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Feminism vs. Multiculturalism The Liberal Project at Odds with Itself by Peter Berkowitz

A review of *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* by Susan Moller Okin with Respondents, edited by Joshua Cohen, Michael Howard, and Martha Nussbaum. Princeton University Press. 146 pp. \$30.00.

In their introduction to this volume on the relation between feminism and multiculturalism, the editors announce that the views represented in the collection cover a wide range. Yet the author of the lead essay, Stanford political theorist Susan Moller Okin --- perhaps the preeminent liberal feminist in the academy today --- reveals in her concluding reply that the fifteen other contributors have given her not a single reason to qualify her opinions. "Many thanks," she writes, "to the respondents for their thoughtful and thought-provoking comments, many of which I agree with. Some of them extend my arguments in important ways, some of them I wish to argue against, and some of them I think indicate misperceptions of my position."

It may be, of course, that Okin is right and that the various respondents, where they differ from her, are wrong. Indeed, on the crucial issue, Okin is convincing: The multicultural exhortation to respect all cultures often conflicts with the liberal imperative to respect the freedom and equality of women. The root of the conflict lies in the fact that not all cultures respect individuals in the liberal way, and some cultures subordinate the individual to the common good or the good of a person or class.

Unfortunately, Okin's unshakable confidence in the rightness of her moral and political judgments blinds her to the merits of views she opposes and practices of which she disapproves; it also leads her to overlook the inadequacies of her own ideal and the limitations of the way of life she is defending. In this, Okin's feminist critique of multiculturalism exemplifies a malady of modern liberalism, whereby the virtue of toleration hardens into a crusade for conformity to the liberal vision of human flourishing, and a laudable appreciation of human diversity ossifies into contempt for ways of life that do not celebrate diversity as an ideal.

Okin's core argument is simple: The subjugation of women, by men or by cultures, is wrong. Liberal democracies should protect the individual rights of all women within their borders, including women whose cultures and religions sanction practices that deny women's fundamental rights. Liberal democracies should not grant minorities special group rights or privileges to assist them in preserving their culture or religion in a foreign land, as many

theorists of multiculturalism wish. For individual rights are sacrosanct in a liberal democracy, oppression in all its forms is bad, and, Okin suggests, a culture or religion that deprives women of human dignity is not worthy of preservation.

Compelling as this argument may be when stated in the abstract, it prompts serious questions when applied to concrete matters of law and public policy. Where does subjugation leave off and a respectable way of life different from that cherished by liberals and feminists begin? Are all forms of subjugation and oppression properly the object of state action, or do some lie beyond the ken of government in a liberal democracy? What policies and laws provide the best means of enforcing individual rights? Which individual rights are fundamental and nonnegotiable?

Yet these vexing questions do not vex Okin. She categorically condemns as sexist and illiberal clitoridectomy, polygamy, arranged marriages of teenage girls, and also veiling (the practice whereby Muslim women cover their faces in public). None of these practices should be tolerated by liberal democracies, she argues, even if prohibiting them requires state intervention in religious life.

Although Okin does not cite John Locke, her view that government must regulate some aspects of private life can be defended on the liberal and constitutional grounds expounded in Locke's Letter Concerning Toleration. One way government respects the natural freedom and equality of all is by leaving questions of ultimate salvation to individuals and concerning itself only with the things of this world, which for Locke meant maintaining peace, securing liberty and equality before the law, and protecting property. But government limited by the principle of toleration does not leave religious authorities absolutely free. If a religious group wishes to sacrifice animals in its temple to propitiate its gods, then, though the practice be reviled by the majority, the government has no grounds to interfere. But if a religious group instead seeks to sacrifice children or virgins, then government is obliged to bar the practice, to prevent the ultimate deprivation of liberty and life.

While Okin's respondents agree that patriarchy is unjust, not all are convinced that the practices she ascribes to it are always wrong. Several respondents seek to place these practices in cultural or religious context and show how they can actually be seen to serve women's interests. For example, Northwestern University political theorist Bonnie Honig points out that veiling enables Muslim women who would otherwise stay at home because of their religious convictions about female modesty to go out into the world, acquire an education, and participate in public life.

Okin doesn't doubt that entering the public realm is better for women than remaining at home, but she cannot see the freedom veiling creates as anything more than a crumb tossed to the wretched. "Surely," she writes, "to be unable to go out and practice one's profession without being enshrouded from head to toe is not, on the whole, an empowering situation in which to live, unless it is a temporary transition to greater freedom."

Though Okin may think she is putting herself in the position of another and arguing here for justice for the underdog, her "surely" gives the game away. For "surely" is scholarly shorthand for "No argument need be given for the assertion that follows, which is too obvious to question." Yet it is perfectly reasonable to wonder whether some women, on the whole, are empowered by modest dress. And it makes good sense to ask whether "greater freedom" should be the sole measure of empowerment and ought always to be preferred to greater piety.

Okin peremptorily forecloses such inquiries. To her, freedom rightly understood requires nothing short of emancipation from divine law; piety is in the best case superstition clothed in earnestness and solemnity; and a life lived in obedience to God is a life of slavery. Such reckless thinking and lack of sympathy for beliefs different from one's own, however, are not necessary features of the liberal mind. Rather, they reflect a failure of the liberal imagination.

It is a further failure of the liberal imagination for Okin to miss the fact that "greater freedom" can expose individuals to the tyranny of public opinion. Dressing as you please is not always liberating: Sometimes your choices about what to wear merely reflect social convention; and sometimes you make wrong judgments about the clothes that will best serve your interests. As law professor Azizah Y. Al-Hibri, a feminist and Muslim, provocatively asks, "Why is it oppressive to wear a head scarf but liberating to wear a miniskirt"? Honing and Al-Hibri's disagreement with Okin about veiling is at bottom a difference not over whether women should be respected as individuals but over what practices express that respect. This suggests that the multiculturalist thinking Okin opposes can be rooted in the very liberalism she claims as the source of her feminism.

Indeed, a common moral premise underlies the definitions of feminism and multiculturalism used by Okin and her respondents alike. Okin defines feminism as "the belief that women should not be disadvantaged by their sex, that they should be recognized as having human dignity equal to that of men, and that they should have the opportunity to live as fulfilling and freely chosen lives as men can." Feminism understood in this way is really modern liberalism made explicit for women. And the editors define multiculturalism as "the radical idea that people in other cultures, foreign and domestic, are human beings, too --- moral equals, entitled to equal respect and concern, not to be discounted or treated as a subordinate caste." What the editors grandiosely describe as radical is only an attempt to work out for men and women who belong to minority or non-Western cultures the implications of the liberal idea that all human beings are free and equal.

Although they proceed from the same premise, both liberal feminists and proponents of multiculturalism tend to ignore vital dimensions of moral and political life and thus often reach different conclusions about how best to respect individuals in general and women in particular. Okin emphasizes autonomy, the capacity rationally to choose one's own way of life, and opportunities to learn a profession, earn a living, and participate in public affairs.

Multiculturalists stress respect for the culture within which the individual develops and which many individuals see as constitutive of their identity and inseparable from their good. It is trite but true: What is needed is a sensibility that respects persons by respecting both the claims of autonomy and the claims of duty and community; for the inevitable clash between these goods is not a reason for rejecting either but an occasion for more refined thinking.

While there is much that is salutary in Okin's brief against multiculturalist complacency, her thinking fails to balance competing goods in a world of diverse cultures. Indeed, her liberal feminism betrays a complacency of its own, especially in regard to religion.

Consider Okin's invitation to understand "the founding myths of Greek and Roman antiquity, and of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam" as "rife with attempts to justify the control and subordination of women." Put aside Okin's casual equation of biblical faith with pagan religion and her nonchalant reduction of sacred scripture to myth. What remains astonishing is how crude and ill-informed is her indictment of patriarchy:

| Think of Athena, sprung from the head of Zeus, and of Romulus and Remus, reared without a human mother. Or Adam, made by a male God, who then (at least according to one of the two biblical versions of the story) created Eve out of part of Adam. Consider Eve, whose weakness led Adam astray.

Contrary to what Okin implies, Athena, though sprung from the head of Zeus, did have a mother, Zeus's first wife, the goddess Metis (who, having been swallowed by Zeus, gave birth to their daughter from within his body). Moreover, Athena herself, one of the twelve major Olympians, attests to a complex understanding of gender: She is the goddess of wisdom and warfare; she represents power, mastery, order, and public achievement; and she gave her name to the greatest city of ancient Greece.

It's true, as Okin suggests, that Romulus and Remus were briefly reared without a human mother. But it's also highly misleading. According to the Roman story, after a jealous king ordered their murder, the twin sons of Rhea Silvia were found and suckled by a she-wolf. Hence, during the period they were without a human mother, they were also without a human father. Moreover, while still young they were adopted by a shepherd, whose wife brought them up through young adulthood.

Similarly, it is the case that according to Chapter 2 of Genesis, God made Eve from a part of Adam. But as Okin implies in her parenthetical effort to finesse her tendentious reading, the account of the creation of man and woman in Chapter 1 of Genesis places the emphasis elsewhere. It clearly announces a revolutionary teaching about the grounds of human equality: "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them." Finally, while the Bible, as Okin reports, does teach that Eve

caused Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, it also ascribes to Eve a hunger for moral wisdom and credits her with bringing knowledge of good and evil (with all the pain that entails) to humankind.

As one begins to consider the evidence that Okin believes seals the case against Greece, Rome, and Jerusalem for the crime of patriarchy, it becomes increasingly clear that, contrary to her condescending insinuations, the defendants' accounts of the beginnings ascribe to women surprising virtues and indispensable roles. In the rush to judgment, the prosecutor's passion and prejudice get the better of her reason.

The liberal tradition teaches that human reason is constantly vulnerable to disruption by passion and prejudice. Indeed, this is one of the key reasons that classical liberalism keeps the state out of the delicate business of caring for souls. Locke's wise restraint, it bears emphasizing, bars not only religious authorities from using government to save souls but also secular types from using the state to save souls from religion.

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