

Religion and modernity

[Religion](#)



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Religion and Modernity Can it be truthfully said that organized religion is a barrier to modernity? In order to determine such an accusation, we must first try to identify how we define modernity as well as the role of religion in science and humanity. To think modernism means the present is a very narrow view. “ For many Decades, modernization was depicted in social sciences as a broad series of processes of industrialization, urbanization and social changes through which modern societies arose. (Lu, 2011) For the purposes of this essay, we will try to limit the discussion strictly to the terms of modernity relative to science and the inequality of women. But why bring up religion in the context of mathematics and science? Because Science does not develop in a social and political vacuum. Imagine a world without the simplest understanding of the world that surrounds us.

Without science, man may have never been able to navigate the seas, discover new continents, never developed beyond agrarian commerce, without cures for common ailments, electricity, telephones, and running water or with even the basic understanding of natural phenomenon. For example, in ancient times, thunder was seen by primitive people as God expressing his displeasure or showing his power. However, the scientific method has proven that lightning and thunder are caused by complex electrical processes in the atmosphere.

Science and mathematics have provided the world with answers to questions and cures to deadly diseases and has touched the lives of every person in the world today. This clash between modernist thought and Christianity has produced centuries of “ accusation, rebuttal and counter-accusation. ” (Bogart, 2009) Famous sociologist, Emile Durkheim saw religion as a

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necessary institution which enabled society to function harmoniously and that religion provides stability by teaching and enforcing a definite moral code.

Even with this admirable quality, probably few informed people would want to argue the point that the “ bible and religious tradition has often been used to prevent people from pursuing certain avenues of self-expression” (Bogart, 2009) and to deter people from all sorts of activities. In the current view most would agree that it can easily be seen that basic scientific advancements have been beneficial to mankind and most would agree that without the developments in mathematics, and science, the world as we know it could never have existed but it was not long ago when the Christian church persecuted followers of science as heretics. Throughout history, the religious attacks on modernity in the form of mathematics and science is widely documented, forcing religion into a mostly defensive position. Even today, there are still scientific and medical advancements with potentially hundreds of life altering applications that keep religion and science at a standoff in the moral and political spectrum as well as in public opinion.

In this essay, we will illuminate how organized religion has been integral in attempting to subvert modernity, from the development of mathematics and science in antiquity, the oppression of art during the Renaissance era, further suppression of secular education through the Age of Enlightenment, the ongoing battle for the rights of women and all of the way through the modern attacks on stem cell research, cloning, family planning and abortion.

In as early as In 415 A. D. the last known head of the Department of Mathematics and Philosophy at the Museum of Alexandria, part of the Library
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of Alexandria, the female mathematician Hypatia was stripped naked in the streets of Alexandria with her flesh scourged from her body by Christian hands and fingers while being dragged to her final death by burning alive by fanatically enraged Christian Coptic mobs, inspired by the leading Christian patriarch, later canonized Saint Cyril of Alexandria.

Hypatia's invention of an improved astrolabe and her subsequent book "Astronomical Canon", a table of star positions for navigational explorers, was subsequently in use by other intrepid sailors and explorers for the next 1,200 years, all of this in addition to her thirteen books on algebra and another eight on geometry. This atrocity was not the first time and definitely not the last time that the church would attempt to use its power and influence, to try and subvert scientific advancement.

Only a few hundred years later, at the height of the power of the Catholic Church, another movement created a scapegoat for religious persecution. The intellectual movement called "The Enlightenment" is one of those rare historical movements which in fact named itself. Enlightenment thinkers and writers, primarily in London and Paris, believed that they were more enlightened than their compatriots and set out to educate them. Many enlightenment thinkers had the admirable belief that "human reason could be used to combat ignorance, superstition, and tyranny and to build a better world." (Brians, 1998) Additionally, "by celebrating the human race and its capacities they argued they were worshipping God more appropriately than gloomy priests and monks who harped on original sin and continuously called upon people to confess and humble themselves before the Almighty." (Brians, 1998) While at the time, the "humanist", the element responsible

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for the “ enlightenment”, did not have an anti-religious association, there were a few that claimed that humans were like God, created not only in his image, but with a share of his creative power.

They believed that painters, architects, musicians, and scholars were, by “ exercising their intellectual powers, were fulfilling divine purposes. ” (Brians, 1998) While, even within the church, there were notable Christian who pursued and promoted advances in mathematics, astronomy, medicine and science in general, the humanist notions of divine creativity and enlightenment went directly against the basic tenant of the Catholic Church of a single all-powerful, all-knowing, divine god.

Because the church could not frame these tools of logic to the uses it preferred, they were afraid that this message could not only diminish the power so long held by the church over the daily lives of the people and over the monarchy and politics, but could cause outright revolt from the church as it had in before in Athens. With so much fear and apprehension, the church struck out on a terroristic mission to shame, humiliate and publicly murder those who could not be tamed.

During this time of the “ Inquisition”, trials of witchcraft flourished as they never had during the Middle Ages and thousands were slaughtered as examples at the hands of the church. For those who were so lucky to avoid the execution table, they still faced public humiliation, had their life works destroyed in front of their eyes and in some cases like Galileo, were forced into the infamous, unjust house imprisonment. Galileo Galileio, was one of the foremost scientific thinkers of his time, and his works have served to be

the basis for the majority of astronomical work to follow. He uses the same logic the seamen had used, reinforced with observation to argue for the notion that the earth rotates on an axis beneath the unmoving sun. ” (Brians, 1998) The Church objected to this idea because the Bible clearly stated that the sun moved through the sky and denounced Galileo's teachings, forcing him to recant what he had written and beginning in 1633, under Pope Urban's personal authority given by the " Congregation of the Holy Office of the Inquisition" forced him into house imprisonment, preventing him from teaching further.

In this case, the Church's triumph was short-lived, because while they were successful in silencing Galileo, they could not prevent the advance of science and astronomy. Some of the more caustic clashes between science and religion in modern history is the battle over stem cell research and cloning. “ When news that Ian Wilmut and his team had successfully cloned an adult sheep in 1997, there was an immediate and ill-informed wave of public, professional, and bureaucratic fear and rejection of this new technique. ” (Savulescu, 2008) Cloning is the process of multiplying cells and tissue to genetically replicate the host.

Almost immediately, cloning of Human tissue was banned, but sampling of plant materials and various offshoots of the science have been allowed, such as limited cell regeneration and stem cell research as a means of treating or avoiding serious diseases. While this technology is a controversial issue, and few people have openly supported it, there are some important advancements that this technology could currently serve and endless

possibilities that remain. For example, in agriculture, there are several advantages to cloning including yield, strength, and timing.

A cloned plant can yield a thousand new plants from one parent plant. This means that farmers can produce more crops without a lot of seeds. In addition, cloning a plant means you can choose the best plants to clone. An entire crop of healthy, prosperous plants can be cloned from one strong parent plant. Lastly, cloned plants grow at the same rate, so harvesting can become streamlined. In reference to animal cloning, better breeding is a perfect example of the benefits of technology. In animal cloning, the best of the breed can be chosen as the clone subject.

This means farmers can have the strongest or best producing animals on their farms. In the current world economy, and with a majority of the world stricken with hunger related problems, cloning could likely be the best option for countries with inopportune growing environments, or who have suffered from natural disasters, but several concerns about health issues and moral issues have stalled attempts to perfect the science. In addition to having multiple benefits in food production, there are also key benefits to the cloning of human tissue.

The cloning of human tissues could lead to no longer needing to harvest animal organs to replace dead or damaged human tissue. In many cases, animal organs are rejected by recipients. In the “ United States the discrepancy between the number of potential recipients and donor organs is increasing by approximately 10-15% annually” (Savulescu, 2008) Not only is there a shortage of human tissue, there are still the issues of incompatibility

and the need for a lifetime of immunosuppressive therapy and serious side effects.

With cloning, there could be abundant sources with near perfect capability. While there are several issues with cloning most notably those relating to the spiritual morality of creating or replicating human tissues. The movement to ban human reproductive cloning appears to draw strength from traditional religious beliefs. Religion is among the most powerful factors shaping attitudes toward human reproductive cloning and remains an influential force in human society, despite the secularization brought about by scientific progress, bureaucratic rationalization, and economic growth. Members of some religious groups, particularly Evangelical Christianity and Roman Catholicism, believe that a soul enters the body at the instant of conception, and that the fertilized ovum is in fact a human person with full human rights. ” (Bainbridge, 2003) Another traditional function of religion has been to provide a set of metaphors through which people could think about their own psychological processes. The Christian notion of an immortal, righteous soul offers hope in return for moral behavior and in regard to the cloning of human tissue, the assumption that clones would lack souls seems to be widespread. This worry is not limited to Christians, but also afflicts people in the broad tradition of Hinduism and Buddhism who believe that each being, whether human or non-human, is born with a spirit. “ This spirit may or may not be a reincarnation of a previous spirit and that cloning will prostitute the natural evolution of spirits and life. ” (Bainbridge, 2003) For many believers, the crucial quality of a soul is its immortality. In a sense, religion is the death

business, and it cannot tolerate any technology that would take away its market.

As we have seen throughout the readings, religion has a serious impact in the inequality of the genders and the subjugation of women throughout the world. In *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti made the difficult decision to abandon Kabutri with her family as the persecution she faced for her refusal to marry her brother-in-law, and then for the shame of disappearing with Kalua. Her village leaders meant to use religious law against her and to beat or kill her for her apparent indiscretions against morality. This example along with various other examples within *Season of Migration to the North* illustrate the plight of women in extreme religious societies.

Particularly, the focus in the books centered around the Middle East and Islam. However, backward thoughts about women are not exclusive to the Middle East or to Islam. All major religions have a storied history of women's subjection to men. It is not in all cases that women are beaten or shamed, in many cases the persecution is more subtle, but nonetheless ruthless. In religious history, across Christianity, Islam, and even Judaism women were and in some cases still are denied the ability to participate equally in religious ceremonies and rituals.

In Judaism, there is a Jewish prayer that men say each morning. “*sh’lo asani isha*”- “that I wasn’t created a woman.” (Torah, 2012) That blessing is only one striking example of many where women are not treated or considered equal in Orthodox Judaism. In most synagogues women cannot be ordained as Rabbis, cannot lead prayer services for a mixed crowd,

cannot chant from the Torah, and are discouraged from wearing traditional religious attire. However, Judaism is not alone. Even in Christianity there are direct references to the subordination of women to men.

When researching the history of the Catholic Church, one will find that a doctrine against women has always been firmly maintained, and is so today, but not necessarily to the same extent. The Bible has many things to say indicating support of the idea that women are unequal and servile to men. From Genesis III " and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" This is the first direct order of the subservience of women to men and that in Christianity, it is ordained by god that men bear rule over the women.

Later in the New Testament, women's subservience is mentioned again. ; " all the wives shall give to their husband's honor, both to great and small he sent letters into all the provinces, that every man should bear rule in his own house" (Esther, 2002) again like we have seen in all of our readings, women are valued differently and treated differently than men. Based on our readings women's value is in the home as a servant to the husband and her opinions and thoughts are half of a man's.

As we have seen, the most visibly egregious and violent offender of women's rights are fanatic Muslims. In Islam, rather than just being ignored and subservient, women were treated like slaves or property. Their personal consent concerning anything related to their well-being is considered unimportant, to such a degree that they were never even treated as a party to a marriage contract. In Islam, Women are needed only for procreation and

are then discarded. Similar to the other faiths, the Koran has similar passages that diminish women. Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because men spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those among you who fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. ” (Sura, 4: 34) Furthermore, in some Islamic ruled counties, Women have no independence, cannot own property, are barred from employment and are not allowed to attend school and can be beaten or sentenced to death only for being seen in public, unaccompanied by a male relative.

How can such intolerance and subjugation in the name of religion be considered peaceful or modern? It cannot. As in its dealings with science and modernity, organized religion stands united against progress. In the end, no one can claim that religion and modernity have been indifferent and unbiased towards each other. In addition and neither can it be implied that all the advocates of modernity were opposed to religion. “ Dogmatic religious opposition is not rooted in technical or humanitarian concerns, but in a view of existence that is incompatible with scientific progress.

There is no peaceful way to overcome such opposition, short of converting believers away from their strongly-held, literalistic faith. ” (Dawari, 2012) On the other hand, it is not as if all the religious authorities have been opposed to modernity or have struggled against it. However, modernity has changed man's relationship with his fellowmen, with the world, and in some cases with the origin of the world. Scientific progress in many cases has served to

debunk religious mythology in the eyes of some, while for others, it only serves to reinforce the idea of a higher power.

Religious ideals are not bad or wrong. They are just many times wielded by those who wish to maintain power and control over the minds of people. Religious arguments about science will continue to rage as long as modern scientists attempt to understand the minute details of creation and to challenge the validity of an all-knowing omnipresent being. Likewise, in terms of slavery and oppression of women, religion continues to have a chokehold on the minds of many fanatic leaders who continue to brainwash youth into believing that it is God's will for women to be lesser creatures than men.

Technological advancements and the distribution of their benefits has not been equal and modernity has been slower to develop in some places more than others, but that does not change the fact that religion has directly challenged social and scientific progress at every turn. Some of the most basic scientific understandings likely may have not been possible if elements in organized religion had not been defeated. There are still many challenges ahead and it will take education and understanding to find common ground in the struggle against religious idealism and social justice. (2002). Esther.

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