

Women's Rights, Liberation, Religion and Humanism

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

March is Women's History Month in the U.S., England and Australia. March 8th is International Women's Day. What better time to discuss the roles that religion and humanism have played in women's pursuit of human rights?

Sacred texts have long been filled with passages condoning sexism and patriarchy. Indeed, it would be shocking if this were not the case. After all, the earliest Jews, Christians and Muslims were rigidly patriarchal. How could their cultures, societies and religious texts be otherwise?

However, thankfully, religious skeptics and radicals – most of them unsung heroines and heroes – have courageously opposed sexism. The deist, freethinker and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. In this work, Wollstonecraft put forth the idea that human fulfillment and happiness were dependent upon morality which flowed from the proper use of reason. She placed strong emphasis upon the importance of education for girls and boys. She was a fierce advocate of human rights in general.

Frances Wright was an American freethinker, abolitionist and advocate of sexual liberation. She was born in Scotland and raised in England. Like Wollstonecraft before her, she pushed for the education of women. She hated slavery with a passion, and she was especially appalled by slavery as it was practiced in the U.S. She argued that priests were in the wrong and that they served to enslave women mentally. She railed against the sexual repression of women and maintained that slavery was unnatural. Her outspokenness made her a pariah, even among her friends.

Lucretia Mott was a religious radical and served as a mentor for Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Stanton was one of the strongest early feminist critics of the Bible. In 1895, she published *The Woman's Bible*, which was widely regarded as a scathing attack upon Christianity. Stanton, Mott and other feminists drew up a Declaration of Sentiments, taking the Declaration of Independence as a model. In 1848, the first convention for women's rights was held in Seneca Falls, New York. Stanton became a major leader in the fight for women's right to vote.

Ernestine L. Rose is regarded by many historians as the first American female to publicly declare her atheism, as well as the first American woman to openly campaign for women's rights. She started working to bring about the Married Woman's Property Act in 1836. The New York state legislature accepted it in 1848.

Matilda Joslyn Gage was a secularist and a major advocate of women's right to vote. She was a rationalist that contended that superstitious beliefs were retarding women's progress. In her book *Woman, Church, and State*, she argued that Christianity did not help women's plight.

As quietly as it is kept, in past centuries, some men also courageously fought for women's rights. Thomas Paine – a deist – was regarded by some historians as the first feminist. He was one of history's greatest critics of slavery and an advocate of universal education.

Much later, the great 19th Century freethinker Robert Green Ingersoll was a fierce advocate of women's rights and civil rights for African Americans. He attacked slavery and fought on the side of the North as a colonel during the Civil War.

Like his fond acquaintance Ingersoll, the African American abolitionist and freethinker Frederick Douglass strongly fought for women's rights. Douglass was an influential attendee of the Seneca Falls convention. Douglass died on the evening of February 20, 1895. Earlier that day, he argued in defense of women's rights at the National Convention of Women.

In the area of sexuality, women – especially young women – are enjoying sex more than ever. However, sexist double standards – many of them rooted in patriarchal religion – seem to be intractable. Boys and men can still be as promiscuous as they like and suffer no damage to their character or reputation. (On the contrary, most promiscuous males are quite proud of their sexual exploits.) Girls and women, on the other hand, are called hoes, whores, sluts, THOT's (That Hoe Over There) and other degrading names, even if they are not promiscuous. These terms should be every bit as objectionable as racial slurs.

Can women ever achieve genuine sexual liberation as long as these unfair and absurd double standards persist? At this time, unlike Martin Luther King, I do not

have a grandiose dream for humanity. However, I do have a simple hope. I hope that in the future we succeed in obliterating all sexist double standards, and that we achieve complete equality of opportunity between the sexes in every area of human endeavor. The realization of that simple hope would be a tremendous benefit for humankind.