bad word, suggesting wanton values and the breakdown of families. Yet many, from within and outside religious communities, paint a different picture. That picture involves patriarchy, where men dominate, isolation of women, denigration of women's ideas and priorities, and assumptions of male authority. No other issue so perturbs the appreciation of what religious traditions have to offer in the world.

Violence against women is a central part of this troubling scene. Violence against women is probably as ancient as any other human practice. But something is very new. We know far more about it. And it may be happening in forms and on a scale hitherto unknown. A third of women worldwide report some form of domestic violence. Worse, as many as half have never spoken of it. Shame and expectations drive a terrible silence. We know also about the horrors of violence against women in war, rape as a tool of conflict. Trafficking in women is a large, probably growing dimension of globalization. Violence in communities, harassment and far worse, are all too common. The marriage of children, keeping girls out of school, are other forms of violence. Women are an all too common face of poverty.

We can and should expect that religious communities would be at the very forefront of contesting and combating these trends, the more so as we know what is happening. In some cases this is happening. In many others it is not. Silence, discomfort, and acceptance are too common perceptions of how religious traditions approach violence against women. We can work to change that picture.

This discussion today is an opportunity to explore what is being done (and what is not), the issues that lie behind, and new ideas for action.

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When male religious representatives address the question of the treatment of women within their Traditions, they usually indulge in apologetics. This indeed has its place and I will do likewise.

However what must come before apologetics, is an apology; and I have no standing to do so on behalf of any Tradition other than my own. Therefore allow me to open with a request first and foremost for the forgiveness of our Creator for my own community's failures to accord women the fullness of the Divine Image in which they are created. We have sinned against women and in doing so we have sinned against God. And to the degree that there is still enormous violence against women, we continue the sins of the Fathers from one generation to another.

However I now turn to apologetics, not only to place this sad story in context; but also to derive the values that our self-same Tradition embodies and which should direct and inspire us concerning the dignity of women.

Most religions and certainly the Abrahamic religions were born in Patriarchal settings in which women were no more than male chattels. While the Biblical narrative has its problematic texts concerning the status of women; it represents an enormous stride on the journey to afford women their God-given dignity. This is not only to be seen in the significant role of the Matriarchs and female prophets; but perhaps even more in legislation to guarantee women's rights, probably for the very first time.

Above all the Biblical teaching that every person is created in the Divine Image is of the utmost significance. The great sage of the Mishnah, Ben Azzai - two thousand years ago, emphasized this as the most important principle in the Bible. But in doing so, he did not refer to the first and earlier references to the creation of the human person in the Genesis story, but rather to the opening verses of the fifth chapter of Genesis:

"This is the book of the generations of Adam in the day that God created Adam; in the image of God He made him. Male and female He created them and called their name Adam on the day He created them."

These verses highlight the fact that "Adam" is both male and female. This is in keeping with the midrashic reading that translates the Hebrew word "zela", not as a "rib" but as a (complete) "side" (similarly the Biblical specifications for the construction of the Sanctuary in Exodus (chapter 26) use the word "zela" to mean a complete side of the Sanctuary.)

Ben Azzai continues :-

“Lest you say because I was despised, let my fellow be despised with me; because I was cursed, let my fellow be cursed with me”

Adds the sage Rabbi Tanhumah:

“ if you do so; know who it is whom you despise, for in the image of God He created (Adam)”

Accordingly any affront against the dignity of any human person, male or female, is in effect a form of blasphemy against God.

The aforementioned statement of Ben Azzai takes place in a discussion with his contemporary Rabbi Akiva who actually mentions Leviticus 19:18 - “Love your neighbor as yourself” - as the most important principle in the Torah.

We may say that Ben Azzai appears to have been concerned not only of the possible narrow interpretation of the term “neighbor” ; but as we have seen, in particular the danger of allowing one’s subjective experiences to be the criteria for moral judgment. The principle of the Divine Image of the human person transcends all.

Indeed although he does not refer to the concept directly in this discussion, that same Rabbi Akiva is precisely the sage of the Mishnah - more than any other - who emphasizes time and again this very principle of the Divine Image; of inalienable human dignity, which he takes it to its ultimate conclusion.

The Mishnah (Bava Kama 8:6) tells a story of how a man played a prank on a woman of easy virtue and disheveled her hair in public. (In ancient Israel, modest women had their hair braided and it was considered disreputable to go in public with one’s hair loose.) The woman brought a complaint to Rabbi Akiva who fined the man four hundred zuz (a very large sum of money at that time) for the humiliation he caused. The man asked for time to pay the find which Akiva granted and then he set up a trap for the woman. As she was coming out of her courtyard into the public thoroughfare, he broke a jug of valuable oil in front of her.

(This was oil for anointing and might be compared in our times to valuable perfumed body lotion or hair conditioner. The woman was clearly horrified by this waste.) She loosened her hair and scooped up the oil spreading it on her head. The man had brought witnesses to this and took them along with him to Rabbi Akiva.

“Rabbi” he said “to such a one must I pay four hundred zuz ?”

Akiva replied “you have made no point at all. When a person injures himself, he is not liable to punishment, even though he had no right to do so. (However) when others hurt him, they are liable. (Similarly) when a person cuts down his own (fruit) trees, he is not liable to punishment, even though he had no right to do so. When others cut down his (fruit) trees, they are liable.”

Not only regardless of how one has been treated; but even regardless of how one has treated oneself; human dignity is a sacrosanct value.

Not only is violence against anyone, other than in self-defense , prohibited; our sages teach that he who raises his hand (to hit) another is considered a wicked person (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 58b)

Moreover the Torah teaches us that God has special love for the vulnerable; and the injunction of Imitatio Dei, the emulation of the Divine qualities, requires us to behave accordingly.

In the words of the sage Abba Shaul (Mechilta, Canticles 3):-

“Just as He is merciful and compassionate; so you must be merciful and compassionate.”

Furthermore, the sages of the Midrash comment on Psalm 68 v. 2 “Let the Lord arise and scatter His enemies and may those that hate Him flee before Him” :-
“this is one of five times (in the book of Psalms) that David calls on God to arise. But we do not find that God responds to him! When does God arise? (It says in Psalm 12 v 6) “for the plunder of the poor and the cry of the indigent, now will I arise, says the Lord....”.

Our sages are telling us here that even one who is God’s elected cannot assume that God automatically responds to his call.

This is reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln’s comment when he was asked if God was on the side of the Northern states in the American Civil War; and he is reputed to have replied “what is important is whether we are on God’s side !”

The midrash tell us that we are on “God’s side” when we “rise up” for the needy, for the marginalized and the vulnerable.

Violence against women and especially the terrible slave trade and trafficking in women is an outrageous stain on humanity at large. It is a humiliation for our religions that teach the principle of God-given human dignity; and serves as a challenge for us all to do more to protect and advance the wellbeing and status of women in our societies and our religious communities in particular.

<http://www.santegidio.org/pageID/4393/PROGRAMME.html>