

What about the ones who are both sexist and racist?

Joan Chittister | Jan. 18, 2008 From Where I Stand

One of the more interesting dimensions of the current presidential campaign is that we may all need to wrestle now with the question of which is more prevalent in US society -- racism or sexism. This is an alternative that strikes me as a very strange question to begin with, frankly. After all, all races have a male-female question since all men of all races have been raised in the historical mythology of male superiority. All males, any males, everywhere. Which means then that discrimination is also true for all women, any women, anywhere.

As the United Nations Population Fund report puts it:

"At the dawn of the 21st Century, humanity continues to witness massive human rights violations in the form of discrimination and violence against half of the world's population. The unequal status, freedoms and opportunities afforded to women and girls exist to a greater or lesser degree in every society and country of the world and regrettably, all too often taken for granted as "normal" aspects of society and human relations."

In fact, we are only beginning to discover that sexism is based on a bad biology that has been theologized. Women, women were told by men, were physically smaller and therefore secondary human beings, that their single purpose was obviously for pregnancy and child-rearing, that they were more emotional and therefore less rational -- read "less capable, less adequate" -- than men.

As a result, physical size was confused with intellectual competence and spiritual development, child rearing trumped intelligence for women but not for men, and hard-heartedness was more important than compassion in governance. Which may, from at least one perspective, be true if the town is surrounded by hungry lions and rampaging elephants.

But, in the end, one argument silenced common sense everywhere. Sexism, we were meant to believe, was simply built into the human race by God. There was nothing we could do about it. It was ?God?s will? for women.

Everywhere, exceptions were used to prove the rule: a queen here, a cowgirl there, a woman athlete, a couple women scholars. These were all women who could, they said, "think like a man," or throw a ball "like a man," or lead a government "like a man" but who were then, of course, always the exceptions, never the norm. The norm was male.

Racism on the other hand is universal, too -- meaning found to some appreciable and determining degree in all cultures. The difference is that where racism is concerned, there is no universally acclaimed superior race as males were/are argued to be, by nature, over women. In fact males of all colors have been seen as the "natural" leaders, the superior beings, the social elite from tribe to temple everywhere.

Not so for women.

Nevertheless, where issues of either racism or sexism are concerned in a global society, in a world characterized by seeping borders and compulsory education and open universities, ideas are beginning to change. And society is changing with them. Our commitment to the biological or social notions of inferiority -- either racist or sexist -- is reversing itself everywhere and theology is struggling to cope with it.

As St. Augustine says, however, we are in "the already but not yet" moment in history. People still live in one of two mental universes everywhere. Or worse, maybe, we're all living in both of them at one time. Like here, for instance.

Enter the 2008 electoral process and let the confusion begin.

One of the most amusing but least funny of all the analyses of campaign politics to date was the comparison of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton before the Iowa/New Hampshire primaries.

The criticism of Clinton was that she was hard and cold. She appealed to strategy and reason, it seems. She didn't laugh right or smile right or talk in the right register. She wanted to discuss particular programs and experience instead of being more "likable." She wanted to talk about the problems we're having and what she thought would fix them.

Obama, on the other hand ? ironically -- appealed to the heart. He wanted to talk about the need for change. He appealed to good old-fashioned Americanism, the melting pot, can-do (Yes, we can!) world of national unity and compassionate vision.

There was no applause for her rationality, no criticism of his sensitive and stirring appeals, no acknowledgment of her concern for people- problems, no derision of his vocal register.

He was, that is, what every woman is afraid to be: emotional. And not a word of criticism came from it.

And then the change: When asked how she felt about being criticized for being unemotional, she said, "It hurts my feelings." And, to their eternal credit, the audience laughed.

And when she lost in Iowa, they asked her why she stayed in the race when she seemed to be losing so much ground so quickly and with tears in her eyes, she said, "(What happens to this country) is personal to me ..."
And the country blinked.

Apparently, the old categories of hard vs. soft, rational vs. emotional and who is allowed to be them is shifting in the wind.

So now the argument is emerging that some women leaders -- the few of them that history provides us -- haven't been so good. So why haven't we heard any of them argue, on the other hand, that we shouldn't elect a man because all the male leaders we've had around the world, over the ages, then and now haven't been so good either.

Obviously, the old reasons for why we do or don't elect someone aren't as convincing, aren't as certain anymore as they used to be.

Maybe we ought to just start listening to what our candidates say about how they will do all the things they promise to do and then, male and female, female and male, make up our own minds -- whatever their color, whatever their sex -- whether what they're promising is necessary, is doable, is important to us or not. In fact,

maybe we ought to just listen to them to see if they're really promising anything or not.

From where I stand, how people vote is becoming less and less important than why people vote for the candidates they do.

The analysts tell us, for instance, that people voted for George Bush because they saw him as "likable," as someone you'd "want to have a beer with." Al Gore, it seems, wasn't the pub-crawling, beer-drinking type. He was "stiff," we said. And as a result, we turned down a potential Nobel Peace Prize winner for a winsome warrior. Five years of war later and over 600,000 Iraqi and almost 4,000 U.S. military dead, makes you wonder, doesn't it?

This time it could even be worse. We could turn down a good president now simply because the candidate is either a gender we don't like or a color we don't accept. Then, what we'll get from voters who are both sexist and racist at the same time, I shudder to even imagine.

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