

WOMEN AND MORAL DIVERSITY

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Okin, Susan Moller, with respondents. *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

MOST PEOPLE SAY THAT MULTICULTURALISM IS A good thing in today's milieu. After all, multiculturalism attacks not only such "liberal complacencies," to use Will Kymlicka's term, as the assumption that all citizens are white, middle- to upper-class, and male, but also the assumption that all citizens in a liberal society share the same language, religion, and culture. In so doing, it joins the ranks of struggles against injustice, like the abolitionist, labor rights, civil rights, and feminist movements, to strive for equal rights for all citizens of America.

Given their seemingly common aims, one might think that feminism and multiculturalism would be easily reconcilable. Certainly Kymlicka, a philosopher and multicultural theorist, assumes this, judged by his contribution to this collection. Susan Moller Okin disagrees. She insists, in her lead essay—around which this volume is focused and to which the other essays respond—that multiculturalism, although a welcome corrective to cultural imperialism, is morally problematic because

it resists judging behaviors within another culture. Such a refusal to judge, she argues, is intolerable when the behaviors within other cultures are harmful to women, such as child marriage, polygamy, clitoridectomy, unequal property and divorce laws, even sanctioned or excused rape and murder. She suggests that the treatment of women become the standard by which cultural practices are judged.

Okin begins her argument by observing that many women live in indigenous and other national minority cultures that are saturated with practices and ideologies that are harmful or disrespectful to women. While no culture is perfect in its treatment of women, Okin is convinced that liberal societies have achieved a level of equality among their members that is often missing in minority cultures. To give special rights to these cultures then, Okin argues, is to perpetuate and reinforce sexist practices within them. The problem is that multiculturalists focus on differences between groups, such as those between Western liberal culture and the culture of Native Americans, for example. Feminists claim that the proper liberal focus should be on the differences *within*, rather than between, them, e.g., the power imbalance between men and women. Additionally, Okin argues that multiculturalists have ignored the private sphere within minority cultures, and in so doing, they have failed to address the inequality suffered by women in their domestic relationships. This failure is especially problematic because it is within the domestic sphere that women form their fundamental conceptions of themselves and through which cultural norms are transmitted across generations.

In conclusion, Okin makes two suggestions for how to solve the dilemma between special group rights and feminist concerns for the rights of women. The first is reformist. Okin proposes that multiculturalists arguing for special rights for a group give careful consideration to the inequalities between the sexes in that culture. Although these inequalities may be difficult to discern, because they are not public, it is necessary to locate them to insure the well-being of the less-powerful members of the group, i.e., women. Okin only briefly addresses how the needs of silenced women in a minority culture can be determined. Her suggestion is that women, particularly, *younger* women (“since older women often are co-opted into reinforcing gender inequality”)

participate in the negotiation of what special rights and protections a group is granted, thereby insuring that their interests are promoted (24).

Okin's second proposal is more radical. She argues that since minority group rights exacerbate the difficulty of furthering the rights of individual women, in some cases, the minority group's rights may have to be limited. She writes:

In the case of a more patriarchal minority culture in the context of a less patriarchal majority culture, no argument can be made on the basis of self-respect or freedom that the female members of the culture have a clear interest in its preservation. Indeed, they *might* [italics original] be much better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become extinct (so that its members would become integrated into the less sexist surrounding culture) or, preferably, to be encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women—at least to the degree to which this value is upheld by the majority culture. (22-23)

Some of the contributors to this volume agree with her. Similarly to Okin, philosophy of law professor Joseph Raz advocates for cultural respect and assimilation, while drawing attention to other oppressive practices in minority cultures, such as intolerance towards homosexuals. Others take Okin's argument even further. Yael Tamir, a political philosopher at Tel Aviv University, argues that group rights not only harm women, but strengthen those who already are dominant in these groups (rarely women). Special protection thereby favors conservatism over reform. Tamir takes Okin to task, however, for her "paternalistic" assumption that "the other" cannot survive the change and tensions created by modernity that Western liberals have. Several respondents find fault with Okin's thesis on the basis of her requirement that other cultures and religions would have to endorse egalitarianism, not just at a political level, but at a metaphysical and moral level as well, before they could achieve special protections. Azizah al-Hibri, professor of law and founder of KARAMAH, Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, and Martha Nussbaum, professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, present two thoughtful arguments along these lines.

Before responding to Okin's suggestions, it is important to understand precisely some of the terms used in this debate. Multiculturalism is generally understood to mean that people of other cultures, whether internal to the state or external, are human beings, and as such, their ways of life deserve equal respect. Multiculturalism, thus, condemns intolerance and encourages cultural diversity. Proponents of multiculturalism like Kymlicka further argue that minority cultures within a liberal state often need *special* rights or protection in order to help preserve their culture, which otherwise might be overpowered by the majority culture and disappear. Such special protection might include allowing bias in employment—for example, the right of a religious group to hire only men as pastors or priests.

It is also important to note that the arguments for or against special rights are made in the context of looking at minority cultures within a liberal state, like the U.S. or France. The debaters are not primarily concerned with the relationship between states, such as between the U.S. and African nations. This limits the accusations of “cultural imperialism” that can be raised against Okin, for she is not suggesting that liberal states should enforce their sensibilities against other sovereign states. Okin is not arguing in this piece, for example, that the United States should stop the practice of clitoridectomy in African nations.

Lastly, it is helpful to recognize that Okin and her respondents define the proper aim of the liberal state in more than one way. Nussbaum describes the difference as “comprehensive” versus “political” liberalism. A comprehensive liberal is someone who sees the fostering of personal, individual autonomy in all areas of life as an appropriate goal of the state. Nussbaum places Okin in this category, since she argues that “liberalism’s central aim, in my view, should be to ensure that every human being has a reasonably equal chance of living a good life according to his or her unfolding views about what such a life consists in” (119). Political liberals, among whom Nussbaum places herself, accept the core value of the equality of all citizens. Equality is seen, however, as a political value, not a metaphysical or moral one. This qualification affects religious groups because, although they would be required to accept the political equality of women as citizens of a liberal state (as most religious groups do), they would not be required, as in Okin’s

analysis, to accept the equal metaphysical nature of men and women before receiving special protections to maintain their culture.

Like Nussbaum and al-Hibri, my main problem with Okin's argument lies in its application to religious groups. For, much as Okin's and Kymlicka's limitations help alleviate concerns over Western cultural imperialism, they do little to alleviate fears on the part of religious groups concerning secular imperialism.¹ Nussbaum summarizes Okin's view of religion this way:

On one side, for Okin, there are these old patriarchal religions that oppress women in keeping with sexist "founding myths." On the other side, there is the noble Enlightenment goal of a full political recognition of the equal dignity of all human beings. There is no difficulty here, other than a practical political difficulty, because religion is not seen as offering human beings anything of value. It is little more than a bag of superstitions, frequently organized around the aim of maintaining control over women. (105)

Okin clearly believes that religion does not participate in liberalism's aim. In her words, it is a patriarchal minority in a less patriarchal majority culture. Thus, enlightened liberals ought to encourage its reform to the degree that it upholds the majority culture (which is presumed to be feminist) or help it become extinct.

Thus, Okin argues that the aim of liberalism is to further the possibility of living a good life, but the good life is constricted so as to exclude the religions of the majority of Americans. Because of this, I find myself in agreement with Nussbaum in her "plea for difficulty." Nussbaum rightly points out that the ability to search for the good in religion is

¹ Al-Hibri would not even grant, however, that Okin is free of cultural imperialism, arguing in her essay that Okin's argument is burdened by its Western cultural viewpoint. See her essay in this volume, "Is Western Patriarchal Feminism Good for Third World/Minority Women?" 41.

one of the liberties most deserving of protection by the liberal state (and in the U. S., this ability is constitutionally protected).

Indeed, many women have found what they believe to be the good in their religions. Al-Hibri rightly points out that Okin fails to appreciate this because she has made the fatal flaw of deriving her understanding of religious minority cultures from secondary sources outside of those religions and cultures. (*The New York Times* is a prominent secondary source for Okin.) This failure causes Okin to assess the major religions inaccurately, as having “founding myths” that “are rife with attempts to justify the control and subordination of women...[and] characterizations of women as overly emotional, untrustworthy, evil, or sexually dangerous” (13). Instead, these stereotypes themselves can be seen as myths about religion that have been promulgated by feminist theory.²

For example, Okin attributes the creation accounts in Genesis with teaching that a “male God” created Eve out of Adam, thereby denying women’s role in reproduction. Genesis clearly indicates, however, that God is neither male nor female, but beyond sexuality. After all, the phrase “male and female” is the only phrase in the Hebrew Scriptures used to modify “the image of God.” Phyllis Tribble argues in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* that “clearly, ‘male and female’ correspond structurally to ‘the image of God’ and this formal parallelism indicates a semantic correspondence.” In her opinion, Genesis 1:27 is a metaphor in which the more well-known element, “male and female,” is used to illuminate the lesser-known element, “in the image of God.”³

In accepting second-hand accounts about the beliefs of people of faith, Okin fails to give respect to the other. Women in many of the world’s religions, for example, can only be seen as having a “false consciousness,” according to Okin’s way of thinking. There can be virtually no

² I remember in my first women’s studies course, almost ten years ago, hearing the same interpretations that Okin gives of the Genesis accounts of creation.

³ Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) 17.

adequate response to this charge on the part of women of faith, for it can always be said that they cannot see their indoctrination. Additionally, as al-Hibri notes, the failure to seek out first-hand accounts also suppresses real dialogue, out of which the opportunity for an accurate diagnosis of the problem could come. Discussion with feminist Christians, for example, would unearth that the problem is not that Christianity at its core is patriarchal. Rather, it is that male interpreters of the sacred text of Scripture have succeeded in presenting Christianity as patriarchal. Biblical feminists seek to uncover interpretations of Scripture that reveal the equality at the foundation of their faith.⁴

In spite of the reforms that feminists of faith are making, it seems doubtful that Okin would accept that change within the church has achieved the level of equality found in the majority culture of American society. After all, women still are not allowed to be priests in the Catholic Church, nor are they ordained as pastors in many Protestant denominations. Thus, according to Okin, Christianity needs to be altered further before Christian groups should receive any special protections. If they “become extinct” without those protections, so be it.

The gulf between Okin’s feminist perspective and the perspectives of many religious communities points to a larger issue raised by her argument: How do we, as citizens of a liberal state, decide between competing moralities? For this is what the divide between feminists and religious groups boils down to. Okin’s solution is for women to be the arbiters between competing moralities. Since not all women agree about what is best, Okin suggests that younger women, in particular, within a minority group should be the judges, having been less inculturated by their communities. Even better, feminists ought to decide, since they have the clearest vision, unobstructed by patriarchal sensibilities, of what is best for women.

⁴ I am currently working on a manuscript that gives a more detailed account of Biblical feminist arguments against patriarchal misconceptions of Scripture.

People of faith measure what is morally problematic by an entirely different authority, one that involves accountability to something higher. It is this, I suggest, that is the most problematic feature of many religious communities for Okin. In Okin's definition of comprehensive liberalism, individual freedom is paramount. Religious communities, by demanding accountability to a higher authority, do not fit her view of liberalism.

The editors of this collection state in their introduction that the central question of this debate is how we should understand a commitment to equality. The deeper question found in these pages, however, concerns how we can come to agreement, or navigate our disagreements, on issues of morality. One of the values of this collection lies in the fact that it raises such an important question, although I am disappointed that the contributors did not explore more explicitly possible solutions to this problem.

Okin's argument could have remained insular within the academic, feminist community. By including and dealing with issues raised by women and men of other perspectives, cultures, nationalities, races, and religions, however, this book represents a step forward in listening to the voices of those who are theorized about, and not just to the voices of the theorizers. *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* raises important questions for the communal life of Americans in contemporary society and does so in a way that begins to consider the voices of those who are often left out of the discussion. For this reason, it is worth reading.