

THE BIBLICAL LITERALIST/INERRANTIST WAR ON WOMEN

“And if the Democrats want to insult the women of America by making them believe that they are helpless without Uncle Sugar coming in and providing for them a prescription each month for birth control, because they cannot control their libido or their reproductive system without the help of the government, then so be it!” – former Arkansas Governor and 2008 Presidential Candidate Mike Huckabee attacking those who accuse Republicans of engaging in a “war on women” at a meeting of the Republican National Committee 1/23/2014

The Church of Freethought does not involve itself in partisan politics. But political struggles between and within political parties are often fueled by religious issues and, in particular, issues that are styled or claimed to be matters of morality. The above comment by a prominent politician and Southern Baptist minister, was intended to respond to charges that his party is engaged in a “war on women” because of its aggressive efforts against abortion rights and opposition to the new health care law’s requirement that medical insurance cover contraception. Unfortunately, his intentions were thwarted by his own ignorance and underlying wrong-headed ideas that show that he is part of a kind of “war on women.”

Part of the factual context is that “birth control” is a lot of things. It can be condoms and spermicides sold over-the-counter or it can be prescription medications and devices. All can be used for “birth control.” Some are also useful in protecting against sexually-transmitted diseases including HIV. Others can be used to treat disorders of menstruation and even neurological problems that have nothing at all to do with sex or reproduction. And all of them – even the over-the-counter products – come with additional implications for health. Even when used solely for contraception, the spacing of children can improve the health of mothers and their children. For these reasons and others, the Institute of Medicine, in a July 2011 report, recommended coverage of contraception under the new law.

But Huckabee’s understanding of “birth control” is different. He explicitly links it to the libido of women. In defending himself after his initial remarks he even says this outright, asking

“without [libido] ... would there be a demand for birth control?” The clear implication is that if women would not have sex then they would not need contraception. So “abstinence only” is not just for teenagers according to Mr. Huckabee, but for everyone. Yet the practical effect of such an idea is that women are made responsible for the control, not just of their own libido, but that of their partner’s, even if contraception had only to do with preventing pregnancy.

Here is the unspoken connection to Christianity’s historical and traditional view of women as temptations to sin. And this grows out of the Christian doctrine of “Original Sin.” Mr. Huckabee can hardly be unaware of this. It is rooted in the biblical Genesis story in which the serpent first induces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit who then prevails upon Adam to do so. This is referred to by Paul when he famously recommended that women “be in silence” which he justified by saying that “Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.” In the many centuries since, the most prominent and influential Christian theologians continued to build upon this misogyny:

“[of women] the very consciousness of their own nature must evoke feelings of shame.” – Clement of Alexandria (c 150-215)

“[speaking to women] And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? ... You are the devil’s gateway: ... you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account

of your desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die.” – Origen (185-254)

“I don't see what sort of help woman was created to provide man with, if one excludes the purpose of procreation.” – St. Augustine (354-430)

“females ... need greater care precisely because of their ready inclination to sin. ... the eye of woman touches and disturbs our soul, and not only the eye of the unbridled woman, but that of the decent one as well.” – St. John Chrysostom (347-407)

“Woman is less qualified for moral behavior. ... Woman knows nothing of fidelity. ... Woman is a misbegotten man and has a faulty and defective nature in comparison with his. ... one must be on one's guard with every woman, as if she were a poisonous snake and the horned devil. ... Her feelings drive woman toward every evil, just as reason impels man toward all good.” – Albertus Magnus (1193-1280)

“Woman is defective and misbegotten ... woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates ... The reliability of a person's evidence is weakened, ... owing either to a defect in the reason, as in the case of children, imbeciles and women.” – Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

“Eve spoilt all, when she persuaded [Adam] to set himself above God's will. 'Tis you women, with your tricks and artifices, that lead men into error.” – Martin Luther (1483-1546)

“Woman is more guilty than man, because she was seduced by Satan, and so diverted her husband from obedience to God ... This is reason enough why today she is placed below and that she bears within her ignominy and shame.” – John Calvin (1509-1564)

“Imagine the people who believe such things and who are not ashamed to ignore, totally, all the patient findings of thinking minds through all the centuries since the Bible was written. And it is these ignorant people, the most uneducated, the most unimaginative, the most unthinking among us, who would make themselves the guides and leaders of us all; who would force their feeble and childish beliefs on us; who would invade our schools and libraries and homes. I personally resent it bitterly.”

Isaac Asimov (1920-1992)

These ideas are not openly expressed by many Christians today. But they were taken very seriously by all Christians for a very long time and they remain an important legacy today. It is largely on this basis that the Catholic Church still does not allow women to be ordained as priests. For more “fundamentalist” and “biblical inerrantist” Christians, such ideas pose the same difficulties that biblical cosmology did for the Vatican in the time of Galileo. The “war on women” grows directly out of these once widely-accepted views and attitudes as they have come into collision with progress on the rights of women and gender equality. This is what Mr. Huckabee and the political party controlled by his co-religionists are up against, not political business-as-usual in their struggle against their opponents.

Interestingly, when he was the Governor of Arkansas in 2005, Mr. Huckabee signed into law a measure requiring the inclusion of contraception in insurance prescription drug coverage. Perhaps Mr. Huckabee now wants to be seen as supporting specifically Catholic theology even though Protestants generally have no doctrinal opposition to contraception. And less than 7% of people in Arkansas are Catholic. On the other hand, in January of 2008 Mr. Huckabee famously said that:

“ ... it's a lot easier to change the Constitution than it would be to change the word of the living God. And that's what we need to do is amend the Constitution so it's in God's standards rather than trying to change God's standards so it lines up with some contemporary view.”

Of course, a Protestant view of “God's standards” is not the same as a Catholic view. But until Christians generally abandon and repudiate the “woman is the devil's instrument” idea, the “war on women” is likely to go on.