



SPIRITUAL FEMINISM

by

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ARE WE EQUAL YET?

The day was April 10, 1997. It was the day after my mother's birthday. My spouse and I had invited our nieces and nephews to our home in Georgia. The boys played outside. The girls, however, expressed a preference to stay indoors and watch television.

I had assumed responsibility for the children's supervision, and looked for programming that would be entertaining as well as educational. I looked for a television show that would be a source of inspiration for these very young African American women -- not yet old enough, nor wise enough, to appreciate their youth.

As I scanned from channel to channel, my anger and frustration increased. There were no positive images of African American women. Every movie focused on the trials and tribulations of fair-skinned women. In fact throughout the available channels -- and there were more than 30, Caucasian women portrayed the heroine in each film. The remaining channels depicted these women as teachers, commentators, historians, educators, cooks, gardeners, healers, and so on. After scanning for nearly an hour, I asked myself, In a country with approximately 36.3 million women who are non-white, how could television so grossly misrepresent America's true complexion?

It is true that whites constitute a majority of the population, and that approximately seven out of ten Americans are white. Media, however, projects a ratio that makes it appear that 9.5 out of 10 Americans are white. What is even more disheartening is that when African Americans are visible, they are most often athletes, comedienne, criminals or clowns.

Media may take the form of television, film or print. In print we see the same imbalance witnessed on television. A major newspaper, New York's Newsday, for example has only one African-American columnist but probably better than 15 white columnists. Is it any surprise that the paper fails to accurately reflect the point of view held by its entire community.

This is significant because it demonstrates that people of color are forced to live in a society that dismisses, intentionally or unintentionally, the opinions held by millions of Americans. Consequently, when Gallup takes a poll of black and white relations, it is really taking a poll of how blacks and white react to what whites project as the truth. What whites project as the truth, however, is not always representative of millions of Americans, nor is it representative of the truth.

The resulting disparity is not because blacks and white are different. The disparity is due to African Americans, and other non-white Americans, knowing -- through their everyday experiences -- that what is offered as truth through Media is simply not an accurate account. More specifically,

what Media reports is not an accurate account of the experience millions of Americans endure.

One of the television stations viewed, professed to provide "entertainment for women." However, their broadcasts provided very little representation of African American women, nor that of any of the population of women collectively referred to as "minorities." On another channel -- the House and Garden Television, a minority was very rarely even seen -- not even in the background!

During the early seventies, minorities could at least hope to appear as a dark blur whizzing pass the camera. Today, however, minorities are more often observed as figures sitting quietly in the background. Typically, they are provided with nothing to say, and provided with no dialogue that enhances the content of the production.

As I viewed various news reports, it also seemed significant that whenever an important announcement was made by the head of a government agency, the department head or spokesperson was a Caucasian woman. With so many minority women working in government jobs for so many decades, was it possible that so few women or men of color had qualified for these positions? More importantly, why was no one discussing these kinds of inequities in the United States -- its government and its agencies?

Since so much of the information we receive about the country and about the world is derived through television, it is important that every American child see reasonable expectations of success when he or she looks at those images. Some children are fortunate to see their image and culture expressed in an incredible variety of wonderful ways. The white child sees that he or she can be a knight, an orchestra conductor, an astronaut, a fashion designer, or a super hero. They can be a gay Ellen DeGeneres, a First Lady, an air force pilot, or Secretary of State. The child who is not Caucasian does not see such images of himself or herself in similar positions. He or she -- if seen at all -- is typically depicted as a rapper, an athlete, a criminal, or a talk-show host eulogizing the accomplishments of whites at the expense of other ethnicities.

This generally leads minority children to follow one of two paths. In most instances, the child 1) pursues the images that seem most realistic, or 2) tries to emulate what is depicted as most representative of his or her culture. Rarely, in either case, does such a child emerge with his or her true identity intact or with any sense of his or her potential.

Racial relations have never been very good in America. Nationalities dropped into the "Great Melting Pot" never mixed as some had hoped. However, if -- at this point in our history -- certain women are being positioned to hold nearly all the key government positions, where will this leave women of color? How will any minority interest be served? How could it ever be served?

President Clinton's dialogue about improving race relationship seems reminiscent of earlier "peace treaties" with Native American nations. As in the past, there's something very dishonest about a government that says it wants to improve race relations while it so blatantly contributes to the problem of race relations. This is not to suggest that the President is not sincere. He and the First lady have without a doubt put forth an enormous effort. And, given present trends concerning affirmative action and civil rights, it is an effort we are not likely to see again for many years.

In any event, the girls watched a special on Georgia Public Television. Yet, several questions remain: How would the lack of positive and culturally rich images affect their future? What kind of women would they become? What kind of men would the young men become -- educated but void of a cultural identity? Is American intentionally programming our children to become less like the

arrogant and direct bell hooks, and more like the "I'm Every Woman" Maya Angelou -- writing pretty poems to soften the sting of serious social situations?

For several decades, nearly everyone has agreed that education is the key. However, very well educated African Americans emerge from America's most prestigious universities without of any sense of cultural identity. Inevitably, their social contributions are to white America. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas serves as a perfect example of an educated African American man who has divorced himself from the African American community to serve what he believes are concerns of greater importance. The issue is not that he serves America as whole. The issue is that he dis-serves African-Americans as an entire community.

The results of legislation voiding affirmative action in the State of California has already resulted in no African-American being admitted to the law or medical school of that state during its fall semester of 1997. What positive effect can this have on minority communities? And where are the voices that supposedly speak for all the women who had sought admission?

While education is an important component, it is not the key. The key is a combination of education and an imbedded cultural identity. Jews have recognized the importance of their heritage since their first days on the continent. Why have African Americans chosen to be red, white and blue in a nation where they are only seen as black, as "minorities" or as an underprivileged people?

One is equal in American only when one can begin to make demands -- either through a sophisticated legal system, a powerfully focused economic base, or a politically focused leadership. Without these mechanisms, it is impossible to be equal. Without these mechanisms, one is only empowered to submit a request, and then hope for a positive response. One signs a peace treaty, then hopes for the best.

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STATUS QUO FEMINISTS

It is hypocritical that both the Democratic and Republic parties support the National Organization for Women (NOW), while professing to support family values. Patricia Ireland, president of NOW, an admitted bisexual, is known to have had an extra-marital affair with another woman. More importantly, the organization does not believe monogamy should be preserved as an either American or a moral ideal. The question is: How can either political party support NOW, and its affiliations such as the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and also profess to support family values?

Considering the Media's past performance, if Patricia Ireland was a woman of color, these facts would be reported as ardently as the Versace murder, the O. J. Simpson trial, or the death of England's Diana. Yet, the details of Patricia Ireland's feminist philosophy are ignored by America's most prestigious newspapers and most celebrated journalists. This is hardly consistent with the yellow-journalistic standards that is more the norm today than even 5 years ago.

The women who most ardently support the feminist movement, as it is expressed through NOW, are white middle class women. They can be called status quo feminists. However varied their expressions of feminism, they all focus on the status quo. They all focus on the needs and concerns

of white Americans. The needs and concerns of women of color only intersect when the topic is poverty. And this is true only because a disproportionately large number of poor women are also women of color.

The few women of color who belong to NOW fight a losing battle when they struggle to invite more women of color to join the organization. The truth is that most women of color can not support the organization's social or moral positions. The majority of African American women are Christian. Therefore, many of the beliefs sanctioned by NOW would not only be regarded as immoral by most African American women, but would also be perceived as counter-productive to genuinely held family values.

Status quo feminists of African descent have suggested that women of color ignore their moral and philosophical differences and integrate efforts to achieve goals common to all women. However, history has taught women of color that white America invariably calculates ways to circumvent efforts of integration through legislation. Such legislation often serves to negate affirmative action, school busing, or equal employment opportunities.

In June of 1997, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), under the leadership of Kweisi Mfume, started to reexamine the organization's stance on integration for fear it was simply outdated.

The Rev. Wendell Anthony, president of the Detroit NAACP branch, said such discussion is helpful as the organization develops strategy for the future. "We still have a specific commitment for public education and full integration in our society," Anthony commented.

NAACP President and Chief Executive Officer Kweisi Mfume agreed that the organization's support of desegregation would continue. "Having a dialogue and discussion on forced busing doesn't change our course," Mfume said. "It just keeps us from becoming complacent on the subject."

Women of color must also examine whether it is possible to integrate their efforts with those of white women. However, none can ignore that the marriage between feminist women of color and status quo feminists has not been equally beneficial.

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AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMINISM

It is interesting that American history defines Harriet Tubman (African American, nineteenth century) as an abolitionist, while crediting Betty Friedman (Caucasian, twentieth century) as the chief architect of the modern feminist movement.

Friedman is credited as the patron saint of modern feminism through publication of *The Feminine Mystique* -- a sort of feminist manifesto based on the earlier thoughts of nineteenth century suffragettes. What historians fail to understand is that Tubman -- though equally concerned with the rights of women -- could not ignore the indignities and oppression that men and children of African descent were also subjected to during her time. Nor could she ignore that these indignities were imposed on people of African descent by these same women who called themselves suffragettes.

Sojourner Truth could not forget similar indignities. In "Ain't I a Woman?" she wrote:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me!

And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

-- Sojourner Truth (1797 -1883)

African American feminism developed because African American women were able to recognize that status quo feminists could not represent the concerns of women of color. They recognized that status quo feminists were, after all, sleeping with the enemy -- the men who had done most to suppress all women. Furthermore, how could women of color believe organization such as NOW, or Planned Parenthood, could represent their interests while they relied mostly on white men, or the wives of white men, to fund their programs and concerns?

This became exceedingly clear when feminists and Congressional leaders -- who had never rushed to the aid minority women -- rushed to defend former First Lt. Kelly Flynn, an adulteress who had disobeyed a direct command from a superior and lied about it. Ironically, not a single American journalist questioned how the Media could present the story as a feminist issue, when it was so clearly rooted in issues of morality and integrity.

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SPIRITUAL FEMINISM

"Look at me!" demanded Sojourner Truth, speaking as both abolitionist and feminist. The audience at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, were stunned at this tall and imposing image, this woman of African descent, standing before mostly insensitive and hostile whites. "Look at my arm," she continued, "it's plowed and planted and gathered into barns and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman?"

Sojourner seemed unaffected by the sneers and hisses of men in the audience. She confronted their prejudices. She stood proudly and displayed more than many of those men had ever imagined. Her voice was strong, unwavering, and she directed her arguments to the clergyman who had warned that efforts by women to obtain "rights" would only cause them to lose the respect men had extended upon them.

Sojourner understood that privileges enjoyed by white women were built in part on the exploitation of Africans. Furthermore, she knew that the 'respect' to which the minister referred had never been offered to either women, or men of African descent.

Her slave name had been Isabell Hardenburgh. She discarded it when she acquired liberty. The former Isabell choose Sojourner because sojourn meant "to dwell temporarily," which she believed to be an appropriate description of one's condition in this life. She choose Truth as the message she would carry to the world.

However, as important as it is to understand why and how African American feminism developed through women like Sojourner Truth, there also needs to be an appreciation of the power and strength gained by numbers. Understandably, if the feminist movement among women of color is to move forward, the struggle will need to unite -- collecting all disadvantaged women. There must be a unification of the needs specific to every poor woman, and every woman adversely affected because of the color of her skin or the nation of her origin. Essentially, feminism must move beyond its second wave of status quo limitations and become spiritual.

The idea of spiritual feminism has enormous appeal. First, because it excludes no woman. Second, because it can be distinguished from the views of status quo feminists. The word 'spiritual' itself has powerful connotations within many communities, including the community of scholars.

Scholars like James Freeman Clarke in the last century, and several institutes formed after Vatican II in 1967-68 did much to promote spiritual concepts. Whether in the transcendentalist Clarke's "Church of the Future" or that of Pope John XXIII, these scholars recognized the spiritual needs that had frequently motivated social movements and the desire for social reform.

The terms "spirituality" and "spiritual formation", once reserved for the hushed halls of seminary life in a bygone era, are now being picked up in popular culture. Some refer to it as a New Age spirituality that is neither wicked nor cultist. Their key word, however, is still 'spiritual.'

One man, reflecting on the Million Man March, spoke of the march as "deeply spiritual." Another man, having picked up his two young nephews in a moment of "atonement" on the way to Washington, was told by his father, "Don't just go down there to be part of a happening. It's a spiritual day."

At a conference held by the Boston Theological Institute (BTI), a call for a new spiritual revival was announced by such different persons as Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, atmospheric scientist Michael McElroy, politician Byron Rushing, and the scholar, Mary Evelyn Tucker.

Catholic authors, such as Trappist monk Thomas Merton, began to re-invent the term 'spirituality' for individuals seeking a deeper life in the 1960's. Anglo-Saxon Protestants, however, associated the word with Salem witches and Russian salons.

Yet, in spite of the diverse meanings one can derive from the word, it remains a powerful idea that lends itself to a feminist philosophy that is more inclusive. Spiritual feminism could provide a means for physically challenged women to bond with women of color, and for women of color to bond with poor women of all races. The unity, and the power of this unity, might well be the key to unlocking the resources that status quo feminists have essentially held only for themselves. It is a force, a power, that women of color must take back.

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End notes:

1. Kathleen Fischer, "Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction" (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 34.
2. Carolyn Grotton, "The Art of Spiritual Guidance: A Contemporary Approach to Growing in the Spirit" (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), p. 20.
3. "Spirituality, Ecology, and the Million Man March -- An Ecumenical Agenda" by Rodney Petersen,

