

Why Secularism Needs Feminism

By Lindsay Beyerstein



The debate over feminism in secularism has spilled over from the darker corners of the Internet to the mainstream secular movement. In the spring of 2013, CEO of the Center for Inquiry, Ronald Lindsay, caused a stir with an opening address to the Women in Secularism 2 conference, in which he accused secular feminists of attempting to silence their male critics the same way 1st Timothy admonishes female Christians to keep silent in church.¹ Lindsay eventually apologized, but not before several prominent activists broke with CFI over Lindsay's remarks and the initial non-committal response of the CFI board of directors.^{2,3,4,5}

Lindsay's patronizing remarks were downright mild compared to the anti-feminist hostility seething in some secular circles online. Prominent secular anti-feminists, including the YouTube video bloggers Phil Mason (aka "Thunderf00t") and TJ Kincaid (aka "The Amazing Atheist"), and blogger Justin Vacula, vehemently insist that feminism has no place in the secular movement. These bloggers have negligible intellectual credibility in mainstream secularism, but they have built a significant audience online. Mason's anti-feminist videos consistently garner hundreds of thousands of views each. As of this writing Kincaid's video, "The Failure of Feminism," has garnered over half a million views on YouTube since it went live in late 2011, and his channel has over 128 million views and four hundred thousand subscribers.^{6,7}

The secular movement needs to remind itself why feminism is a non-negotiable part of any secular movement worthy of the name: i) A major goal of secularism is to work to undo the harms that religion has perpetrated on society. Throughout history and across the globe, religions have been a major source of support for women's oppression. Many religious institutions continue to oppress women to this day, and this should be of concern to every secularist. ii) Male supremacy is logically untenable without religious special pleading, and once we abandon male supremacy as a moral principle, we are all equality feminists by default. iv) Secularism cannot expect to defend core secular principles like the separation of church and state without taking up feminist concerns like reproductive rights. v) The only way to heal the rifts within the secular community is for mainstream secularists to realize that they, too, are feminists, and present a united front against harassment and intimidation within our movement.

Feminism is a social and political movement for gender equality, a movement with deep historical connections to American freethought. Feminists seek to dismantle a patriarchal system where men are granted higher status or imbued with greater authority simply for being male, and replace it with an egalitarian social structure. Women are the most visible subjects of patriarchy, but patriarchy is an irrational and often internally inconsistent system that causes needless suffering to people of both genders. Therefore, feminism seeks to decouple gender from rights, privileges, and social status. Feminism also questions gender stereotypes and works to loosen the grip of restrictive

gender roles to enable all people to express themselves freely and pursue their talents and interests free of arbitrary gendered constraints.

Secularization is the process whereby human reason supplants religious dogma as a way of understanding our world and how we ought to live in it. The Enlightenment overthrew the old hierarchies of church and monarchy and ushered in democratic revolutions that put states under the control of their citizens. As historian Susan Jacoby illustrates in *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, the United States was expressly founded on the premise that the new society would be ordered by human law, rather than the presumed will of any supreme being.⁸ If a society is to be governed by human reason ratified by popular consent, it becomes increasingly difficult to argue that full civil and human rights should be limited to white men when other groups of people are equally capable of reason. Jacoby notes that there was a great deal of overlap between freethinkers, feminists, and abolitionists in the 19th Century, because all three movements were inspired by the Enlightenment notion that society should be ordered by reason rather than superstition, and they could see no reason why women or blacks should be second-class citizens.

It's no coincidence that most of today's champions of male supremacy are religious conservatives. That's because the secular arguments for male supremacy are terrible. In fact, they're so bad that hardly anyone bothers to make them anymore.

It's telling that even the most prominent anti-feminist movement of our era bills itself as a movement for "men's rights" rather than a movement for the restoration of male supremacy. Men's rights activists accept the moral principle of gender equality, but insist that feminism has tipped the balance of power in favor of women at the expense of men. Some feminists are tempted to dismiss MRA's protestations of support for gender equality as a smokescreen to hide their real agenda, but I'm willing to take them at their word. If the entire ideological spectrum from feminist to anti-feminist embraces gender equality as a moral principle, it can hardly be dismissed as a narrow factional position. It is the modern consensus.

The main religious argument for male supremacy boils down to the assertion that men's superior position in society is somehow ordained by God. In the Christian origin myth, man was created in the image of God and woman was created in the image of man as his handmaiden and helpmate. This is what philosophers call a teleological argument: Women should serve men because that's what God made them for. Without God, the argument fails.

There are secular arguments for traditional gender roles, but they do not speak to the moral principle of male supremacy. These typically appeal to dubious empirical claims about the essential natures of men, women, and the necessary preconditions for human flourishing. These arguments attempt to convince women (and men) that female submission is conducive to happiness. Many women have tried this experiment for themselves and found the exact opposite, but even if these generalizations were true on average, that wouldn't establish that men have any moral authority to command women. At most, these arguments show that there are practical advantages for women who put on a submissive act. They don't establish why women have a moral obligation to submit if they don't want to.

Religions teach that all kinds of things are mandated by God, including such virtues as kindness and honesty. As secularists, we don't need to fall back on God's wishes. We can come up with our own compelling arguments for why we ought to be kind or honest. No one has been able to articulate a good reason for male supremacy without divine edict.

Without supernatural special pleading, the moral justification for men's dominion over women crumbles. As philosophy professor Dan Fincke pointed out in a recent debate with Justin Vacula, the overwhelming consensus among secular moral philosophers is the equality of persons.⁹ Just because a belief is widely accepted doesn't make it true. However, the onus is squarely on those who favor non-egalitarian morality to give reasons for their position.

Some philosophers say that people have rights because of their ability to feel pleasure and pain. Others say our status as moral agents rests on the ability to reason and grasp the demands of the moral law. Still other secular philosophers contend that moral status comes from our ability to make promises and form social contracts. Whichever secular model you pick, it's safe to assume that genital shape has nothing to do with moral status. Men and women belong to the same species. People of both genders are capable of feeling, using language, reasoning, promising, and cooperating socially. There is simply no good reason why having a Y chromosome or a penis should entitle you to boss anyone else around.

Once in a great while, you'll find an overt male supremacist making the secular argument that men deserve more rights because they are inherently more rational than women.¹⁰ This claim is unsupported by evidence, but let's consider it for the sake of argument. Even if it were true that men were more rational than women on average, intelligence still wouldn't be neatly divided into male "haves" and female "have-nots." Like height, weight, ability to fire projectiles with accuracy, attributes are distributed throughout the population. The average man is taller than the average woman, but many women are taller than many men. It simply doesn't make sense to use sex as a hard-and-fast way of assigning rights. It's just a proxy for something else that supposedly correlates with sex or gender, like rationality. So, why not just skip gender as irrelevant and focus on morally relevant attributes like rationality or sentience?

So, why should the secular movement concern itself with feminism? For one thing, organized religions have been, and continue to be, a major source of female oppression. Opposing sexism is already *de rigueur* in organized atheism as long as criticism is directed toward religious bigots.

Many prominent atheists have made considerable headway in discrediting religion in the eyes of rational people by highlighting sexist religious teachings and practices. The late Christopher Hitchens openly clashed with feminists, but he made a career out of decrying the abuses of women in the name of Islam and to a lesser extent Christianity. Ironically, when Richard Dawkins rebuked the skeptical blogger Rebecca Watson for gently urging her male viewers not to proposition women in elevators, he chided her for complaining about low-grade Western sexism because Muslim women suffer *even worse* sexism.¹¹

In his debate with Dan Fincke, Justin Vacula argued that, rather than being distracted by narrow feminist issues, the secular movement should focus on core secular concerns like defending church-

state separation, strengthening the secular community, enhancing the public image of secularists, and so on.

On closer examination, a feminist approach turns out to be essential to all of those core secular functions.

Secularism needs champion the feminist cause of reproductive freedom in order to defend the separation of church and state. A threat to the principle of church-state separation in any area is a threat to the principle as a whole. Separation of church and state means much more than challenging school prayer. The recent onslaught of anti-choice legislation at the state level is the most egregious violation of the separation between church and state in the country today. The Religious Right isn't just inserting their false doctrines about sex and reproduction into curricula, they're inserting unwanted, medically unnecessary vaginal probes into women seeking to exercise their constitutionally protected right to abortion.

As far as strengthening the secular community, the single greatest threat to community cohesion is an online subculture of virulent misogyny personified by the views of the Amazing Atheist and his fans. (The Amazing Atheist is notorious for repeatedly threatening to rape a woman who identified herself as a rape survivor during an online discussion.) Feminist freethought activists, particularly feminist bloggers, are being deluged with abuse, including rape and death threats from fellow secularists.^{12,13} One prominent secular feminist blogger, Jennifer McCreight [abandoned blogging](#) all together after a sustained campaign of online harassment.¹⁴

Secularists are often challenged to show how we can be good without God. We prove that point by living our values, treating others with respect, and marginalizing those who abandon debate for threats. This movement has always thrived on spirited debate. We cherish our right to challenge each other, to offend each other, to annoy each other, and even to insult each other--but we must draw the line at threats of violence.

We are a movement that prides itself on following the evidence. There is overwhelming evidence that feminist activists in the secular community are being targeted for abuse by fellow secularists. Some secularists would rather pretend the problem doesn't exist and accuse feminists of making a big deal out of nothing. It's easy to underestimate viciousness and tenacity of online harassers. They rarely hold positions of influence in the secular movement. They don't get invited to speak at conferences. They're all but invisible to anyone who's not being targeted. But in their element, they can be extremely disruptive, especially to activists who use the Internet as their main outreach tool. As Rebecca Watson wrote after being inundated with graphic rape threats, "I started checking out the social media profiles of the people sending me these messages, and learned that they were often adults who were active in the skeptic and atheist communities. They were reading the same blogs as I was and attending the same events. These were 'my people,' and they were the *worst*."¹³

Mainstream secularist leaders need to stop nit-picking their feminist colleagues when they complain about harassment and present a united front against online intimidation. Their own secularist, egalitarian principles demand it.

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