

Feminism a personal and political experience

The following is a satirical view of the opinions of Marilyn Kerstead.

Womynsay

For many womyn and men, feminism is a mystery if not a completely foreign phenomenon. Negative images of feminists as angry man-haters who refuse to shave or enjoy sex, or whining womyn who refuse to take responsibility and wallow in victim status, have caused many to disassociate themselves from the feminist movement, if not reject it altogether. For others, it is the polyphonic nature of conflicting feminist voices that creates confusion, leaving many to question, "What is feminism?" And those of us who attempt to respond are equally frustrated as feminism exists in the dualism of being both theory and personal experience.

Personally, the introduction of feminist theory to my academic career was a revolutionary experience. It was the moment when 'personal became political' and it provided not only the analytical tools to express gendered experience in my studies, but the words to articulate the frustration and pain I felt as a womyn. No longer alienated by my feelings, I was united through the collective experience of many. I was coming into my own: sharing feminism with my sisters; being emotionally and spiritually uplifted; and

prepared to demand change. This is the upside. Now that I identify myself as a feminist, I place my personal experience in a very public realm, where every belief, understanding, and experience is up for debate and criticism — not just by others but by myself as well. My 'personal is political', remember. This is the downside.

But the solidarity of the upside always sees me through the down, and I am challenged by the opposition and spurred on to demystify feminism for my friends and colleagues who remain unaware as to the true sense of the word.

While feminism means many different things to many different people, to me it means (as I best can express it in one sentence) the acknowledgment of womyn's subordination, a deep love of womyn, but mostly the commitment and determination to bring forth change. By sharing my personal relationship with feminism, I hope I have encouraged those who support the feminist movement as well as those who could benefit to reexamine it!

Jina Rodas is a member of the UNB Womyn's Collective.

It's time for a merry revolution

The following is a satirical view of the opinions of Marilyn Kerstead.

Sometimes things are not what they seem. Take Christmas, for example. To most people it is a perfectly innocent holiday where the most important thing is to get lots of presents (unless you are one of those people who think it is better to give than receive...), eat and drink more than you really should and generally have a lot of fun. Nothing wrong with that. But a small minority of people want Christmas to mean something else; something more sinister, and they appear to be having quite a lot of success.

The people in question — let's call them 'Christians' — seem to think that there is some kind of religious significance to the holiday season, and they would like nothing better than for everyone to send Christmas cards with images of a baby (let's call him 'the son of God') rather than jolly old St. Nick. Can you believe it? No more Santa Claus at all!

These people maintain that the holiday celebrates the birth of 'the son of God', and that the best way to celebrate is to go to religious buildings (let's call them 'churches') and sing songs of praise to some god or other. Careful examination of the lyrics of the songs in question have revealed a very high religious content, and an acclamation of 'love' for their 'God' (let's call him 'The Lord'). With such blatant disregard for the true spirit of the holidays, can an outright ban on the form of Christmas we have all come to know and love be far away if these people have their way?

Research into the origins of Christmas reveal that the event started as a festival of merrymaking in the Middle Ages, with the word itself coming from the ancient English *crissing*, meaning "to party," and the Scandinavian *tmaz* meaning "gifts." It was only slightly later that the 'Christians' came along and took this beautiful festival and poisoned it with their own agenda.

Not only do they want to promote their own views on the holiday, but they are also trying to 'decommercialize' Christmas, getting rid of what must be the most pleasant aspect of the season — shopping. What else would we all have to do in the last few days before December 25th if we weren't out shopping for gifts? Exactly.

One man who calls himself a practicing 'Christian' said that it gave 'Christians' an immense amount of joy to see people being fooled into celebrating a religious holiday by the subtle infiltration of Christmas — the mentions of the baby, the songs to 'The Lord' and so on. And all this is going on under our very noses!

The time has come to take back Christmas from these people and restore it to its rightful position as a holiday of excess chocolate and massive spending. But in order to do this, we have to unite and show the 'Christians' that we will stand for no more of this religious claptrap.

Who's with me?

Michael Edwards

RID

All dressed up with everywhere to go!

In keeping with the spirit of Halloween coming up next week, I'd like to look at the concept of cross-dressing as it pertains to society. Cross-dressing has been with us since the beginning of history. Both men and women often wore the clothing of the other sex for numerous reasons. Predominantly though, more men than women cross-dress.

In ancient times, various societies have stories of people wearing the clothing of the opposite sex, mainly to avoid detection for one reason or another. Literature is filled with anecdotes and recordings of women dressed as men in order to not be "taken advantage of" by men. Men were usually dressed in women's clothing as a disguise for a mission. In most of these accounts, the underlying themes were focused toward disguise and circumstantial need.

As a form of entertainment, various cultures have promoted cross-dressing, mainly with male performers dressing as women. The Japanese kabuki theatres often had male performers dressed in the long flowing kimonos of the women of Japan; mimicked actions and behaviours conveyed the story inherent in the particular performance. Ancient Greece had its traditional theatrical style with male performers also taking female roles. The central theme here is entertainment, often humorous, in which the conveyance of the performance imitates certain social values and tenets.

In certain contexts however, cross-dressing is a part of the cultural norms of a given society. Certain aboriginal cultures in Africa and the South Americas have an almost gender reversed ideology in terms of social appearance and gender roles. In these tribes, the men dress up in elaborate costumes and natural "make-up" in order to impress potential mates. The women dress up as well, but not as elaborately as do the men. Such a concept of cross-dressing is a function of the sociocultural complexities of these societies.

In the past, most cases of cross-dressing were taken as a form of entertainment or, as in the case of the few aboriginal tribes, a cultural norm. The few cross-dressers who actually wore opposite sex clothing because they liked it, or because they identified with members of the opposite sex were often perceived as eccentric or insane. In most modern societies of the 1990's, the idea of cross-dressing is simply perceived as a strange concept. Most promoters of cross-dressing appear to be gay men, with some straight men and a few lesbians to add to the mix. Little do most people realize, some forms of cross-dressing are part and parcel of modern society. For instance, T-shirts, pants, dress shirts and other apparel are often worn by either sex as clothing for everyday wear. These people are seldom viewed as strange, yet those who do cross-dress with deliberate intent to convey themselves as members of the opposite sex are often viewed in negative terms.

Perhaps one of the more entertaining and outrageous forms of cross-dressing is the idea of the drag queen. Heterosexual or homosexual/bisexual men appearing as women (often with stunning results) have been subjected to much ridicule in the past and to some extent still do. Nevertheless, the existence and stability of drag queens has led to some outstanding careers. The late Divine led a successful career as a performer in numerous alternative and B-movies. The success of the current reigning drag queen, RuPaul, has taken singing and supermodel agencies by storm.

This phenomenon has helped open the eyes of many to the existence of cross-dressing. For the lesbian community, the concept of cross-dressing is a part of our population's diversity. The recognition and understanding of drag queens and others who cross-dress is but one obstacle among many to overcome. Unnecessarily perceived as an abnormality or freakshow, it has slowly been gaining ground as a form of entertainment, social statement and way of life for some people.

Metanoia

John Valk

Religion and education: when fear and ignorance reign

Lois Sweet, award winning Ottawa journalist, recently hosted a two-part special on CBC's *National Magazine* on the issue of "Religious Education" (Sept. 16-17). In the history of this program, no other special has received so many responses, written or otherwise, from its viewers.

In conjunction with the CBC series, the *Toronto Star* ran a five-part series (Sept. 14-18) in which Sweet explored the debate over religion and educational choice in Canadian schools and the contentious issue of who should pay for religious instruction. Again, responses have been overwhelming.

The issue of religion and education is coming to the fore. The question is, how do we integrate the two? How do we teach about religion as if it mattered; religion as a central and integrating aspect in the lives of many people? Here, public education — from elementary to university levels — has shamefully neglected its duty. Knowledge and awareness about religion is seriously lacking, and it has led to unnecessary fear and ignorance.

That struck me yet again as two students interviewed me regarding the place of religion in the school curriculum. Religion, for them, had been reduced largely to right-wing, fundamentalist, intolerant and narrow-minded Christianity. In no way did they feel this kind of religion should have any place in the schools. I agreed.

Then I informed them that they might be equally intolerant, narrow-minded and perhaps even discriminatory. Having embraced relativism — all religions are basically equal they assured me — they themselves were not as knowledgeable, open and tolerant as they had assumed. That caught them by surprise.

Why does such a narrow perception of religion in general and Christianity in particular exist, not least among university educated students? True, there are right-wing, fundamentalist, intolerant and narrow-minded Christians in our society. There are also right-wing, fundamentalist, intolerant and narrow-minded non-Christians. But to assume that this represents all Christians and Christianity is patently false, as any honest teacher, scholar and journalist will affirm.

Further, to assume that all religions are basically the same is also false. Any devote Jew, Muslim, Christian or Native person recognizes that. We live in a pluralistic society that recognizes differences of culture. We must also recognize the deep differences among religious beliefs. They are not all basically the same. To teach so is to distort the truth.

The media bends over backwards to present a narrow perception of Christians and Christianity. Because schools fail to adequately teach about religion, the media has become the prime source of information. As such, it is the source of much distortion, bias and ignorance. The purpose of education is to remove these. Actually, it is to get at the truth. Why has public education failed to teach adequately about religion, about different religious ways of life, about people for whom religion is an integral part of their life?

Education ought to teach responsible citizenship: mutual respect, mutual responsibility, economic equity, social justice, and environmental integrity. These are also important when teaching about differences in religious beliefs. Schools, however, are not to teach religious assimilation. They are not to teach about religion as if deep religious differences do not exist, or do not matter.

Failure to properly educate leads to fear. Students and others fear what they do not know. When fear and ignorance reign, complex matters are all too frequently reduced to simple and false notions. Intolerance and discrimination follow, and these work both ways. On the other hand, knowledge and wisdom about religion results in tolerance extended towards, and space created for, those who believe and think differently.

Lois Sweet had few positive things to say about private religious schools. Yet, in her concluding article she perceptively recognized that for those for whom a religious way of life is important, "the fear is very real that the pressures of an aggressively secular school system will result in a loss of faith among their children."

That is no little fear and Sweet, I think, takes it seriously. She states that Canadians face a choice: "We can simply maintain the status quo. This will probably result in increased numbers of people, for whom religion in education is essential, leaving the public education system. Or, we could embark on some bold changes to improve public education and begin to accommodate religious groups."

Sweet makes a number of good suggestions. Two of them, I thought, were significant for us here at UNB. One, changes will not come about if those in the trenches — teachers — aren't supported: "mandatory teacher education courses should be offered on how to teach religious diversity and foster intercultural sensitivity. Professional development days could be used to further this education." Two, "universities across the country could introduce teacher education courses on teaching education about religion, and fostering an understanding of religious differences."

Sweet states that, "public education must begin to examine ways to include the spiritual dimension of human existence in a non-indoctrinating way." I agree. Let's begin teaching about religion as if it matters in the lives of many people.

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