

The Wimm'n's Room

Women suffer from the injustices of the Christian heritage

by Rita Hurley

Feminism might have trouble welcoming the critique of the Christian community or at least that version expressed by its spokesperson, John Valk. (*Brunswickan* Jan. 22) Women feel compelled to challenge the limited male perspective of religious history because we suffer the injustice of its heritage. However, we prefer to confine our arguments to the force of the issues involved and to avoid questioning the knowledge and orientation of the arguer.

I found much in Mr. Valk's article with which I agree. The creators of a dominating ideology strive to redefine human reality in an image that protects the interests of that group. The Christian Church has provided the patriarchy with a supportive ideology for two hundred centuries. Never has any ideological institution been so successful as an integrating social force nor so long lived. But the way it has done so has resulted in the dispossession of women. If we are going to take exception to dominating and dangerous ideologies it would seem the Church meets that criteria more surely than does feminism.

The orientation of the Church to women has distorted human life. That is why women like Sinead O'Connor, who are recovering their own power, have suggested that we should know our enemy. Of all the 'ism's mentioned, chauvinism, communism, materialism, hedonism, and capitalism, Mr. Valk has chosen to speak against the least powerful and the least understood, feminism. Yet feminism does not seek to impose its perspective as an ideology in the way the Christian patriarchy has done, but merely to find a means for women to take back the power that they have too long surrendered to that institution.

I am a lot less convinced by Mr. Valk's point that Christianity and sexual pessimism are not synonymous. Christian traditions have been puritanical regarding sexual expression and largely irrational in deciding which practices of non-Christian cultures are morally bankrupt. The Song of Solomon is in the Old Testament and represents a period of history and a culture that was more comfortable with the sexuality of its people than the Christian Church proved to be during the Middle Ages.

Even the Protestant Church has undergone a long tempestuous debate over contraception and other sexual issues. It is only in relatively recent history that the male hierarchy of the Anglican Church decided to leave birth control choices to its members. All Christian Churches share a mutual historical heritage regardless of the denominational breakdown.

Now in regards to dumping on St. Augustine, there is evidence that 'finding his rest in God' did not reduce Augustine's sexual anxiety nor his guilt or self-loathing. Augustine had a son who was in his company as a teenager years after his mother, Augustine's former concubine, had vanished. This young man died around the age of sixteen and it is to him that Augustine refers in *The Confessions* when he says, "I had no part in that boy but the sin." (IX, vi, 14)

In fact, Augustine did not leave this woman as a result of moral scruples but to marry an heiress and improve his chances in life. His advice to a young friend reveals the true nature of Augustine's notion of women: "Whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman."

That such a man remains a highly respected theologian after so many cen-

turies of sexually pessimistic teachings and the concomitant damage to women both in and out of the Church is what I as a feminist must speak out against. If his old bones crumble as a result of the ferocity of my attack, I can only wish that there were still some flesh on those bones — especially ears to hear the pain of women who still suffer the legacy of the misogynistic heritage he helped to found.

St. Augustine is only a typical representative of great Church teachers and thinkers whose work fostered the diminished spiritual consideration of women. St. Jerome, in an attempt to be kind, described women as 'a temple built over a sewer'.

Aristotle suggested the pseudo scientific explanation that the innate inferiority of women was the result of successive animation of souls. That is, the male foetus had his soul implanted on the fortieth day of gestation while the female foetus did not receive this benefit until the eightieth day leaving her permanently spiritually handicapped. Indeed, this was the basis for the Church's sporadic tolerance of abortion into the sixteenth century. Since the medical technology of the time could

not determine the sex of the foetus, it was deemed fair to assume it was a female. Hence abortion was tolerated to the eightieth day of the pregnancy.

St. Thomas Aquinas embraced Aristotle's perspective and taught that women are defective men. This was the basis for his justification of the condemnation of witchcraft which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of women. He also encouraged the Church to raise the principal of the indissolubility of marriage to dogma in order that children would be assured of a male educator since women were considered incapable of performing this function.

Finally Mr. Valk, really, where did you find the interpretation of Genesis that indicates Adam was stupid? I would not be surprised to find that it has been suggested by a woman because many of us have known this all along. We cannot help but celebrate that such an apologetic interpretation is now in existence but unfortunately, the standard popular misunderstanding is that woman, the seductress, is responsible for the Fall.

Yes, feminists do experience much undue anger and frustration as a result of the institutional Church. Not the least of

the sources of this frustration is the patronizing attitude inflicted by those who have been so long identified with the dominant group that they cannot hear the anguish involved in the outcry of the dispossessed. We do not need Mr. Valk to tell us the Church is not listening, we have known that for centuries. Continued resistance to change replaces the accidental consequences of history with a conscious intent to continue repression.

Mr. Valk is merely continuing the tradition of the Church in coping with dissent by expelling or other wise attempting to silence dissidents by disputing their credentials and perspective. Holiness, like power, has long been considered the exclusive preserve of the priesthood and the clergy. Further, his appeal to the Christian practice of forgiveness can also be interpreted from an alternative perspective. In the words of Susan Dowell: "A church that has allowed its sacred ideals of monogamy and chastity to be wielded as tools of male supremacy and female repression needs not only to preach forgiveness to sinners; it has itself to be forgiven as an institution."

Metanoia

Legalizing gambling: A bad bet

by John Valk

Short-term gain for long-term pain. That appears to be the strategy governments, and some small businesses and native communities have adopted. When the bottom line is a quick buck, we all too readily throw caution to the wind.

Casinos, lotteries and video gambling are hardly an economic Godsend. Instead, they are an inappropriate means for our governments to raise revenues. And, can they really be considered the economic salvation of the native peoples?

From the perspective of the Judeo-Christian Scripture nothing we possess, including our money, actually belongs to us. The earth and everything in it belongs to the Creator God. We are called upon to use our God-given resources in a manner that is positive, constructive and for the benefit of all. With this I think traditional native values concur.

Casinos, lotteries and video gambling thrive on greed and the love of money. They offer riches to a very few at the expense of a great many. All too many people are enticed into false hopes of gaining an equally false sense of security.

Until the late 60's, lotteries in Canada were rendered illegal under terms of our Criminal Code, a set of laws reflective of the moral and ethical positions of most Canadians. But in 1968 the civic administration of Montreal introduced lotteries as a means of raising funds required for the construction of extremely expensive Olympic installations. These lotteries proved to be an instantaneous success, both with the people and with other levels of governments. With some haste lotteries were removed from the Criminal Code in 1969. Since then they have spread across the land like an epidemic.

What once was condemned as gambling suddenly became known as a "voluntary tax". Canadians were actively and aggressively encouraged to "play the game", in support of such worthy causes as the arts, sports, scientific research and education. Almost overnight a vice became a virtue, and the end was carefully shown to justify the means.

But lotteries and video gambling

should be seen for what they really are, that is, an essentially dishonest and manipulative scheme for raising funds. They are a ruse applied by political leaders who lack courage to raise, through fair and normal taxes, money needed for causes by which our society would be well served.

It is the duty of governments to pursue economic well-being for its citizens. But government must have as its primary concern justice for all of society. The role of government is essentially a protective, caring one, with charity towards the weak and powerless. Its involvement in lotteries and video gambling flies in the face of this essential role.

Lotteries and video gambling are unjust. The proportionate amount of income poor people are seduced into spending on them is far greater than that of people who could afford contributing a voluntary tax.

They are also uncharitable. The chances of winning big in lotteries are less than the chance of being struck by lightning. Yet, propaganda material never mentions the real odds. Instead, it assumes the public to be ignorant and stupid, ready to be duped.

Furthermore, lotteries and video gambling help no one. Quite the contrary; they deceive, they hold before an unwitting public a lie; a false and misleading notion that happiness and contentment come solely from possessions and riches.

There is nothing creative, wholesome nor lasting about lotteries, video gambling, even casinos. They undermine the general well-being of society, creating false notions of what is really worthwhile in life. They enhance the illusion of the quick fix, the easy way out of our human dilemmas, the plausibility of soft and painless solutions to profoundly complex problems.

To date the New Brunswick government forbids gaming houses. May it remain that way. But that they initiate, endorse or encourage participation in lotteries and video gambling is unconscionable and reprehensible. They ought to be forthright and inform the public just how fraudulent these really are in terms of winning and losing. They ought also not turn a blind eye to the pain and suffering these cause to individuals and their families when addiction sets in. Social workers, en-

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forcement agencies and journalists daily uncover horror stories of the effects of gambling addiction. And those who suffer the most are, as always, women and children.

It has been said by some that the salvation of white people will come from native communities. There may be merit in that view, particularly in regard to the traditional native sense of justice, community and respect of the earth. But the strident fight of natives for casinos appears to deviate radically from their traditional values. That native communities seek economic independence is praise worthy. That they use gambling as a means to that end is not.

In Nova Scotia the provincial government has reversed its position on video gambling. It will now seek to restrict these machines to licenced establishments, much to the chagrin of some small business people. They are in the process of trying to convince the government that it is a serious mistake to restrict the use of gambling machines. Granted, these business will be deprived of a source of revenue. But is there not also a moral element that ought to enter the picture, and at times override the economic "bottom line"?

In the end we will reap what we sow. If short-term economic strategies are implemented, we must prepare ourselves for the long-term social fallout, some of which is already before us. Let us hope government, community and business leaders have the courage to give leadership, which seeks the good of all people, which is not deceptive and which reflects responsible stewardship.

(With notes from the "Committee for Contact with the Government" of the Council of Christian Reformed Churches in Canada)

The final solution

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maligner who not only tramps cockily across Jewish graves, but sets out to dig them up and fill them with new Jews, at least indirectly, by fostering Anti-Jewish hostility.

Such a Racist calls for more access to information, but he wants that information to be selective; this is a direct contradiction of terms. The Racist wants his media to guard from our awareness the injustices which characteristically strike Jews more forcefully than any other group in society, e.g. Muslims.

Racists in this line of dogma, the "pseudo-historical cynics", do not suggest that we try to disprove the Expulsion of the Acadians, which is just as much a "religion" to Francophones, 250 years later, as The Holocaust is to Jewish people, a mere 50 years later. The Anti-Jewish Racist is not intent on erasing the Internment of the Japanese Canadians during the 1940's, or the slaughter of the Beothuks of Newfoundland, or any other gross assault on any other ethnic and/or religious minority, except for the Jewish minority. He or she singles out the Jewish people as deserving of violence.

Remembering the Holocaust doesn't, and hasn't, blinded us mysteriously to the "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia. On the contrary, and as Mr. Nevo, president of the Dalhousie Jewish Students Federation, voiced in our newspaper, remembrance of the WWII Holocaust will only lead to a faster and more humane end to the Bosnian-Herzegovinian "ethnic cleansing"; members of the Canadian Jewish Congress are the courageous forerunner among Canadian groups to raise awareness and take a firm stance on the crisis.

Let us, finally, examine the mind of The Racist. In all fairness (the least we can do, under Liberalism) to The Racist, his narrow-minded attitudes are not necessarily his fault. Because Anti-Jewish forces, as we have seen, swamp non-Jewish history and culture, The Racist could well have fallen prey to subtle social conditioning, the brainwashing called conformism. Ironically, and unfortunately for The Racist, this is the same pax which he tries to push as the cause of the public's disagreement with his racist attitudes.

There is an obvious flaw of reasoning from the mind of The Racist whose message is, in short, that "we shouldn't turn our heads from atrocity, but we should." In other words, our attention should be riveted to crimes of humanity inflicted on Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but it is just as imperative (for some unnamed reason) that we turn our heads away from the Holocaust of World War II. When the Holocaust, as a particular incident, is put forth as material to be slashed from our common world history, anti-Jewish racism is the motive. Furthermore, if the welfare of Bosnia-Herzegovina is the fake Samaritan's mission, then where are the Samaritan's suggestions for the improvement of the situation in Bosnia? Is Bosnia-Herzegovina the true cause for concern, or is the true concern an aim to wipe out a major chapter in the history of the Jewish people, and in everyone's histories? Such an omission might again leave Jews a prime target for violence; these days mark the revival of Nazism in Europe, as a response to economically and politically unstable fissions and fusions. Considering the circumstances, the scent of racism nearly nulls any respect that I might have held for an ostensible attempt to raise University consciousness of Bosnian-Herzegovinian violence.

It will be a quirky case-study in history if some racists who help to make Jews' lives miserable are ever forced to experience the real effects of their crimes first-hand; non-racists know that The Final Solution to Anti-Jewish hostility is not the killing off of all racists in concentration camps. It is the refusal to let their doctrine pervert our political system. We must safeguard the policies under which all groups, including Jews, are allowed to lead a collectively free and unassaulted existence.