

## See Sherry Speak

## Sexual domination and politics: Man is still on top

SEXISM/ Past sexism has more in common with today than we would like to admit.

by Sherry Morin

See Billy and Sue get gifts. See Billy and Sue unwrap their gifts. See Bobby get a toy gavel. See Sue get a curvaceous fashion doll. See Sue fix the dolly's hair, see Billy pound his gavel. Sue is quiet. Billy makes noise. See Mommy in her apron. See Mommy smile and nod. See Daddy turn away from a sexist beer commercial for long enough to also nod his approval.

Ask some "modern" males if they would ever stand behind a female Prime Minister, and they might answer, "Sure, if the view was good." Ask others, and they might answer with a wholehearted and sincere "Yes." This article sets out to rally support from the latter group, and to work on changing views of the closed-minded former. Due to anti-female social conditioning, a legacy passed on from generation to generation and century to century in patriarchal societies such as ours, this is not an easy task.

Despite meagre gains made by feminist movements, women of the Western world have not achieved equality with men; the battle for equality is ever-raging and never won. For centuries, women have struggled to wrest away their destinies from the power-holding hands of men. Paradoxically, as society rockets forward into the 21st century, invisible vector forces are pushing women back. As society moves to supposedly more liberalist frontiers, the struggle has become more difficult to fight. Male control abuse has crawled deeper within its dark and protective lair, the legal system. It has evolved into a chameleon-like beast, invisible to those it attacks, cleverly sublime and increasingly camouflaged. This beast maintains control over women, by attacking them socially, morally, economically, sexually, and physiologically.

Whether or not forms of male control result in direct violence against women, as in Canada's widespread rash

of domestic violence or rape, is inconsequential. As we shall see, all forms of male control lead to violence. Under Liberalism, our supposed political system, individual rights are crucial and that act of taking them away from women constitutes violence. Psychological evidence testifies that the representation of women, in pornography, advertising or otherwise, as sexual props or mindless objects, provokes male aggression toward women, and therefore constitutes violence. All of these forms of male control, because they constitute violence against women, are equally detrimental and unacceptable.

We like to think of Canada as the proverbial city in the clouds, as a model of political perfection. Meanwhile, we condescendingly label the writings of ancient religions, cultures and their philosophers as "sexist". Aristotle, for instance, is seldom taken seriously because of his quaint and archaic boorishness towards women. If we could see past our noses to read the type of these sexist writings, we would see that their sexism has more in common with our society than we would like to admit.

True, to the Ancient Greeks who read Aristotle 2000 years ago, women were not classed as "citizens"; but the same was true, not so long ago, of "modern" Canadian society. Not until 1929 were women declared people of the Canadian nation. This was to reverse an earlier ruling under the British North America Act that women were not legally "persons"!

In ancient Greece, there were two official, legally-subjected social classes. Again, the same is true of Canadian society, but the enslaved can today be categorized under one name—women. Throughout history, subject social classes have been trodden on in order to preserve the social, economic and political structure of the Male-created State. "If not kept in hand, they are insolent, and think that they are as good as their masters, and, if harshly treated, they hate and conspire against them

(their masters)...when these are the results the citizens of a state have not found the secret to managing their subject population". Aristotle said this of slaves, one subject class, over 2000 years ago. Today, a Modern-day Sexist might apply the same words to modern Canadian women; disobedience of or attempts to change sexist legislation, or a women's charging of her husband for battery might be labelled as "insolence". Attempts to change the traditional, male-dominated structures that still pay women lower wages for equal work are still labelled by protectionist, whining sexists as "hate" and "conspiracy".

The battle for equality and modern feminism, which should be fostered as an essential force for fostering equality, have been met with a severe backlash by a subtle neo-sexism. The male domination monster has again crawled out of its hole. As I have said, its hideaway cave is the Canadian political and legal system, and the infectious culture festering around it.

Many Canadian women were not allowed to run for municipal office until 1970, because male legislators had imposed a "property qualification" on this privilege. It neatly and conveniently discriminated against women in that few women owned property within the regions to which this legislation applied. Ten years ago only 6% of Canada's provincial legislatures were filled by women, according to Politics: Canada. Furthermore, Last year, women occupied only five percent of

the provincial cabinets.

Unfortunately, governmental structure right here on campus is guilty of a blatant slap to the face of feminism. The U.N.B. Student Union is supposed to be a structure fostering equality between all groups of students, regardless of gender, race, or economic background. This should be automatically discerned from its name, "Student Union". Perhaps they should have used some "Basic Instinct", or perhaps common sense, before providing a motion picture as misogynic as "Basic Instinct" at our Loonie Wednesday, a Union-sponsored event. By doing this, the union united us only in joining hands against women. The Union expressed its approval for sexist attitudes and the growth of sexist attitudes, in exchange for profitable ticket sales. According to most English dictionaries, and to feminist writers such as Jillian Ridington, the exploitation, or the marketing of women's bodies for the sake of making a profit, is defined as pornography—not as entertainment. Such an injustice, especially when perpetrated here on campus, by our Student Union, merits further discussion.

First, Basic Instinct objectified women; women were shown in the nude more often than men. Furthermore, women were portrayed in the film as enjoying sexual violence. This factor, in psychological studies, has been proven to increase male-to-female aggression in non-sexual contexts, and also to increase male subjects' tendencies, who view such mate-

rial, to rape women. The most famous of these studies were commissioned by the Canadian Federal Government in 1983, as part of the Fraser Committee on Pornography and Prostitution's investigations. In other words, even a traditionally counter-feminist government recognized that the objectification of women, or the degrading of them by treating them unequally as objects to be enjoyed men, is detrimental to women's position in society. The worst stink from Basic Instinct came from the fact that the two most intelligent female characters in the film were depicted as either inherently dependent on men for their happiness or as psychotic. Horrifically, this could provoke male hostility towards intelligent women, particularly condoning male aggression toward female students here on campus, where intelligent and driven women should be commended, not hated, by both their male and female associates.

Blind compliance to any unjust, patriarchally-generated legislation, or to the social conditioning spawned by it, is a crime. All citizens who subscribe passively to sexist systems and gender roles, whether those citizens be male or female, are conspirators in the injustice. Remember this—as far as eliminating sexism is concerned, the road to Parliament Hill was paved with good intentions.

That's it for this week, kiddies; be fair and take care. See me speak again in two weeks.

## The Wimmin's Room

## Sinead O'Connor and the Pope

CHRISTIANITY/ It retains a monopoly over problems of meaning from human experiences.

by Rita Hurley

Recently Sinead O'Connor suffered the wrath of millions of Christians, particularly Roman Catholics, when she publicly mutilated an image of the Pope. Although one might be inclined to question the efficacy of her act, it does draw attention to the fact that there are some very good reasons why the hierarchy of the Church might be a legitimate target of the frustrations and anger of many feminists.

Indeed, the ideology preserved by the Christian Church contributes more than any other single factor to the failure of the feminist movement to progress beyond an interstitial phenomenon lacking even the concerted support of its own constituency. It is commonly observed that any oppressed group internalizes the ideology of the dominant group. Not only western men, but women as well are inundated with the residual attitudes of misogyny born of the early Christian traditions of patriarchy and celibacy.

All sexism is a form of misogyny and the Christian ethic continues to provide the mystic and physical imagery that makes sexism righteous. Hence women's secondary political and economic position is both supported and added to by their inferior ideological position. Before any individual women can feel comfortable about being part of a movement to make change, she must overcome a socialization process which has been reinforced over two millennia.

Uta Ranke-Heinemann, a former Catholic theologian, traces the history of misogynistic practices by the Church in her book, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*. Her theme is that "Catholic sexual morality is largely a master-race morality and a pitiless exploitation of women." It is not so much that the Roman Church invented misogyny, as that it incorporated those features from the culture of its early evolution and continues

to preserve them to this day.

The means of achieving this have included placing all levels of personal life under the moral microscope of Canon Law. The Church's priests have concerned themselves with the minutiae of human existence and have established control through the mechanism of the sacraments, most especially Penance as effected through the practice of confession.

Such extensive and intensive control of individual lives has been enhanced by the fear of excommunication. Historically this threat was more comparable to the practice of 'shunning' in tribal societies than the distant formality it has become in modern times.

Michael Mann suggests that "Christianity has retained a near monopoly over problems of meaning that emanate from key human experiences - birth, sexual desire, reproduction, and death." This fact sets Christianity and feminism on a collision course since three of these four experiences are a major part of the territory feminists are staking out as the exclusive preserve of women.

What the Church which has more or less successfully marketed for twenty centuries is called sexual pessimism. The leading themes of its advertising include the ideal of celibacy as the highest form of virtue with women as its primary opponent. Although such views tend to be less public and more subversive today, it is still expressed in the conventional wisdom of the Church. Their teachings continue to formally proscribe extramarital sex, the use of birth control, in fact any sexual practice that results in the avoidance of pregnancy. The absurdity of this position is horrendous when considered from the perspective of the Third World demographic crisis.

One must reach back to the fourth century and the teachings of St. Augustine to discover the source of the Church's position. It was the elevation of August-

tine's philosophy to the level of dogma that resulted most surely in the equating of Christianity with the hatred of sex and pleasure. His hard-nosed position on the doctrine of original sin stated that "Sexual intercourse or, more precisely, sexual existence is what carries original sin on and on, from generation to generation."

Hence no child is born innocent but all are tainted by the sin of their parents, or more accurately their mothers. Women, through the legend of Eve, have come to bear the primary responsibility both for the initial disobedience and condemnation of the human race; and thanks to St. Augustine, they also carry the weight of visiting this sin on their children through their sexuality. Although the sacrament of Baptism can purify the child, there is to date no permanent absolution for the culpability of women.

The ironic tragedy of Augustine's influence on Church teachings is that it probably sprang from personal sexual anxiety. The love of his life was a woman he came to know when both were members of a Gnostic sect of the Manichaeans. They practiced both contraception and abortion. He was to betray her with another woman and then later he converted to Catholicism.

He appears to have turned his guilt and self-loathing over these events of his life into an aversion to women. It is but one more small example of a man trying to make a woman responsible for his own shortcomings, but one with monstrous consequences in history.

When we consider the politics involved in Ms. O'Connor's choice and the intensity of the reaction to it, I for one am inclined to be sympathetic to both sides. I cannot help but see Sinead's act as a triumph over the weight of two thousand years of conditioning. But I must also be sympathetic to the backlash of those who must still be involved in their own struggle.

## Metanoia

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we are indeed "gaining", changing for the better. Advances in medicine, justice, welfare, transportation, communication, individual rights and freedoms, illustrate that our society today is not as it was yesterday, and in certain respects a positive contrast to many non-Western cultures.

Not everyone in the West is a recipient of these advances. While the status quo may espouse freedom and equality for all, history clearly indicates that such ideals are frequently long in coming. In other words, we have not arrived yet.

However, in order to arrive somewhere, it is necessary to know where it is that we wish to go. What are the goals we are pursuing? And, what are we doing to approximate those goals?

Little unanimity exists in our modern society regarding desirable goals. This is reflected in our constant (and nauseating) polarized debates, generated (and perpetuated) frequently, but not solely, by the media. Hence, we all too often find ourselves in left-right, liberal-conservative, women-men, gay-straight camps.

Each camp or group lobbies for its own causes, and is committed to exposing the weaknesses and shortcomings of the other. Those on the left, in seeking social justice, rail against those who are satisfied with the status quo. Those on the right, desiring social and economic stability, expose the moral laxity and political anomie of those on the left. Radical feminists, striving for greater social and political power and control, hurl aspersions at all (men) who question their tactics or claims. Vocal gays and lesbians, struggling for increased social, political, even religious acceptance, are intolerant of any who disagree with them. Heterosexuals, anxious to maintain some normative sexual relationships, frequently ostracize, discriminate against, even injure those who are different.

No doubt we are frequently like ships passing in the night, despite our advanced communication systems and networks. We do not hear each other. Is it because we are not really listening to the other? Hardness of hearing is closely linked to hardness of the heart.

Listening is a skill to be learned. That skill is much needed as the voices of the marginalized - gays, women, aboriginals - grow more intense, even in our Canadian society. Ought the change that is constantly whirling about us not entail also a change in the status of the marginalized, while at the same time preserving that which makes this country the envy of the world? Listening to others may help us achieve a more concrete understanding of peace, justice, compassion and reconciliation, and, is this not what real change, and advancement, is about?

Authentic living entails *semper reformanda*, a continual reforming of our thoughts and actions — with the other in mind. Continual reforming is necessary for the journey toward peace, justice, compassion and reconciliation. And, that journey cannot be fully fathomed without an understanding of God and God's ways with humans. When that is taken into account, we do indeed have change, and things do not remain the same. But, that is an item of discussion for another day.