

*X23 – EXchanging Worldviews, 23:
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EXpanding Women’s Liberation*

Dear: In the previous chapter, I began investigating possible ways to exit the viscous circle of child abuse, perhaps the most important of which is to promote women’s liberation. As I wrote at the end of the previous chapter:

The idea is simply that, as deMause emphasizes, happy mothers are more likely to rear both happy, hopeful daughters (who abhor brutality) and sons who have learned how to love and how to control their aggressive instincts.

In this chapter, I want to at least outline ways to expand women’s liberation; immediately, however, I should repeat some caveats.

First, recall that a certain troublesome four-year old granddaughter asked me why I didn’t believe in god, not how to solve all the problems in the world! Consequently, in what follows, I don’t plan to explore all possible ways to expand women’s liberation. Instead, I’ll focus “only” on those ways that are inhibited by most organized religions – and even then, I’ll address only some of them, because as I’ll try to show you, the problems that organized, patriarchal religions cause women are enormous.

I also repeat: I’m a novice. Thus, just as was the case for child abuse, there’s “no way” I can adequately address the issue of women’s liberation – in this book or in this lifetime! If you’re interested, I’d encourage you to search on the internet, read any of many available books, and if for no other reason than to obtain help getting through the vast literature, take relevant courses at university. If you do dig, you’ll find that much effort by many women’s organizations and other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) has been and continues to be expended throughout the world to promote “women’s rights”.

In summary, in this chapter I’ll provide a ridiculously brief sketch of a few of the many noble (even heroic) efforts to liberate women, emphasizing problems caused by religions. Before starting, however, I want to try to show you some important, general features of the problem.

LAWS AGAINST ABUSE & DISCRIMINATION

One way to promote women's liberation (or, stated more generally, to promote female liberation from male domination, discrimination, and abuse) is obviously *via* legislation, and of course I applaud all attempts to stop child abuse and liberate women *via* legislation, i.e., with laws proclaiming and protecting children's and women's "rights". Yet, although some legal progress has been made in some countries (especially Western countries), data on discrimination against women and their abuse show that enormously more progress is needed.

For example, a 14 Dec. 2011 report¹ from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), documenting only abuse of American women, details:

- Nearly 1 in 5 women has been raped at some time in her life.
- One in 4 women has been a victim of severe physical violence by an intimate partner in her lifetime.
- One in 6 women has experienced stalking victimization during her lifetime in which she felt very fearful or believed that she or someone close to her would be harmed or killed.

Reliable data for abuse of women in Muslim countries are generally unavailable. I expect, however, that the following paragraph recently written by Robert Spencer provides a fairly reliable summary of some of the horrors faced by Muslim women:²

The oppression of women sanctioned by the teachings of Islam, and often by its holy book [the Qur'an], manifests itself in innumerable ways. Among its most notorious are female genital mutilation, which an Islamic legal manual approved by Cairo's prestigious al-Azhar University states is required "for both men and women." Then there is wife-beating, sanctioned by nothing less than the Qur'an itself, which tells men to "beat" women from whom they "fear disobedience" (4:34). The Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences has determined that *over ninety percent* of Pakistani wives have been struck, beaten, or abused sexually – for offenses on the order of cooking an unsatisfactory meal. Others were punished for failing to give birth to a male child. Dominating their women by violence is a prerogative Muslim men cling to tenaciously.

¹ Available via http://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2011/p1214_sexual_violence.html.

² Copied from <http://frontpagemag.com/2012/04/20/islamic-apartheid-conference-under-attack/>.

As for other discriminations against women, I expect that all women in all countries throughout the world (i.e., 100% of women) suffer some form of discrimination, including in educational and employment opportunities, pay, and health services.

Meanwhile, reasons why laws against abuse of and discrimination against women have been inadequate (or have been inadequately enforced) and how organized religions (especially the Abrahamic religions) have commonly managed to thwart attempts to liberate women can be seen by considering:

ANIMALS KNOWN AS A “RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISTS”

In an article entitled “The Fundamentalist Agenda”,³ Davidson Loehr describes a common feature of all religious fundamentalists:

The most famous definition of fundamentalism is H. L. Mencken's: a terrible, pervasive fear that someone, somewhere, is having fun. There's something to this. Fundamentalism is too fearful, too restrictive, too lacking in faith to provide a home for the human spirit to soar or for human societies to blossom.

But there are far more fundamental things to understand about fundamentalism, especially in this age of terrorism. An adequate understanding also includes some inescapable and uncomfortable critiques of America's cultural liberalism of the last four decades. The attacks on September 11, 2001 provided us a rare revelation about fundamentalism that arrived in two installments.

First, we became vividly aware of the things some Muslim fundamentalists hate about our culture:

- They hate liberated women and all that symbolizes them. They hate it when women compete with men in the workplace, when they decide when or whether they will bear children, when they show the independence of getting abortions. They hate changes in laws that previously gave men more power over women.
- They hate the wide range of sexual orientations and lifestyles that have always characterized human societies. They hate homosexuality.

³ Available at <http://www.uuworld.org/2004/01/feature2.html>; see also the blog at http://www.commiejournal.com/community/dommie_watch/16867.html.

- They hate individual freedoms that allow people to stray from the rigid sort of “truth” they want to constrain all people. They hate individual rights that let others slough off their simple certainties.

Not much was really new in this installment of the revelation. We had seen all this before, when Khomeini's Muslim fundamentalists wreaked such havoc in Iran starting in 1979. We have long known that Muslim fundamentalism is a mortal enemy of freedom and democracy.

The surprise second installment came just a few days after 9 /11 in that remarkably unguarded interview on The 700 Club when... Jerry Falwell told Pat Robertson,

I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way – all of them who have tried to secularize America – I point the finger in their face and say, “You helped this happen.”

These men are so media-savvy it's amazing they would say such things on the air. But it's also remarkable because in their list of “causes” of the 9 /11 attacks, we heard almost exactly the same hate list:

- They hate liberated women who don't follow orders, who get abortions when they want them, who threaten or laugh at some men's arrogant pretensions to rule them.
- They hate the wide range of sexual orientations that have always characterized human societies. They would force the country to conform to a fantasy image of two married heterosexual parents where the husband works and the wife stays home with the children – even when that describes fewer than 25 percent of current American families.
- They hate individual freedoms that let people stray from the one simple set of “truths” they want imposed on all in our country. Robertson has been on record for a long time saying that democracy isn't a fit form of government unless it is run by his kind of fundamentalist Christians.

Together, the two installments make vivid the fact that “our” Christian fundamentalists have the same hate list as “their” Muslim fundamentalists.

From 1988 to 1993, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences sponsored an interdisciplinary study known as The Fundamentalism Project, the largest such study ever done. More than 100 scholars from all over the world took part, reporting on every imaginable kind of fundamentalism. And what they discovered was that the agenda of all fundamentalist movements in the world is virtually identical, regardless of religion or culture.

They identified five characteristics shared by virtually all fundamentalisms:

1. The fundamentalists' agenda starts with insistence that their rules must be made to apply to all people and to all areas of life. There can be no separation of church and state, or of public and private areas of life. The rigid rules of God – and they never doubt that they and only they have got these right – must become the law of the land. Pat Robertson, again, has said that just as Supreme Court justices place a hand on the Bible and swear to uphold the Constitution, so they should also place a hand on the Constitution and swear to uphold the Bible. In Khomeini's Iran, and in the recent Taliban rule of Afghanistan, we saw how brutal and bloody this looks in real time.
2. The second agenda item is really at the top of the list, and it's vulgarly simple: Men are on top. Men are bigger and stronger, and they rule not only through physical strength but also and more importantly through their influence on the laws and rules of the land. Men set the boundaries. Men define the norms, and men enforce them. They also define women, and they define them through narrowly conceived biological functions. Women are to be supportive wives, mothers, and homemakers.
3. A third item follows from the others. (Indeed each part of the fundamentalist agenda is necessarily interlocked, and needs every other part to survive.) Since there is only one right picture of the world, one right set of beliefs, and one right set of roles for men, women, and children, it is imperative that this picture and these rules be communicated precisely to the next generation. Therefore, fundamentalists must control education by controlling textbooks and teaching styles, deciding what may and may not be taught.
4. Fourth, fundamentalists spurn the modern, and want to return to a nostalgic vision of a golden age that never really existed. Several of the scholars observed a strong and deep resemblance between fundamentalism and fascism. Both have almost identical agendas. Men are on top, women are subservient, there is one rigid set of rules, with police and military might to enforce them, and education is tightly controlled by the state. One scholar suggested that it's helpful to understand fundamentalism as religious fascism, and fascism as political fundamentalism. The phrase "overcoming the modern" is a fascist slogan dating back to at least 1941.
5. The fifth point is the most abstract, though it's foundational. Fundamentalists deny history in a radical and idiosyncratic way. Fundamentalists know as well or better than anybody that culture shapes everything it touches: the times we live in color how we think, what we value, and the kind of people we become. Fundamentalists agree on the perverseness of modern American society: the air of permissiveness and narcissism, individual rights unbalanced by responsibilities, sex divorced from commitment, and so on.

What they don't want to see is the way culture colored the era when their scriptures were created. Good biblical scholarship begins by studying the cultural situation

when scriptures were written in search of their original intent, so that we can better discern what messages they may still have that are relevant for our lives.

But if fundamentalists were to admit that their own scriptures are as culturally conditioned as everything else, they would lose the foundation of their certainties. Some scholars see evidence that St. Paul, for instance, had severe personal hang-ups about sex that may account for his harsh teachings about homosexuality and women. Many biblical scholars treat some of Paul's teachings as rants rather than revelations. But for fundamentalists, their scriptures fell straight from heaven in a leather-bound book, every jot and tittle intact.

Except for the illustrations I've added in laying out the agenda that the Fundamentalism Project discovered, you can't tell what religion, culture, or century I'm describing. The scholars discovered this a dozen years ago while they were presenting abstracts of their papers. Several noted that all their papers were sounding alike, reporting on "species" when studying the "genus" was called for, that there were strong family resemblances between all fundamentalisms, even when the religions had had no contact, no way to influence each other.

The only way all fundamentalisms can have the same agenda is if the agenda preceded all the religions. And it did. Fundamentalist behaviors are familiar because we've all seen them so many times. These men are acting the role of "alpha males" who define the boundaries of their group's territory and the norms and behaviors that define members of their in-group. These are the behaviors of territorial species in which males are stronger than females. In biological terms, these are the characteristic behaviors of sexually dimorphous territorial animals. Males set and enforce the rules; females obey the males and raise the children...

Thereby, Dear, I trust you see reasons why laws attempting to liberate women have been inadequate (or have been inadequately enforced) and why organized religions have frequently managed to thwart such attempts. Generally in any society, only laws consistent with the society's dominant cultural norms (which are usually entrenched by the society's religion) can be effectively promulgated and enforced. In the case of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Mormonism, etc.), their clerics attempt to "freeze" cultural norms in the dark days when their "holy books" were written, when the cultural norms were that women were to be subservient to men, with the "alpha male" applying the law of the jungle, "might makes right". As a result, when attempts are made to liberate women, religious fundamentalists commonly object, proclaiming ignorance such as "God [or Allah] wants...", of course not realizing (or not recognizing) that an "omnipotent" God couldn't possibly "want" anything!

As a result, Dear, when you hear (as no doubt you will) that “men are animals”, you might want to consider adding “...especially religious fundamentalists!”

WAYS TO LIBERATE WOMEN FROM RELIGIOUS ANIMALS

In what follows, I want to comment on several methods that have been applied to try to liberate women from such “religious animals”. But before starting any of my comments, I should mention that there are many different types of “feminists”, i.e., women fighting for the liberation of women, including:

- “Conservative feminists” (such as your mother), who want more freedom but apparently willingly accept the authority of their religions,
- “Religious feminists”, who seek reinterpretations of their “holy books” to emphasize women’s liberation (i.e., they want more “picking and choosing” of their “scriptures” – smorgasbord religionists – just as is commonly done, now, for their religion’s position on slavery),
- “New-age feminists”, some of whom want to return to the worship of goddesses (which certainly is as justified as worshiping any god – and usually a helluva lot more civilized!), and then
- “Secular feminists”, those capable of evaluative thinking, able to see all ideas about gods and goddesses for the crocks they are.

As you probably expect, I most strongly support the secular feminists, such as my wife and my daughter – and, who knows, maybe someday, such as a certain trio of granddaughters!

Actually, though, rather than the above distinctions of different types of feminists (which emphasizes “where they’re coming from”), some authors intelligently distinguish different types of feminists by their different goals (i.e., “where they’re trying to go”). Illustrative is the following quotation from an article by the Libertarian Roderick T. Long:⁴

⁴ Copied from his article entitled “Beyond Patriarchy: A Libertarian Model of the Family”, which was published in the Spring 1997 issue of *Formulations* (Vol. 4, No. 3, Issue #15) and which is available online at <http://libertariannation.org/a/f4312.html>.

Libertarians have an uneasy relationship with feminism. Many endorse Christina Sommers' distinction between "liberal feminism" and "gender feminism." Liberal feminists, Sommers says, are concerned with legal equality, i.e., with ensuring that men and women have the same rights before the law, while gender feminists go beyond this and assert that sexual inequality pervades every aspect of society, and that a mere equality before the law is insufficient to redress this problem.

Sommers' distinction, and her preference for liberal feminism over gender feminism, is shared by many in the libertarian community. Libertarian feminist Wendy McElroy offers a more subtle analysis in the introduction to her book *Freedom, Feminism, and the State*. There she distinguishes not two but three kinds of feminism. First there is "mainstream feminism," which simply seeks to include women equally with men in whatever the existing legal *status quo* is. If there are male Senators, there should also be female Senators; if males can be drafted into the army or compulsory labor camps, so should females; and so on. This position is contrasted with what McElroy calls "radical feminism," which sees sexual equality as a symptom of a deeper inequality that pervades society as a whole and is inherent in the *status quo* (so that mere inclusion in the *status quo* won't do). There are, says McElroy, two kinds of radical feminism: "socialist feminism," which sees *socioeconomic* inequality as the culprit, and *individualist* (i.e., libertarian) feminism, which regards the problem as stemming from *political* inequality (where by "political inequality" McElroy means any coercive subordination of one person to another person's will – statism being the paradigm case of political inequality).

In what follows, however, I won't go into the topic of feminism in such detail that these "more subtle" distinctions are needed; instead, I'll emphasize where different feminists are "coming from" and identify only the common goal of "getting somewhere else than where they've been"! Also at the outset, I should probably mention that all methods promoting women's liberation from "religious animals" are being pursued to varying degrees in different countries and with varying degree of success – with essentially zero progress in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Further, I should mention that in Western countries, most progress in women's liberation has been made, not because of "enlightened clerical leadership", but through a host of converging circumstances: courage of early feminists, more economic opportunities for women, more education for girls, and simply because science and technology provided women with what they wanted, i.e., reliable and relatively simple methods to avoid and eliminate unwanted pregnancies. In Islamic countries, the little progress that has been made is mostly courtesy the courage of Islamic women, a few examples of whom I'll show you later in this chapter.

And now, with all that "introduction" out of the way, I'll get underway!

* Go to other chapters *via*

<http://zenofzero.net/>

1. Promoting Women's Liberation via Egalitarian Aspects of Religions

I'm not optimistic about success in attempting to promote women's liberation by promoting egalitarian aspects of various religions. Described derisively, the method is to continue to play the game that's been played so many times before, namely, read a culture's "holy books" selectively (conveniently ignoring the passages that demean women, while emphasizing passages that promote egalitarianism). As I see it, the fundamental error in such an approach is for women to "request" of "religious animals" (and/or patriachs) that they grant "human rights" to women. But as I've tried to explain in earlier X-chapters, "rights" aren't "granted", they must be demanded – and in many cases, they must be fought for (though not necessarily with physical force).

Yet, in spite of my doubts (that promoting egalitarian aspects of specific religions will lead to substantial liberation of women), I should at least comment on the method, especially because (in spite of my deep desire that all organized religions be dumped into the trashcan of human mistakes) the reality is that simple-minded and brainwashed people continue to cling to such ignorance – and probably will continue to do so, for a long time yet to come. Therefore, some attempt should be made to try to get such people to at least see that treating women as second-class citizens needn't be a part of their religions.

A good survey article that can be used to support this approach has been written by Nelia Beth Scovill. In its *Introduction*, she writes:⁵

This pamphlet is an attempt to bring to the forefront what many women and men know to be true: that at its fundamental core, their own religious tradition is egalitarian because it affirms that women and men are fully and equally human.

This egalitarian core is expressed differently within each of the world's religious traditions, though there are some similarities. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the egalitarian core is expressed in terms of their equal creation. Each of these traditions affirm that because both women and men are made in the image of God, they are equal and thus are to be treated in social relations with the same dignity afforded all human beings. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the egalitarian core affirms that both men and women are able to reach liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

⁵ The article is at <http://www.religiousconsultation.org/liberation.htm>.

The significance of this egalitarian core cannot be underestimated. The egalitarian core is a far-reaching and fundamental critique of every social structure which denies women their human rights and systematically subordinates women's basic needs in order to reproduce the species or to fulfill the needs of men [e.g., Dear, as in Mormonism]. If the world's religious traditions are to live up to their egalitarian core, they must advocate not only to redistribute social, political, and economic power, but also to vest women with the power to make their own life decisions.

The egalitarian core is especially critical of religious institutions and authorities which perpetuate gender inequality. At best, such institutions and authorities fail to live up to the true egalitarian core of their religious tradition; at worst, they spread a fundamentally distorted understanding of their religious tradition. The distortion of the egalitarian core can be traced to an unholy merger between developing religious institutions and the values of the patriarchal cultures in which the institutions emerged. The egalitarian core fundamentally undermines the world's religions pattern of upholding the patriarchal family as divinely mandated. In the patriarchal family structure, the women of the family (both daughters and wives) and their sexuality are placed under the control of the male head of household. Religious endorsement of such social structures directly contradicts the egalitarian core which affirms women's full humanity.

In her article, Scovill then provides details to support her contention that, at their cores, the principal religions of the world are egalitarian.

Those of us who dismiss all ideas about all gods as childish, however, have difficulty suppressing skepticism. Thus in the case of Judaism, Scovill advocates that "believers" focus on the first Genesis myth (in which, as a "finale" to his six-day stunt, God allegedly created man and woman) – while ignoring the second Genesis myth (in which Eve is created from Adam's rib, to be his helper). In the case of Christianity, "believers" are to ignore "Saint" Paul's pronouncements on the second-class status of women and instead focus on reports of how Jesus treated women – an argument, by the way, that would be stronger if Scovill had ignored the clerics' Jesus (as "reported" in the New Testament) and instead emphasized the Gnostics' Jesus. In the case of Islam, some support for Scovill's arguments are fairly well supported – provided one ignores much!

An example of criticisms of Islam's treatment of women is the following comment by Ali Sina (more about whom I'll mention in a later chapter) in which the references are to verses in the Quran:⁶

⁶ Copied from "Symposium: Gender Apartheid and Islam" by Jamie Glazov, *FrontPageMagazine.com*, 31 December 2004, available at <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=16440>.

Let us see what the Quran says about women. It says “men have a degree (of advantage) over them” (2:228), that the witness of woman is worth half of that of man (2:282), that women inherit half [as much as] their male siblings (4:11-12), that a man can marry two or three or four women (4:3), that if a woman becomes captive in a war, her Muslim master is allowed to rape her (33:50), that if a woman is not totally submissive to her husband, she will enter Hell (66:10), that women are “tilth” for their husbands (to cultivate them) (2:223), that men are in charge of women, as if women were imbeciles or minors who could not take care of themselves, that they must be obedient to their husbands or be admonished (verbally abused), banished from the bed (psychologically abused) and beaten (physically abused) (4:34).

In the case of Mormonism (which Scovill ignored, no doubt because most people consider Mormonism as a minor aberration), the possibility of her ignoring the damnable domination of woman by men would be much harder: even in Islam, men aren't permitted to interfere in the relations between women and their “god”, whereas in Mormonism, even when they're dead, men continue to control the possibility that their wives can enter the Mormon's fictitious “celestial paradise”!

If I were pushed to comment on the whole idea of liberating women *via* promoting the “egalitarian foundations” of their religion, I'd probably respond with something similar to the following:

I suspect that (for most religions and in the long run) it would be better if women were dominated by their husband rather than by some god, because in the case of their husbands, women have a chance to be liberated (e.g., when the men die); in contrast, gods don't die – except when people stop believing in such foolishness. Yet Mormonism is a separate case: the poor Mormon women are brainwashed into believing that all males are “gods in training”!

In any event, some brave women try to liberate other women while continuing to be “believers” in their religions. One such is Shirin Ebadi, winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize for her work helping to liberate women in Iran. She is one of the “religious feminists”, i.e., one who maintains that it's not Islam but the Iranian patriarchal society that demeans women – as you can see in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech.⁷

I'd also encourage you to read a report of an interview of Shirin Ebadi by Naila Fathi, who “reports for *The New York Times* from Tehran” and who

⁷ Available at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2003/ebadi-lecture-e.html.

“translated Shirin Ebadi’s book *The History and Documentation of Human Rights in Iran* from Farsi to English.”⁸ This article, which details Ebadi’s courage, includes the biographical note:

Before the 1979 revolution she [Ebadi] had been one of the country’s first women judges, but the new Islamic Republic deemed women “too emotional” for such work and demoted her to court assistant. Her campaign for human rights starts from this event.

Fathi’s article concludes with

Ebadi argues that Islam is a religion of peace and equality, and that inequality originates from culture not religion. Moreover, Islamic law should be interpreted according to modern needs; “I am against (patriarchal) culture, not Islam,” she says...

I suspect that the reason that Ebadi is stuck on her religion is that, although she has a university degree in law, yet similar to most judges in this country (including justices of our Supreme Court, especially the five Catholics), she doesn’t have a clue about the scientific method. Thereby, she demonstrates that she makes major decisions on the basis of absolutely zero evidence (as do the Catholics on our Supreme Court). If they don’t base their decisions just on what “feels good” (as do most religious people), they base their decisions on reason, alone – not having the common sense to test their reasoned results against data. What atrocious excuses for judges!

But although I’m obvious disgusted that such people are appointed as judges (in Iran, America, or anywhere in the world) and I shake my head at Ebadi’s naïve worldview, yet I admire her courage. In fact, or at least in my view, there’s hope for progress when people with such diverse worldviews can agree on a common goal, such as women’s liberation.

2. Promoting Women’s Liberation *via* Demanding “Equal Rights”

As I briefly reviewed in an earlier X-chapter (and anyway, as you no doubt know), most progress in liberating women from religious patriarch “animals” has been achieved (especially in the West during the 19th Century) *via* women’s demands for “equal rights”. Their nonviolent methods were later copied by such “revolutionaries” as Mahatma (“Great Soul”) Gandhi (1869–1948) in India and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–68) in America.

⁸ Available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/themes/article-10-1557.jsp>, web page of “Open Democracy: free thinking for the world.”

In my view, every woman alive is indebted to such leaders of the Woman's Rights Movement as Elizabeth Stanton (1815–1902), who said:

The Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women's emancipation.

Another of the leaders, Ernestine Rose (1810–1892) stated it more forcefully, “responding to a religious heckler at Seventh National Woman's Rights Convention, New York, Nov. 25–26, 1856”:

Do you tell me that the Bible is against our rights? Then I say that our claims do not rest upon a book written no one knows when, or by whom. Do you tell me what Paul or Peter says on the subject? Then again I reply that our claims do not rest on the opinions of anyone, not even on those of Paul and Peter... Books and opinions, no matter from whom they came, if they are in opposition to human rights, are nothing but dead letters.

As I'll show you below, similar could be said and has been said – forcefully – indicting the Quran and Islam, but most unfortunately, such can't be said by people living within Muslim countries: they'd be executed for “apostasy” (i.e., “[the abandonment or renunciation](#)” of Islam). As a result, such indictments of Islam are made only by those who have managed to escape Muslim countries and live in the West.

To investigate a stunning example of a secular humanist, an apostate from Islam now living in the West, and a promoter of women's liberation, I'd encourage you to search the internet for articles by Azam Kamguian. In her article entitled “The Lethal Combination of Tribalism, Islam, & Cultural Relativism”, she concludes by addressing the question “What is to be done?” and states the following.⁹

⁹ This article (available, e.g., at <http://www.middleeastwomen.org/html/comboination.htm>) was adapted from a speech given at a three-day conference on honor killing and violence against women, held on 17-19 January 2003 in Stockholm. At <http://stophonorkillings.com/index.php?name=Content&pid=1> the following information about the author is available: “Azam Kamguian is an Iranian writer and women's rights activist. She was born in 1958 and started her political activities as a socialist in 1976. She was a medical student at Pahlavi University in Shiraz until arrested and imprisoned for a year for organizing student protests. The second time she was imprisoned for political activities was after the Islamic Republic of Iran took power. Azam was released from prison in 1983, after a brutal treatment in prison including constant torture and solitary confinement. She resisted all the pressure and kept her real political identity undiscovered. Lest this be discovered, placing her life in real danger, Azam fled to Kurdistan, a free region at that time, and continued the struggle for eight years until the beginning of 1990s, when she left Kurdistan for America. Currently, she lives and works in London, England.”

A society ruled by a misogynist tribal and Islamic laws and values permits the killing of women. Honor killing is a reflection of ancient patriarchy embracing Islamic misogyny and ancient tribal values. In the West, in collaboration with cultural relativism, it has created a deadly mix that has brutally victimized many young girls and women.

Honor killing, which contradicts many basic human rights and values, is clearly connected to the subordination of women. The prevailing culture of discrimination and misogyny in Islamic religion and society will not change without implementing a comprehensive and radical socio-political and legal changes in the situation of women.

The civil rights of Arab citizens generally depend on their status, class, tribal affiliation, and proximity to the regimes. This altogether discriminatory culture strongly affects women. It is not easy to dislodge let alone eliminate honor killing and other forms of violence in the absence of a radical transformation of the unequal social and economic order.

The only effective strategy to abolish honor killings is to safeguard and advance women's rights and status; by fighting against Islamic, patriarchal, and tribal traditions; by separating religion from the state; and by forming secular and egalitarian governments in the region. Then, when equality before the law, civil rights, human rights, justice, freedom are achieved and safeguarded for all citizens regardless of their gender, class or race, women will benefit by extension.

The struggle against honor killing is inseparable from the struggle for women's civil liberties, for the separation of Islam from the State, the struggle against political Islam and Islamic States in the region. All restrictive and backward cultural and moral codes and customs that hinder and restrict women's freedom and independence as equal citizens must be abolished. Severe penalties must be imposed for the abuse, intimidation, restriction of freedom, degradation, and violent treatment of women and girls.

These are the tasks of women's liberation movement along with the progressive and egalitarian movements in the region as well as in the West.

Ms. Kamguian provides additional details in her article "Islam and the Liberation of Women in the Middle East: Separation of Mosque and State is the Only Answer", which was published in the *Free Inquiry* magazine (Vol. 23, No. 4) and which is available on the internet. In this article, in answer to the same question "What is to be done?", she states:

Given Islam's intrinsic animosity to equality between the sexes, to women's rights, and toward women's roles in society, how can the condition of women in Islamic societies be improved? The answer must be to eliminate political Islam as a

precondition to any improvements in the status of women in the Middle East. The social system is based on Islamic misogyny and backwardness, and Middle Eastern women will have no cause to regret its passing.

The twenty-first century must be the century that rids itself of political Islam. I believe that this movement will begin in Iran. In Iran, women presented the first and the most effective challenge to the Islamic regime by courageously questioning the right of Islamic authority to define the conditions of their lives. The most hopeful signs and the most remarkable force for change continue to come directly from Iranian women, both in Iran and in exile.

As ever, the key to Middle Eastern women's liberation is secularism and the establishment of egalitarian political systems. Secularism has been and continues to be a prerequisite for women's liberation in the Middle East. Our objectives must be:

- The complete separation of religion from the state;
- The elimination of all religious and religiously inspired concepts from laws;
- Definition of religion as the private affair of individuals;
- Removal of references to a person's religion in laws, on identity cards, and in official papers;
- A ban on ascribing any religion to people, whether individually or collectively, in official documents and the media;
- Elimination of religion from education; and
- A ban on teaching religious subjects and dogma and on presenting purely religious interpretations of secular subjects in schools.

Why should Islam be eliminated from the operations of the state instead of modernized and reformed? If someone says that slavery, fascism, or patriarchy can become humane and modernized, I would ask them why they should not be abandoned altogether. In the view of advocates of Islamic reform, if Islam allowed a woman to go to school in a knee-length skirt or to become a judge as long as she does not speak of her sexuality, then it would be acceptable. This is not the improvement that we deserve. Attempts to modernize or reform Islam will only prolong the age-old oppression and subordination of women. Rather than modernize Islam, it must be caged, just as humanity caged Christianity two centuries ago. Islam must become subordinate to secularism and the secular state.

Of course I totally agree with Ms. Kamguian that “Islam... must be caged” [and not just for the liberation of women but also for “the West” to prevail in the poorly-named “War on Terror” (a topic that I’ll return to in later X-chapters)]. But just as I suggested was the case for child abuse, progress toward women's liberation *via* legal procedures, promoting “women's rights”, isn't sufficient – even in countries such as the US and certainly not in essentially all Islamic countries.

3. Promoting Women's Liberation *via* Economic Liberation

To make more progress, I'm convinced that, in addition to such "legal procedures", much more effort is needed in educating women and in obtaining their economic liberation from men.

And for a change, Dear, in the case of economic liberation of women, I do have some relevant experience!

3.1 *Some Personal Experiences*

It was in the late 1960s, when we had moved with our three young children into our first house, that I first became conscious of "the women's liberation movement." It seemed to me to be highly desirable, and whereas during my "spare time" I was working hard to improve the drainage on our ~2 acre horse-pasture (on the flood plan, below and in front of the house), I went out and bought a shovel also for your grandmother!

Ten years later, by the end of the 1970s, she had earned her Bachelor's degree in Engineering Physics with the highest GPA then (and probably still) ever achieved at the University in the city where you subsequently lived. By the end of the 1980s, she was responsible for running a nuclear reactor as head of its Engineering Department, and with about 90 engineers reporting to her, she was paid more than I was. And I should add: it was only because of financial problems (I was unable to obtain additional research contracts) that I couldn't continue to fund her education. Otherwise, I have no doubt that she would have obtained her Ph.D., and become, I suspect, a famous astrophysicist.

3.2 *Some Generalizations from History*

From which I generalize that, in contrast to what I consider the foolishness of trying to liberate women while they continue to be imprisoned in religious balderdash (such as by emphasizing egalitarian principles at the bases of most religions), surely a sensible way to liberate women from abusive patriarchs and colluding clerics is by educating women and empowering them economically. That's the way that's worked best during the past 10,000 years!

Thus (and once again confining my assessments to a ridiculously brief look at history), women seem to have been first liberated from domination by men during the start of the agricultural revolution (when, I expect, women's knowledge of plants gave them leadership in farming). Similarly, sons seem

* Go to other chapters *via*

to have been first liberated from domination by their fathers when soldier sons returned from Roman campaigns (with knowledge of the world, experience in having their own way, and with some wealth). And similarly, younger generations were liberated from family clans in the West during the Industrial Revolution, and Western women were further liberated from men when women were employed during WW-II and pursued more education during the subsequent fifty years.

3.3 Cooperation vs. Competition

I expect that, generally speaking, women are more cooperative than men (who are more competitive). Even though primitive men needed to cooperate in hunting prey and even though possibly no mammal is more competitive (even ferocious) than a female protecting her young, yet whereas males have always needed to compete for the “reproductive rights” of females and whereas women have found advantages in cooperating in the birthing and rearing children, I expect that such traits are now instinctive. Such instinctive competitiveness of males has been to the advantage of economies that are dependent on success of free enterprises (e.g., in discoveries, efficiencies, and sales promotion), but instinctive cooperation is needed for quality, production, and protection of people and resources. Further, such cooperation is essential in the efficient workings of most democratic governments and undoubtedly will become more important in “the global society” – provided it isn't run as a worldwide dictatorship (e.g., by Islamic theocrats).

Let me try to say it differently, starting with my admitting some more of my many biases. Thus, in addition to my bias about the importance of trying to help kids rather than adults (most adults are pretty much a “lost cause”!) and my bias about the importance of education (particularly in developing evaluative-thinking skills), I hold the biased opinion (based on ~70 years of personal experiences) that mothers and school teachers (most of whom, fortunately, are women) are both the foundations and the futures of all societies.

I hold this opinion because, in my view, the essence of all societies is cooperation among its members, and from my experience, women are more cooperative than (the generally more competitive) men. And it's not that some men don't cooperate (e.g., on teams) and that some women aren't competitive (e.g., for a man's attention), but it seems to be a general rule that women are more cooperative than men, traits probably derived from natural

* Go to other chapters *via*

selection: men needed to be competitive (against animals and against other men), whereas woman needed to be cooperative (e.g., for child bearing and rearing, and during illnesses and injuries).

Given these natural or instinctive propensities, it might be expected that, generally, men would more appropriately engage in competitive roles, e.g., in competing industries and in other adversarial roles (e.g., as lawyers, soldiers, and unfortunately as leaders in science – at least so long as the current method of funding science continues in this country, i.e., *via* competition). Meanwhile, it might be expected that, generally, women should lead in politics and in judgeships (which require the art of compromise – cooperatively resolving conflicts and finding middle grounds – although to be elected in politics certainly requires competition!), as well as lead and even totally dominate all service industries (including all levels of health care, education, and all government services).

3.4 Constraining Competition

Of course I'd agree that healthy societies have a healthy balance between cooperation and competition. I might even argue that a weakness of the American Constitution and American society is their biases toward competition over cooperation. A similar healthy balance is needed for a prosperous (competitive) and peaceful (cooperating) world. But I think it obvious that re-balancing is needed, not only to correct the excesses of competitive, patriarchal, tribal societies but also to constrain excessive competition between and among companies and countries.

In the case of constraining competition among companies, almost certainly companies will need to be forced by governments (because of the tragedy of the commons, addressed in an earlier **X**-chapter). In the case of constraining competition among countries, international laws and their enforcement must be strengthened (a topic that I'll get to in later **X**-chapters). In sum, then, my opinions are not only that social change is needed but also that such changes will be best led by women, because based on my experiences, speaking generally, and compared to men, women's possibly instinctive biases seem to be toward more cooperation and less competition.

Such advances, however, will require more progress liberating women, and as with most social changes, there are arguments for and against women's liberation:

* Go to other chapters *via*

- For those of us in favor of women's liberation, we of course feel that it's overwhelmingly beneficial: for the women to be in control of their lives, for the usually decreased number of births, for the physical and emotional welfare of the (wanted) children, for husbands for whom the strain of being the sole "breadwinner" is reduced – and even for other males, whose sexual frustrations are usually reduced by being able to find interested (and interesting) sex partners.
- On the other hand, though, it's common for patriachs to be opposed to women's liberation, since they loose control over "their" females and since it's not uncommon for men to then have even more difficulty finding jobs (having to compete, also, with women) – especially if the men also encounter some "affirmative action program", promoting women's employment, which is especially inappropriate in those jobs (such as in police work, firefighting, and the armed services) where the "might of males" is finally "right" (for the jobs).

There are additional and serious complications from other inappropriate "social contracts" between males and females (dealing with, e.g., divorce and child support) that suggest that "women's liberation" is certainly not so "cut and dried" as some "rabid women libbers" advocate – but I'll delay further comments on such "social contracts" until a later chapter (entitled "EXtrapolating Laws"), save to repeat: "[moderation in all things.](#)"

Some patriachs claim that it'll be the end of "civilization" if women libbers have their way – but what fun can be had with their arguments! For example, based on animal behavior, patriarchy is obviously "uncivilized"! In contrast, "civilization" (i.e., city life) first occurred with the agricultural revolution, when patriarchy almost certainly almost totally vanished. Then, as resources became strained, people became "uncivilized", with wars between cities – fought by men, who then again began to dominate women in the resulting patriarchal societies. Similar uncivilized behavior occurred more-or-less continuously during the subsequent ~3,000 years of wars. Maybe soon, when women are again liberated from patriachs, women will finally be able to "civilize" men again!

3.5 Some Philosophical Considerations

In addition, I should at least mention some controversies about women's liberation that follow from philosophical considerations:

- One such consideration can be posed as the question: What's the goal? For those of us who see the overall goal of humanity to be to continue to evolve (to help intelligence expand – to permit all people to "be all they can be"), then we consider the need for women's liberation to be so obvious that it's hardly worth discussing the matter further.

- For those who blithely state that the goal is “peace and prosperity”, arguments ensue, in large measure because the words aren't normally defined carefully: for some people, there can be no ‘peace’ without ‘justice’ (poorly defined), whereas for others, there can be no ‘peace’ without ‘honor’ (also poorly defined), and for some people, ‘prosperity’ means ample food and consumer goods, whereas for others, ‘prosperity’ means maintaining the social *status quo*.
- And then, for those (the majority of people in the world!) who accept as “the goal” whatever their clerics tell them that their god(s) say are the goals, then such people will be for or against women's liberation depending on what their damnable clerics tell them to be! For example, I know a certain set of granddaughters who have been indoctrinated into “believing” that their prime goal is to have babies – to provide an “**earthly body**” for god's “**spirit children**”, waiting in heaven for an opportunity to be “**tested**”! Thereby, my poor granddaughters have been indoctrinated by their damnable clerics to be opposed to women's liberation. Meanwhile, I wonder if Mormon (and similarly Baptist, Catholic, and Muslim) girls have considered the possibility that what the clerics really want is to ensure a bountiful crop of paying customers in their pews! Or are clerics really so dumb as to think that the first symmetry-breaking quantum-like fluctuation in a total void managed to scribble out some instructions on how many babies each woman should have?!

3.6 Economic Liberation of Women & Reduction of Child Abuse

But setting such philosophical considerations aside for now, let me return to the horrible, viscous circle of child abuse and how it might be exited *via* women's liberation. My assumption is that women who don't really want any children (or any additional children), but are forced by patriarchs to marry men (of the patriarch's choice!) and have children, are less likely to provide healthy, helpful, loving environments for their children and more likely to either abuse their children, physically, emotionally, sexually, and intellectually (e.g., by teaching them the data-less concept that they and the universe are under the control of some giant Jabberwock in the sky) or to not strongly object when the children's father abuses them. Consequently, from the perspective of diminishing child abuse, I want to comment on ways for promoting the economic liberation of women.

But once again, Dear, I must be embarrassingly superficial. Economic liberation of women is a huge topic, confounding people who have spent their lifetimes studying it. In my superficial treatment that follows, I'll comment on the topic from the perspective that every human pursues his or her trio of survival goals, and I'll emphasize the fact (supported by a huge amount of data) that poverty is rampant in most Muslim countries.

* Go to other chapters *via*

In general (and in contrast to the case in Muslim countries), women's economic liberation in most Western countries is proceeding fairly well – although less so where patriarchy is strong, i.e., backed by clerics in fundamentalist religious sects, e.g., in the US, such as in “the (Baptist's) Bible Belt” and in “Mormon-land”, i.e., Utah. To be sure, more progress is needed, which, Dear, you can explore on your own (e.g., search on the internet for “equal pay for equal work” and “the glass ceiling”). But with increasing university education of women (although and unfortunately, not so much in the physical sciences and in technical fields such as engineering), surely you will experience much less discrimination than did women of early generations – mostly courtesy their struggles and achievements.

3.7 Economic Liberation of Muslim Women

In most Muslim and other backward countries, however, not only has women's economic liberation made little progress, but in many ways, there has been retrogression, e.g., in Saudi Arabia and Iran. In those two countries, in particular, vast oil revenues have been used by the rulers to bolster both patriarchy and associated fundamentalist Islamic sects. That, of course, is unsurprising, given that patriarchy (and its associated clerical support) has always been a “spoils system”, ever since leaders of hunter-gather tribes doled out portions of any “kill” or any “windfall” to try to ensure their privileged positions.

Stated differently, patriarchal leaders of many oil-rich nations (similar to members of any “mafia-like” criminal group) buy allegiance from followers by doling out whatever “spoils” are available. Similar occurs in the Islamic country of Afghanistan (in which case the “spoils” are from illegal sale of heroin) and in many patriarchal Catholic countries in Latin America (with “spoils” from the illegal sale of cocaine or from monopolies on mineral and similar resources, e.g., in the case of Venezuela, from oil). In such cases, the prospects of economic liberation of women are not encouraging – unless a leader arises (such as appears to be occurring in Qatar) who is sufficiently perceptive to see such methods as shortsighted and to see that, for example, current oil revenues are more wisely used to educate both men and women, giving their society a better chance of economic prosperity when its oil revenues fail.

3.8 Muhammad Yunus & “Microloans”

An important case of progress in women's economic liberation in an otherwise backward Muslim country has started to occur in Bangladesh, but in this case, the progress can be traced to a single economist: Muhammad Yunus, winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for his creation of the concept of the “microloan” and its implementation in his “Grameen” (meaning “rural” or “village”) bank. I want to show you substantial information about Yunus, because his enormous contributions to humanity are truly revolutionary.

To begin, please consider the following Associated Press news report, filed on 13 October 2006, the day that the award for the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize was announced.

Nobel Prize winner Yunus revered by poor

By BETH DUFF-BROWN

Walking alongside rice paddies and water buffalo on the outskirts of Dhaka with Bangladeshi economist Muhammad Yunus was like walking down the red carpet with a Hollywood movie star.

Women in saris grabbed at the handsome man with thick gray hair, flirting and addressing him with ease. I was surprised, given we were in a conservative Muslim country where rural women typically take a backseat to men.

But this man, who won the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday, had taught them to stand up to their husbands by giving them small loans that now put them in the driver's seat.

“The first hostile person to our program is the husband. We are challenging his authority,” Yunus said as we walked around Kashipur, where water buffalo lumbered down dirt paths alongside women barking Bengali into the cell phones they had bought with small loans from his bank. [Italics added]

“In the family, he's a macho tyrant,” Yunus said. “He starts to see that she's not as stupid as he thought. He says, ‘Now she cannot nag me about money, because she understands now how hard it is to make.’ The tension eases and they become a team.” [Italics added]

We had driven to the village just north of Dhaka in April 2004. I wanted to profile the father of the banking revolution known as microcredit, fueled by his Grameen Bank, which now shares the prestigious Nobel prize.

When we arrived, the women sat on benches in a tin-roof shack with hard mud floors and reported on their projects, laughing and cheering as they tallied up their earnings.

One complained her cow was sick; another missed her son, a construction worker in Saudi Arabia.

Yunus has enormous faith in these women, who make their payments on time and put their profits back into the family. In Kashipur, the barefoot women lined up to hand the local Grameen representative small wads of cash. After 17 years with the bank, they had 100 percent repayment.

Some had borrowed to buy another cow or expand their rice paddies or mustard fields. Others bought cell phones, walked about the phoneless village, making and taking calls for a fee.

“Mr. Yunus has done more for the poor people of Bangladesh than anything our government has ever done,” said Anju Monwara, one of the country’s now-famous “telephone ladies.”

They help seal deals, find out the price of shrimp in rival fishing villages, and even mediate marriage ceremonies from across the seas.

“This is a form of globalization,” Yunus said. “They have the whole world at their fingertips.”

The crushing poverty – in a country Henry Kissinger once dubbed “South Asia’s basket case” – has decreased since Yunus founded Grameen in 1983. Bangladesh’s per capita income has grown from \$280 in 1985 to \$440 in 2006, according to World Bank figures.

Anju Monwara had been one of Kashipur’s telephone ladies for six years, earning on average \$50 a month making and taking phone calls for others.

Her most memorable, and profitable, call was a 36-minute marriage ceremony between a young woman and a fellow villager on a construction site in Saudi Arabia. He had sent a wedding ring and some money, but could not afford to come home. “So, he brought a local registrar with him, and they said their vows over the phone.”

The following Associated Press article (copied here from *The New York Times*), also published on 12 October 2006, provides additional insight. The authors are identified as follows: “Associated Press writers Matt Moore and Doug Mellgren in Oslo, Norway, and Julhas Alam in Dhaka contributed to this report.”

Microloan Pioneer and His Bank Win Nobel Peace Prize

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) – The simple yet revolutionary idea of loaning tiny sums to poor people looking to escape poverty by starting businesses won Bangladeshi economist Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank he founded the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday.

Yunus' notion – today, known as microcredit – has spread around the globe in the past three decades and is said to have helped more than 100 million people take their first steps to rise out of poverty.

Some bought dairy cows, others egg-laying hens. In recent years, money for a single cell phone has been enough to start thriving enterprises in isolated villages without phone lines from East Asia to West Africa.

“Lasting peace cannot be achieved unless large population groups find ways in which to break out of poverty,” the Nobel Committee said in its citation in Oslo, Norway. “Microcredit is one such means. Development from below also serves to advance democracy and human rights.”

The 65-year-old economist said he would use part of his share of the \$1.4 million award to create a company to make low-cost, high-nutrition food for the poor. The rest would go toward setting up an eye hospital for the poor in Bangladesh, he said. The food company, to be known as Social Business Enterprise, will sell food for a nominal price.

Yunus is the first Nobel Prize winner from Bangladesh, a poverty-stricken Southeast Asian nation of about 141 million people on the Bay of Bengal.

“I am so, so happy; it's really a great news for the whole nation,” Yunus told The Associated Press after the prize was announced. He was reached by telephone at his home in the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka.

His joy was shared by those his microcredit program has helped.

“I can't express in words how happy I am,” said Gulbadan Nesa, 40, who five years ago used \$90 from the Grameen Bank to buy chickens so she could sell eggs. She's since taken more loans and expanded into selling building materials.

“Not long ago I was almost begging for money to feed my family,” she said from Bishnurampur, her village in northern Bangladesh. “Today, I've got my own house and enough money to feed my children and send them to school.”

Grameen, which means rural in the Bengali language, was the first lender to hand out microcredit, giving small loans to poor Bangladeshis who did not qualify for loans

from conventional banks. No collateral is needed for Grameen loans, which average about \$200.

But there is social pressure to repay. Recipients form groups of five, and members qualify for future loans only if all are current on their old ones.

The results are hard to argue with – the bank says it has a 99 percent repayment rate.

The bank says it has loaned \$5.72 billion to 6.6 million Bangladeshi, 97 percent of whom were women, and today provides services in more than 70,000 villages.

The success has allowed Grameen to expand its credit to include housing loans, financing for irrigation and fisheries, as well as traditional savings accounts.

But Grameen is not without critics, many of whom focus on the bank's high interest rates. Its business loans carry a rate of 20 percent, significantly higher than the 10-15 percent charged by commercial banks.

“While the poor pay 20 percent interest for their loan, the rich pay much less. It can't be called social justice,” said S.M. Akash, an economics professor at Dhaka University.

Reports routinely circulate in Bangladesh's media of people being forced to borrow from second or third sources, often at higher interest rates, to repay Grameen loans. But almost no one is willing put their names to such criticism in Bangladesh, where Yunus was considered a national hero even before the Nobel Prize was announced...

In fact, the spread of Yunus' and Grameen's microcredit schemes around the world – they are now considered a key approach to spurring development – is arguably one of the few bright spots for Bangladesh since it won independence from Pakistan in 1973.

Worldwide, microcredit financing is estimated to have helped 92 million families last year alone, according to Jove Oliver, spokesman for the Microcredit Summit Campaign, part of the Washington-based Project Results Educational Fund.

Yunus told The Associated Press in 2004 that his “eureka moment” came while chatting to a shy woman weaving bamboo stools with calloused fingers.

Sufia Begum was a 21-year-old mother of three when he met her in 1974 and asked how much she earned. She replied that she borrowed about five taka, the equivalent of nine cents, from a middleman for the bamboo for each stool.

All but two cents of that went back to the lender.

“I thought to myself, my God, for five takas she has become a slave,” Yunus said in the interview.

The following day, he and his students did a survey in the woman's village, Jobra, and discovered that 43 villagers owed a total of \$27.

"I couldn't take it anymore. I put the \$27 out there and told them they could liberate themselves," he said, and pay him back whenever they could. The idea was to buy their own materials and cut out the middleman.

Over the following year, they all paid him back – day by day.

Finally for your consideration, Dear, is the following 13 October 2006 interview of Yunus, originally published in TIME Magazine.¹⁰

Paving the Way Out of Poverty

Bangladeshi economist Muhammad Yunus was awarded the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize not for giving to the poor, but for helping them to help themselves

By ISHAAN THAROOR

As the proverb goes, Muhammad Yunus taught Bangladesh how to fish. Beginning only with \$27, the 66-year-old former economics professor from Chittagong built an institution which uplifted impoverished millions in his country and, if you listen to him, portends the end of global poverty. His Grameen Bank – which is named after the Bengali word for "village" – extended credit to rural poor, empowering entire communities, and especially women, to work, earn income and improve the conditions of their lives. He spoke to TIME moments before hearing the news that he and the bank he founded had been awarded the 2006 Nobel Prize for Peace.

When did it first dawn on you to start loaning small amounts of money to poor people with no collateral?

In 1974, there was a famine in the country. We felt terrible because instead of things improving after liberation, things were getting worse. I felt empty because my knowledge in economics meant little to the people suffering. So I would go out to the village near the University and tried to do something to help. I saw how people suffered for not having access to tiny amounts of money. Villagers had to borrow from loan sharks on terrible conditions – some even becoming slave labor for the money lenders. I made a list of 42 people most seriously in debt who, all together, owed no more than \$27, and I went around the village according to the list, giving each person the money they owed with no conditions other than that they concentrate on their work and repay me when they could. It was a big shock for me that just a little bit of money could make people so happy. With the money, they could become free.

¹⁰ Copied from <http://www.webislam.com/english/?idt=141>.

Investors and philanthropists have been astonished that your impoverished clients repay 99% of these loans on time. How does the Grameen Bank work?

Each branch is self-contained, its own Grameen Bank, made up of a community of borrowers and local staff who all know each other. We have a total staff of 20,000, lend \$800 million a year to 6.6 million members nationwide. The Bank is very close to its community; there is a relationship of trust and the system as a whole encourages repayment. There is no attempt on anyone's part to outsmart anyone. After all, everyone wants to keep the door open to opportunity and we present that opportunity.

You maintain that credit is a human right. Why?

For any human right – the right to work, shelter, education – a person needs to be enabled to do it. Society can create the environment where this takes place, but the fundamental thing with human beings is self-employment, for someone to unleash their own potential, to unwrap that gift of one's self and find out who you are. With credit, people can begin to create income and improve their lives. If the right to credit is established first, then it makes other human rights easier to achieve.

96% of Grameen Bank members are women. Why is that?

When we started, we looked at all the other banks in Bangladesh and found that only 1% of their membership were women. We aimed for 50/50 in the beginning. The main challenge for a poor woman was overcoming the fear in her which was holding her up. We found that compared to men who spent money more freely, women benefited their families much more. Women wanted to save and invest and create assets, unlike men who wanted to enjoy right away. Women are more self-sacrificing, they want to see their children better fed, better dressed and, as a result, the conditions of the entire community improved.

In a heavily Muslim society, did this trigger any opposition?

We've had opposition on many fronts. Of course, the first opposition came from the husbands, who thought we were insulting them. The second were the mullahs, who started preaching that taking money from the Grameen Bank was against religion and that they should leave it to their husbands. Some even scolded the women for being so gullible to listen to us and claimed that we were Christian missionaries! We told them that in Islamic history women had been warriors and businessmen – look at the Prophet's first wife! There was also political opposition: the radical Left campaigned against us because they thought we were part of an American conspiracy, bringing capitalism to the poor so they wouldn't join the revolution. The Right in the country suspected that we were trying to organize the people into a political force – that we were a communist threat. We had people accusing us of being guilty of two opposite things! But in time people have gradually accepted the good that Grameen has done, and the social empowerment it has created with millions of the poorest Bangladeshis is undeniable.

What singular achievement do you take most pride in when looking back at three decades of the Grameen Bank?

I would have to say that I did something that challenged the banking world. Banking now must be all inclusive. Conventional banks look for the rich; we look for the absolutely poor. All people are entrepreneurs, but many don't have the opportunity to find that out. All I said was that poor people can handle money to improve their situation, and the effectiveness of this is being demonstrated tenfold around the world.

You said a decade ago that our grandchildren will have to go to museums to see poverty. Do you still hold fast to that conviction?

Yes, absolutely: 58% of the poor who borrowed from Grameen are now out of poverty. 2005 was declared the Year of Microcredit, and there are over 100 million people now involved with microcredit (programs). At the rate we're heading, we'll halve total poverty by 2015. We'll create a poverty museum in 2030.

From such reports as the above, Dear, maybe you, too, can find grounds for some optimism. Let me list some points I consider especially noteworthy.

- Notice the hurdles that Yunus had to overcome: discrimination against women by patriarchy and its supporting clerics, and discrimination against the poor by “money sharks” and other bankers.
- Notice, too, that single person can make a huge difference in this world.
- And although you can't see it from the above, I'd have you notice that the Nobel Peace-Prize Committee considered so many worthy candidates for the 2006 award.

Relative to that last point, consider the following from an article by Nina Berglund in the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*:¹¹

Yunus beat out 191 other candidates [168 individuals and 23 organizations] for this year's Peace Prize. Candidates are never identified, but it was widely thought that human rights activists like Lida Yusupova in Chechnya¹² and Rebiya Kadeer of northwest China, or peace brokers like Maarti Ahtisaari, were on the committee's list.

Actually, I question why the Nobel Committee doesn't publicly identify (and praise!) all candidates. On the one hand, there's little of higher honor (in my opinion) than being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. And on the other hand, surely the vast majority of the people in the world would benefit from learning more about the wonderful people and groups of people who have done so much for world peace as to be considered candidates for the Nobel Peace Prize.

¹¹ Copied from <http://www.aftenposten.no/english/local/article1492637.ece>.

¹² An article about this brave woman is at <http://www.aftenposten.no/english/local/article1493896.ece>.

Yet, in spite of my finding encouragement in such people and from such progress, much more progress is needed. Although major progress is made by helping starving people start chicken farms (and similar), yet for any society's economy to grow and compete in the modern world and for humanity to make progress toward more peace and prosperity, then people in all societies must become more and better educated.

4. Promoting Women's Liberation *via* Expanding Education

As present, educational deficiencies throughout the world are “mind boggling”. For example, even for “educationally advanced” countries such as the UK and the US, consider the following assessment by Richard Dawkins, contained in his description of the mission of Foundation for Reason and Science.¹³

I have just visited my local branch of Britain's biggest bookshop chain, and this is what I found: six books on astronomy and nineteen books on astrology. The real science is outnumbered three to one by the pseudoscience. There were twenty books on angels, which means that angels and astrology together (39) outnumber the totality of books on all the sciences (33). When you add in the books on fairies, crystal healing, fortune telling, faith healing, Nostradamus, psychics, and dream interpretation, it is no contest. Pseudoscience outnumbers science by at least three to one, and I didn't even begin to count the far larger number of books on religion. This is not, of course, an academic bookshop. Oxford is well supplied with those, and they'd show a very different result. I made my counts in a popular bookshop, presumably typical of the nationwide chain of which it is a part – indeed, the chain's buying policy is centralized in London, and we may be sure that strenuous and expensive efforts are made to reflect popular taste. As a statistical generalization, the general public, as opposed to an academic readership, prefers irrational books over books that reflect what we know about the real world.

A recent Gallup poll concluded that nearly 50% of the American public believes the universe is less than 10,000 years old. Nearly half the population, in other words, believes that the entire universe, the sun and solar system, the Milky Way galaxy, the Andromeda galaxy, and all the billions of other galaxies, all began *after* the domestication of the dog. They believe this because they rate a particular bronze-age origin-myth more highly than all the scientific evidence in the world. It is only one of literally thousands of such myths from around the world, but it happened, by a series of historical accidents, to become enshrined in a book – *Genesis* – which, by another series of historical accidents, has been translated and disseminated to almost every home in the land plus – infuriatingly – every hotel room.

¹³ Copied from a transcript of a video available at <http://richarddawkins.net/foundation.ourMission>.

Even before science told us the true story of the origin of the world and the evolution of life, there was no reason to believe the Jewish origin myth any more than the origin myths of the Yoruba or the Kikuyu, the Yanomamo or the Maori, the Dogon or the Cherokee. Now, in the 21st Century as we approach Darwin's bicentenary, the fact that half of Americans take *Genesis* literally is nothing less than an educational scandal...

And of course the “educational scandal” is far worse in other countries. Illustrative is the following statement by John Daniel, when he was Assistant Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):¹⁴

...the Arab region has some of the world's lowest adult literacy rates, with only 60% of the region's population of 15-and-over able to read and to write in 2000, well below the world average of 80%... Gender disparity in literacy is severe. Women account for nearly two-thirds of the region's illiterates, a figure not expected to change much by 2015.

That is, in the US and the UK during the year 2000, at least the majority of people could read (although consider again what they read!), but in the Islamic world, approximately ½ of all females couldn't even read! Yet, as the following quotation shows, some progress has been made, especially in Arab counties with oil wealth.¹⁵

The literacy rate in Saudi Arabia in 1970 was 15% for men and 2% for women. By 1990 it was 73% for men and 48% for women, and, in 2002 it reached 90.9% and 70.2%, respectively.

But, Dear, if you think about the situation for a little while, I expect you'll quickly become quite discouraged by prospects not only for liberating women from patriarchs but also for the prospects of their breaking free from the clerically concocted Catch-22 and the god meme. Thus, although 70% of the women in Saudi Arabia may now be able to read, yet as I've already sketched, women's lives – and deaths – continue to be totally under the control of patriarchs.

Further, although the statement “By 1990 it [viz., literacy in the richest Islamic country] was 73% for men and 48% for women, and, in 2002 it

¹⁴ See his presentation “Education for All in the Arab World: Past, Present and Future”, available at <http://www.unesco.org/education/adg>.

¹⁵ From <http://www.ajc.org/InTheMedia/PubEuropeEducation.asp?did=744&pid=1620>.

reached 90.9% and 70.2%, respectively” may seem promising, these data are only for “literacy” – and “literacy” is enormously less than is needed to break free from the clerics’ Catch-22. For example, I’ve seen (on TV) what this “literacy” means in Pakistan: poor little children (mostly boys) “educated” (by clerics) to learn how to read (and memorize!) only the Quran! Similar horror was perpetrated against European children by the damnable Christian clerics during Europe’s Dark Ages.

In contrast, what’s needed is to increase the level of education up to the ability to be able to distinguish tested hypotheses from clearly invented balderdash – and based on the data showing ~90% of Americans “believe” in God, 90% of Americans (including your mother) are obviously still far below that level.

5. Promoting Women’s Liberation *via* Educating Males!

I have no doubt that more and better education is the fundamental remedy for both child abuse and abuse and discrimination against women – and I’m equally certain that providing such education is an absolutely humungous problem. Furthermore, it’s my opinion that the most difficult part of the problem is not in educating females but in educating males! To begin to see what I mean, Dear, consider what progress you might make if you approached a Pakistani tribal leader and informed him that his idea of tribal honor was wrong, or if you approached a Saudi father and told him that the ways he treated his wife and children were barbaric.

What seems obvious is the need for a huge change in such patriarchal, tribal, abusive cultures – but equally obvious is that it’s not easy to get cultures to change. In all cultures, some people are satisfied with the *status quo*, namely, those who are in power (fathers, tribal leaders, politicians) and those who have managed to prosper in the culture as parasites (such as all clerics). Consequently, those who try to expedite cultural change will commonly need not only to confront the most powerful and influential members of the culture but also to convince them that they’d experience substantial advantages if they permitted their culture to change.

And let me add that one of the best ways to perpetuate a backward society is to provide it with substantial unearned wealth. Such has been the case with oil rich nations such as Saudi Arabia and Iran (and other nations, as well), in which the leaders have used the largess to strengthen the social *status quo*.

For contrast, I'd suggest that Muhammad Yunus, with his \$27 and his Grameen Bank, has done billions of times more good for humanity than have the foolish leaders of Saudi Arabia, who have been spending ~\$3 billion per year exporting their damnable, fundamentalist, Sunni version of Islam called Wahhabism. Someday, surely the descendants of these Saudis will spit on their graves: with their oil resources, the Saudis literally have a "golden opportunity" to lift their society out of their Islamic Dark Age; instead, they buy off the patriarchs and the clerics (and live in unsurpassed luxuries), squandering their descendants' inheritances. If the Saudi "Royal Family" doesn't change, then 100 years from now, Saudi citizens will again be riding camels in poverty through sands that buried the squandered opulence.

Yet, in spite of the tremendous accomplishments of Muhammad Yunus, the problems of liberating women in such societies are so enormous that they seem insurmountable. Illustrative is the following paragraph from the informative report¹⁶ by Elhum Haghghat entitled "A Comparative Analysis of Neopatriarchy and Female Labor Force Participation in Islamic Countries." This paragraph is a quotation of an article by Obermeyer.¹⁷

The ambivalence of any Arab/Muslim leaders toward female emancipation stems from their need to address two conflicting demands in their societies: prosperity, which means modernization; and identity, which is partly rooted in tradition... The traditional bases of identity [viz., patriarchy] present themselves as the safest choice, and religion is used selectively to cope with political exigencies and to legitimize the power of individual leaders...

Haghghat concludes:

To sum up, it seems that once women's labor in the modern sector is in demand, government responds to the need by integrating women into the labor force. Islamic ideology as a conservative factor to suppress women's equal access to the modern sectors is manipulated when the society is facing a high rate of male unemployment. Government officials engineer this strategy as a way to deflect attention from economic failures. Gender issues had been addressed in those countries superficially, because women's labor force participation has never been seriously in demand. Because of high fertility rate [and] political and economic failures, governments are

¹⁶ Available online at <http://www.sociology.org/archive.html>; the article was published in the *Electronic Journal of Sociology* (2005), ISSN: 1198 3655.

¹⁷ Haghghat gives the reference: Obermeyer, C.M. (1992) "Islam, Women, and Politics: The Demography of Arab Countries." *Population and Development Review* 18, no. 1 (March).

facing high rates of unemployment and a disproportionately young population in search of jobs. In these circumstances, Islamic ideology is manipulated to keep women out of the labor force and men are given priority.

Again, the problems of liberating women in such societies are so enormous that they seem insurmountable. Somehow such societies must be dragged (no doubt “kicking and screaming”, e.g., the reactions of Osama bin Laden and his murdering cohorts) into at least the start of the 20th Century – leaving for later the task of dragging them into the 21st Century.

One approach, one attempt to surmount such problems, is given in an excellent article¹⁸ by Isobel Coleman entitled “The Payoff from Women’s Rights” and published in the May/June 2004 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. I encourage you to read this article, Dear; here, I’ll provide you with only its summary:

Backing women’s rights in developing countries isn’t just good ethics; it’s also sound economics. Growth and living standards get a dramatic boost when women are given just a bit more education, political clout, and economic opportunity. So the United States should aggressively promote women’s rights abroad. And by couching its case in economic terms, it might even overcome the resistance of conservative Muslim countries that have long balked at gender equality.

That’s a hopeful possibility when it’s coupled with the desire of many political leaders to strengthen their nations’ economies (evidence for which I showed you in an earlier chapter). In that chapter (and subsequently), I argued that this quest for greater “economic competitiveness” could be tapped to promote kids being taught evaluative-thinking skills. Now, I want to suggest that this same “economic competitiveness” be tapped for its potentials to weaken patriarchy and liberate women. But before arguing the case, I should try to defend some generalizations.

6. Promoting Women’s Liberation *via* Promoting Cooperation

My first generalization (already suggested in earlier X-chapters) is an application of Heraclitus’ concept “all things come to pass through... strife.” The generalization is that, next to the strife between humanity and nature, the dominant strife with which humanity must contend is between competition and cooperation among humans.

¹⁸ Available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20040501faessay83308/isobel-coleman/the-payoff-from-women-s-rights.html>.

I should note, in particular, that for multiple chapters, now, I've been suggesting how competition among humans could be exploited to obtain not only permission but even encouragement to teach kids evaluative-thinking skills. In contrast, to promote women's liberation, I now want to emphasize, not competition, but cooperation.

My second generalization follows from my opinion that the expressed desires of political leaders throughout the world for their societies to become more "economically competitive" (and therefore, their expressed desires that their schools should improve education in science, technology, and mathematics) is myopic – although I wouldn't want that opinion to be widely appreciated, because it would undermine my ardent desire for kids, worldwide, to become more competent critical thinkers!

But temporarily setting that concern aside, I want to mention two points:

- 1) In reality, only an extremely small fraction (maybe one in a million!) of those kids trained in science and technology will assist the kid's society in becoming more "economically competitive" (i.e., there will be very, very few future Watts or Wrights or Edisons or similar), and
- 2) Therefore, quite likely more important for a society's "economic competitiveness" is a well-organized, cooperative workforce (as demonstrated so well by "the Asian Tiger economies").

Consequently, although I wouldn't want prospects for teaching evaluative-thinking skills to be undermined, my second generalization is: **realistically, political leaders would help their nation's economic competitiveness more by promoting the teaching of kids about how to work together cooperatively.**

My conclusion, that improving women's education and promoting cooperation will improve the economies of underdeveloped countries, certainly isn't original. More than a hundred years ago, the brave and brilliant Jewish-Polish-American "individualist, feminist, abolitionist, freethinker, and atheist" Ernestine Louise Rose (1810–1892) said:¹⁹

The wisest of all ages have acknowledged that the most important period in human education is in childhood... This most important part of education is left entirely in the hands of the mother. She prepares the soil for future culture... But the mother cannot give what she does not possess; weakness cannot impart strength. With an

¹⁹ Copied from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernestine_Rose.

imperfect education... can she develop the powers, call out the energies, and impart a spirit of independence in her sons?... The mother must possess these high and noble qualities, or she never can impart them to her offspring...

More recently, UN Secretary General Kofi Anan said similar: “...there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls.” And I support his statement almost no matter how one interprets the word ‘development’!

Thus, a more educated mother would generally lead to more educated children (the educated mother's girls would be expected to continue the process, while the mother's boys would be expected to be more receptive to further liberation of women). In addition, educating and then employing women would help develop their society's economic strength (through incorporation of women's cooperation), help develop democratic societies (in turn leading to more peace throughout the world), and thereby, help develop a more peaceful and prosperous global society (while also protecting the environment for future generations, courtesy more educated women). Stated differently, educating girls is the most effective way to start the slow process of lifting humanity up by its collective bootstraps. As Karl Marx (1818–1883) said:

Social progress can be measured by the social position of the female sex.

In his 24 September 2006 op-ed column in the *New York Times* entitled “Democracy: Closing of a Nation”, David Brooks summarized it well:

The larger lesson, as we think about future efforts to reform the Middle East and combat extremism, is that the Chinese model probably works best. That is, it's best to champion economic reform before political reform... We know from a wealth of historical experience that when people see their standard of living rise, they reject the reactionary survival mentality and they become more open to others and to change. If people already see their lives improving materially, they will be more likely to keep their cool as their political institutions are reinvented... In the age of terror, statesmanship means knowing how to create a sense of security so you can lead people on a voyage of reform.

In contrast to such needs, desires, and advantages of such a “voyage of reform”, the educational opportunities for girls in most Islamic countries are nothing short of criminal.

Yet, to get such a “voyage of reform” underway, to expedite cultural change, is such an enormous job that I admit to the temptation to just say: “**Forget it! Let them stew in their stupidities of tribalism, male chauvinism, and supernaturalism.**” But then, Dear, think of the kids caught in the traps of their culture’s making: they’re physically, emotionally, sexually, and mentally abused by parents and other adults (who were similarly abused when they were kids), abuse that’s perpetuated by political leaders (whose prime goal is to continue in power) and “sanctified” by a bunch of lame-brain clerics (whose prime goal is to continue their parasitic existence).

And it’s not just in Muslim countries. It’s also here, in America, as practiced by sects of the “Christian Reich” (especially in various Evangelical sects, but also including Catholicism and Mormonism). Again, pity the poor children.

And if the difficulty of the voyage starts to depress also you, Dear, then maybe it’ll help to reconsider two “pieces of wisdom”. One is often expressed as, “**A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,**” although it’s more accurately translated from the original recorder of Taoism [i.e., Lao-Tzu (604–531 BCE)] as, “The journey of a thousand miles begins beneath one’s feet,” or “Even the longest journey must begin where you stand.”²⁰ Stated still differently, there’s really no other option than to start where from we are.

And another “piece of wisdom” is the idea that everything is connected to everything else, expressed well by the English poet Francis Thompson (1859–1907) as follows:

All things by immortal power
Near or far
Hiddenly
To each other linked are
That thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star.

Therefore, there’s really no point in complaining about how interconnected the problems are; that’s just the way it is; so, there’s nothing else to do but to begin to try to solve them all.

²⁰ Those more accurate translations are from <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/24004.html>.

In particular, as I've been trying to show you, to try to bring more peace and prosperity to the world, then there's need for more people to "get real". To do that, probably the best procedure is to try to help kids by improving education (so the kids will learn evaluative-thinking skills), and even before that, put a stop to the abuse of children. Probably the most important way to do that is to stop the abuse of women by promoting their liberation (especially their economic independence). But then, to do that, probably the most important task is to decrease the dominance of patriarchy, tribalism, and fundamentalist religions – topics that I'll address in subsequent chapters.

In the next two chapters, I'll address possible methods to educate men – to permit the education of women, to promote their economic liberation, to diminish child abuse! As I'll try to show you, I think that the task of educating men should be recognized to be subsumed by what seems to be the most pressing problem currently facing humanity: the need for liberation of men (from the violence of collectivism, toward the freedoms of individualism). But before trying to show you what I mean by that, let me try to show you what I meant by still another way to promote the liberation of women, namely:

7. Promoting Women's Liberation *via* EXalting Goddesses

Recall from earlier chapters that in polytheistic cultures (such as the culture of your ancestors, before they were conquered by the Christians, and such as the cultures of Middle Eastern women, before their ancestors were conquered by monotheists such as Muslims), many of the gods and goddesses were male and female ideals (or "idols"), exemplifying, e.g., truth, justice, love, cooperation, compassion, courage, and so on. As I've mentioned in earlier chapters, I think it was a terrible blow to human development that all such ideals were compacted into a single giant Jabberwock in the sky, viz., the Egyptian pharaoh Akenaten's monotheism, which was later promoted (and literally "capitalized" upon) by Ezra, "Saint" Paul, Muhammad, Joseph Smith, and other madmen.

Actually, though, humans never totally yielded their polytheism, for they still idealize a huge number of "heroes" and even a few "heroines" (e.g., various sports, entertainment, and other "heroes", from Einstein to Elvis and from Marie Curie to Patsy Cline). And thus, by "EXalting goddesses", I mean promoting such ideals as Ms. Mukhtaran, whose heroism I highlighted

* Go to other chapters *via*

in the previous chapter and who, as you can find on the internet,²¹ was a finalist for “The Most Inspiring Person of the Year Award”. Another example is the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Shirin Ebadi. Would that more people would know more about such goddesses – including Azam Kamguian.

Of course I realize that what's been done to recognize such women is only a “drop in the bucket” – or even “a drop in the ocean” – compared to what's needed to overcome tribalism and its props (i.e., patriarchal religions); yet, please remember two important points. One is (again) the Ancient Chinese wisdom that “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” and the other is the butterfly effect; that is, no one can predict the “winds of change” (or even hurricanes!) that might result from helping butterflies like Mukhtaran Bibi to take flight.

And thereby, Dear, maybe you see why a certain set of grandparents sent certain granddaughters those books describing so many heroines, from Hatchepsut to Cleopatra, from Eliza Pinckney to Margaret Knight, from Irene Curie to Laura Bassi, from Mary Leakey to Florence Nightingale, and from Indira Gandhi to Golda Meir and Amatalrauf al-Sharki. Sending those books was just another small way to try to help three more beautiful butterflies take flight – assuming, of course, that they get enough eXercise!

²¹ See http://www.beliefnet.com/story/157/story_15720_1.html.