

Are religions unfair to women? Is the Pope Catholic?

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Kate Smurthwaite rocks. Now I've got that out of the way, I will describe in slightly more detail other matters that became apparent while I was watching [The Big Questions](#) on BBC1 on Sunday. There was only one question on this episode: Are religions unfair to women?

At the start of the programme, I turned to my other half and said; ok, you're about to be served up a smorgasbord of "out of context", "that's not religion, it's culture", "it's not unfair, it's just different" (or "complementary" if you prefer), "we oppress women out of respect for them", "it's not religion that oppresses women, it's men" and let's not forget the misinterpretations and the misunderstandings and complexities and nuances of the language of scripture which we dunderheads are unable to demystify due to our crass and immensely unhelpful adherence to reason. You've got to side-step reason and ... what's the word... oh yes "transcend" reason in order to truly understand the complexities of a command as subtle as "beat her".

(How to side-step the "beat her" command in the Quran – like this: "Yes, we realise that is what the scripture says, but what on earth makes you think that when it says 'beat her', it means 'beat her'? Clearly, what the creator of the universe was trying to say (he can be clumsy with words but we love him anyway) is 'hit her lightly – and respectfully – with a feather, but only if she's completely lost all sense of reason (because you know what women are like) and is a danger to herself, or she's about to throw the kids out the window. Only then do you lightly physically restrain her (respectfully) and even then only after you've told her off several times and refused to have sex with her (a terrible punishment no doubt)'. Whilst we realise none of this is actually written in the scripture, and we've therefore invented it, we do have women to placate and we can't have them knowing that scripture endorses violence against them, so this calls for some serious flim-flammy. Et voila".)

Anyway, back to the programme. Kate Smurthwaite was heroic, as was Prof Francesca Stavrakopoulou of Exeter University. When they were allowed to speak, they fought the corner well. But, as so often, I found myself frustrated at what wasn't being said in reply to the standard assembly-line arguments I've described above, so I'm afraid I'll have to vent my frustrations here. I'll start with the greatest weapon in the clerical armoury – "out of context".

The first rule with "out of context" is that it only applies to nasty things. So, if a scripture says something enlightening and loving, well then that is perfectly clear – God is enlightened and loving (and this book here is the word of God). On the other hand, if it is violent, cruel, vicious, unjust, barbaric, or just plain genocidal – then it is "out of context". This is rule number one and it is not up for negotiation.

Rule number two is this: sometimes the scripture is interpreted as relevant to the time in which it was written. At other times, it is a rigid demand for all times and all places. How do you tell the difference? Well, it depends entirely on the priest/rabbi/imam/vicar you happen to be talking to at the time. That's the beauty of this rule – it is uber-flexible (and uber-convenient).

"It's not religion, it's culture". This one is convincing and wins over many. That is of course the many who haven't actually given it any thought. This argument assumes a few things, the most important being that religion and culture are somehow separate and have no influence on each other.

Nonsense.

Have a look at Saudi Arabia. Women are not allowed to drive, or be seen, or have any autonomy or power whatsoever. If, and when, this is challenged – the response is not "that's against our culture", the response is "that's un-Islamic" and when anything is un-Islamic, that's the end of it. When politicians in Yemen argued to end the practice of child marriage there, the argument was cut short for being un-Islamic. Culture didn't come in to it.

In Iran, people are stoned to death not because it's got anything to do with culture (Iranians – and Afghans for that matter – had a very different culture prior to the arrival of political Islam), but because it is Islamic. The Taliban don't talk about culture when they behead, mutilate and maim. That's Islamic too, and that's what they call it. It is barbarism, cruelty and misogyny carried out in the name of Islam, justified by Islam, defended by Islam and found in Islamic scripture and law, but apparently it's got nothing at all to do with Islam. Spectacular.

"It's not unfair, it's just different". This one is wheeled out routinely as well (you could set your watch by it) and it is also complete and utter tripe. Let me tell you something: when "different" means that one of you has all the power and the other one has none, when one of you is master and the other one a servant, when one of you has all the money and the authority while the other has zero – that is different yes, but is also immensely unfair. It is different in the way that a slave and a slave-owner are different. It is different in the way that the Afrikaaners and black Africans were different under apartheid. It is different in the way that just and unjust are different, sane and insane are different, cruelty and compassion are different. This is annoying me now, so I'm going to move on to the next one.

"We oppress women out of respect for them". This is a good one, and is swallowed hook, line and sinker (by those who give it no thought).

This one could also be described as "we keep women dependent and enslaved at home with no opportunity to experience life because they are precious jewels which must be protected – this is how much we honour them. That is of course until they step out of line in any way, then we kill them. Out of respect."

Similar rubbish was put forward by an Orthodox Rabbi on the programme when he was asked why he didn't shake the hand of a female researcher that morning. After delivering this hum-dinger "I don't touch those things that don't belong to me" (enough said), he went on to describe how he won't touch women out of respect for them. But of course, "ewgh, I'm not touching you" has always been a well-known mark of respect – hasn't it? He also delivered some upper-class drivel when he said "unclean doesn't mean dirty"; thus proving beyond doubt that there's absolutely no amount of crap that they won't try to get away with.

This argument also adheres to the virgin/whore dichotomy. Women are one or the other – they're either a virgin or a whore. The Virgin Mary is the perfect woman – and so often wheeled out as an example of how highly women are valued in Catholicism – but it's exactly the same as "we honour you until you step out of line". Mary is loved because she is a virgin who does what she's told. This is not love or respect. This is "do as we say or you're dead", which is somewhat different.

"It's not religion that oppresses women, it's men". This one is particularly convincing and it's the only one I am going to give the benefit of the doubt on. I do believe that those putting forward this argument are on the whole well-intentioned, but I'm afraid it still isn't good enough. It completely side-steps the fact that yes, it is men who are oppressing women but if not for religion, they would not be able to do it.

Let's go back to Saudi Arabia. When women there complain of their treatment, the men can throw up their hands and say "don't blame us, God said". And the argument ends there. It is so much harder to fight against the rulings of the creator of the universe than it is to argue against a mere man. So the woman must shut up and accept it. Religion gives unquestionable authority to men who wish to oppress women and allows them to do so – the religion is the weapon, it is not an innocent bystander. If these things about women were not written in the scripture, and the scripture deemed the word of God, then men would not be able use it to beat women in to the ground.

This is the reality, and no amount of verbal diarrhoea is going to change it.

Speaking of reality, I must include the quote of the day, delivered by the fantastic Kate Smurthwaite – I can't possibly put it any better than this:

"If we look at the real world, there are thousands of women – millions of women, all around the world who, as a result of religion, are being denied the right to vote, being denied the right to drive, being denied the right to leave the house and get the job that they want. Young girls are having their clitorises removed, unsafely, in unsanitary conditions. Women being killed, women having their lives ruined, and we're sat here bickering about what verses mean. Just look at the real world – religion is incredibly damaging to women".

In short, religion is oppression perfected; a weapon of the powerful to beat the powerless in to submission. Religion must assert its authority and it does so in the way that male-dominated societies always have – by beating up women. When you strip away all the useless and abstruse theology that is what is left. It's not complex, it is simple. A group of petty and insecure men reassure themselves of their power by trampling all over women – and they do so with the connivance of a special class of women who sell out their sisters for a few scraps of male-defined power.

Personally, I don't have a problem with belief in a God, or a belief in things beyond the human mind. If I rejected those who believe in God, I would be missing some of the most important people in my life. The problem is religion. The problem is scripture. The problem is clergy. The problem is the power that the unknown holds over us and the exploitation of the fear this creates by a professional class who exploit it for political power and wealth.

The solution is secularism, and only secularism.

Secularism does not control belief; it keeps religious oppressors away from power and, most importantly, keeps women safe and free from these oppressors.

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Anne Marie Waters was a member of the NSS. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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