

There is a case now before the Supreme Court about how much can religious rights (beliefs) triumph over human rights. Do those who believe that their objection to abortion rights should prevent women from control over their own bodies? And will the court vote to remove legal protections from women with current rights to make decisions over their own future? Does a woman or girl who has been forcibly impregnated (rape) have no rights other than to submit to the consequences for years to come?

Around the world, beginning in the 1920s when women in developed countries got the vote, they also had legal access for the first time to contraceptives. One of the most important definitions of being a modern woman and voting citizen was control over fertility. Terminating a pregnancy came later, and legal, safe abortion came much later in the United States, and is the law both here and all other representative democracies.

The only modern countries that have revoked such rights are fascist dictatorships and theocracies, demanding total control over women in the constant need for foot-soldiers for war.

Elsewhere, countries governed by religion rather than the laws of participatory governance, are very bad placed for the human rights of women and children. One of the worst offenders is Pakistan, despite the efforts of its Independent Pakistan Human Rights Commission, the one bright light in that benighted country.

The Commission gives Pakistan a failing grade, saying that Pakistan does too little to protect the country's most vulnerable, including women and children. Pakistan's human rights failings include honor killings (family murder of disobedient women and girls), forced conversions of minority Hindu girls, and use of blasphemy laws that carry death penalties for supposed "insulting the Prophet." The Commission also notes: "Despite the legislation enacted to protect and promote women's rights in recent years, violence against women has escalated." Media that report such horrors are being muzzled.

In the developed world, child abuse by Catholic priests, after long coverups, is now publicized and the scope of the problem an enormous headache for the Church. But Catholicism is not alone in this. Pakistan, again the poster child of hideous practices, is now becoming aware of how many Muslim clerics abuse both girls and boys in their care. Demonstrators are now demanding capital punishment for rapists. If they are smart, they keep their children out of madrassas, (religious schools).

Too often, however, overcome by the fear that the stigma of being sexually abused will shame the family, families drop the charges instead of prosecuting. In our own country, among fundamentalist religious cults, children have no protection from predator ministers, because parents believe them rather than their own children.

A particularly egregious case of covered up child abuse has been revealed by investigative reporters, who have found that the Haredi Jewish (Ultra-Orthodox) community in Brooklyn, New York routinely covers up sexual abuse of clerics and teachers, never reporting offenses to the police. The Haredis intimidate witnesses, encourage congregations to shun victims and their families if they speak out, and quietly transfer offending clerics or teachers to other communities.

One common characteristic of all these abusing communities, from renegade Mormons, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Hindu temple priests in India, Muslim clerics, and even Buddhist priests, is patriarchy. The unquestioned primacy of males is protected against the modern movements that promote the equality of women and the concern for children.

The irreligious can also create their own cult. Goel Ratzon, an Israeli cult leader, truly believes in the sanctity of marriage. He had 21 women he considered his wives and fathered 38 children with them.

The State did not see his "belief" exculpatory. He was convicted of rape and other sexual offences against the women, who were mostly minors at the time of the offences, and some victims (wives), were his own daughters. As a father, he got an F and a long prison term.

Let us hope that our own Supreme Court will contemplate the consequences of

permitting "beliefs" to take away others' rights. We are a country of laws, not beliefs. Human Rights are more important than religious rights.

686 words

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