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Title: The Sources of Secularism: Our Religions

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7/30/2007--Our Religions have failed and are failing two great tests in our day: the role of women and the rights of homosexuals.

In only a small fraction of Our Religions are women and gays treated as genuinely equal to heterosexual men. In liberal religious pockets, women have achieved almost full equality in the ministry and administrative leadership. This is true in the Episcopal Church, for example, but even there, there is tension over the role of women within the greater Anglican community. The more telling example is that women cannot be priests in the Roman Catholic Church. In terms of the rights of gays, an even smaller pocket of liberal religious groups perform gay marriages and truly accept homosexuality.

Of course, it is not for me or anyone else to tell the Catholic Church whether women ought to serve as priests or whether gay marriage should be recognized. But the right of Our Religions to believe what they believe is not what's at issue.

For many people, including me, it is obvious that women and men are equal in any sense relevant to religion. To anyone like me, excluding women or limiting their role is just prejudice, no different from a rule excluding blacks from leadership positions. So, it is just impossible to take Our Religions seriously when the role of women is even an issue.

What is even worse, from the point of view of the religions of the Book, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad must be regarded as rather advanced, even revolutionary, in their views of the role of women for their time. For their followers to be less radical in attitude is intolerable.

Take for example the exclusion of women from becoming Catholic priests. This is often said to root in Jesus' own selection of twelve men to be Apostles. But the Apostles weren't just men. They probably were not dark skinned. Yet no one would think that Africans are excluded from the priesthood. Nor were they maimed, which was an important ritual point in Jewish law. Jesus simply could not have selected a disabled person as an Apostle because of the opposition of people at that time. Nor were any of them illegitimate. That also was not a minor point, for the status of illegitimacy would have excluded an Apostle from many homes. Yet, obviously none of this is considered a restriction today on who may be a priest.

The prejudice against homosexuals is even greater. Many religious people regard homosexuality as objectively unnatural. But we now know that homosexuality is rather common in nature and has always been present in human society as well. Jesus never condemned homosexuality. The matter never came up. But why should the Book of Leviticus be invoked against homosexuality when it is never invoked against eating ham and shrimp, which of course were also condemned in the Old Testament?

The prejudice against gay people in Our Religions has had the tragic effect of turning many gay people against religion itself. Obviously this is not the intention of any religious leader regardless of his opinion about gays. Nevertheless, we are all responsible for the consequences of our actions. It seems to me that the contribution of these failures of religion to the growing secularization of our time, especially among the young, who do not share these prejudices to the same extent as their elders, is a judgment against Our Religions.

There are other failures by Our Religions. For one thing, Our Religions are contributing to the problems of the world in both obvious and subtle ways. The obvious ways are fanaticism and violence. In the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians, the more religious you are the more likely you are to support violence and to refuse to consider compromise and the needs of the other party. The drive for "Greater Israel, including Judea and Samaria" and the commitment to Jihad are religious commitments. Conversely, the more secular you are, the more willing you will be to seek peace and risk your own interests to attain it. These are gross generalizations,

but I think in the main, they ring true. There are justifications for an atheist like Hitchens to write a book attributing the problems of the world to Our Religions. Obviously, young people look at these things and many turn away from religion.

A more subtle point is that Our Religions have often lost the heart of their own message and have become a part of the problem, even if they are not the most significant part. Bill McKibben makes this point in his book, *Deep Economy*.^[1] McKibben points out that most Christians in America believe that the saying “God helps those who help themselves” can be found in the Bible. Actually the phrase originated with Ben Franklin and it expresses an individualism that is at odds with the Bible in general and with Jesus’ message in particular.

This is just one example of how tame Christianity and Judaism have become in the face of capitalist organization of the world. Our Religions are just important enough to be a source of conflict among people, but have not been radical enough to be the source of transformation they were meant to be and have been in the past.

Part of the reason that Our Religions have not convinced the young that they are the new future is that they have been either asleep or defensive in the face of a new and more vigorous atheism. Religion doesn’t have to be ridiculous but it often is because new thinking doesn’t enter the houses of worship. Theologians have dealt with the issue of miracles from the perspective of modern man, for example, but you won’t hear their message in most churches or synagogues. Our clergy are generally both timid and smug, an odd combination.

Even the bold clergy who reinterpret for their flocks, tend to do so in post-modern irony, without the passionate commitment that originally gave our holy texts life. It is not helpful to hear the words “whatever you think that means” after invoking God. We don’t have a lot of Sarah Blumenthals in our pulpits.

There are many exceptions to these criticisms, of course. But it is fair to say that they do not contradict the rule. One consistent exception is the very liberal, politicized religion of certain Unitarian congregations. Here is where you can find gay ministers and consistently caring congregants. Maybe this will be a model in the future. For me, the problem here is that religion really is more than politics, which is why the politics religion gives birth to can be so shockingly original. This form of politicized religion to me is not hallowed and therefore, although I usually agree, I don’t trust it.

[1] *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* (Times Books 2007)
