

WOMEN AND MEDIATION IN RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

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ABSTRACT

The present article is an investigation into the possibility, raised by the research of both Shlain and Gilligan, in different contexts, that women have a distinctive capacity to ameliorate the kind of religiously motivated violence witnessed globally in the present era. To be able to make sense of the need for such intervention by women, the present global situation is first reconstructed with reference to recent, allegedly religion-motivated, so-called “terrorist” attacks, such as those in Paris, France. These attacks are placed in an interpretive framework provided by Huntington, on the one hand, and Hardt and Negri, on the other. More specifically, Huntington’s thesis is that we live in a time when global conflict will no longer occur on the same grounds as in earlier eras (e.g. ideological grounds like those of fascism or communism versus liberal democracy), but on cultural grounds instead, where religion will be the most important such cultural component motivating conflict. Hardt and Negri answer the question concerning the renewed prominence of religious fundamentalism by showing that this does not mark a return to a premodern condition, but is rather a postmodern phenomenon where cultures such as Islam reject the emergence of the new sovereign, supranational power, which they call “Empire”. It is against this backdrop that Shlain and Gilligan’s arguments concerning the specific predispositions of women towards mediation and intervention in situations of religious conflict must be seen. Shlain’s argument is that, since the earliest hunter-gatherer times women have concentrated on tasks that engage right-brain capacities such as nurturing and caring, while men focused on left-brain tasks that involve objectivity, logical thinking and dispassionate decision-making. While both genders have the same capacity to perform these different tasks, the one set became conventionally associated with women and the other with men, which has resulted in a predisposition on

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PRESS

Phronimon
Volume 18 | 2017 | pp. 79–94
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/Phronimon>

<https://doi.org/10.17159/2413-3086/2017/2317>
Online ISSN 2413-3086
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the part of women to perform these tasks. Gilligan provides confirmation of this claim from a different angle, namely the evaluation of children's moral development. Her analysis of the respective reasoning of a boy and a girl who had to respond to a moral dilemma, shows that, contrary to the view that the boy displayed greater moral maturity than the girl by focusing on the question of justice, the girl displayed different priorities in her reasoning, namely her concern with human relationships. This is what led Gilligan to posit an "ethic of care" which is characteristically feminine. Considering the above it is therefore argued that women clearly possess a capacity for caring, empathy and nurturing that would be invaluable in situations of religiously motivated conflict, in which they should be encouraged to mediate.

Keywords: care; conflict; culture; empathy; Empire; ethics; left-brain; religion; right-brain; violence; women

INTRODUCTION: RELIGION AND CONFLICT TODAY

In his insightful book, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess* (1998, 362), Leonard Shlain² makes the following intriguing observation:

Humans are by nature a curious lot. Our expansive sense of time and space stimulates us to ponder our place in the scheme of things. Many of us have had experiences in which we seemed to glimpse other dimensions, or realities, and these epiphanies inspire the belief that there is an existence greater than the one commonly described. Attempts to discern the supernatural and experience the transcendent have been part of virtually every culture. All spiritual traditions share certain common denominators. All have developed exercises and rituals to alter everyday consciousness to transcend an individual's feelings of alienation and reconnect (*religare*) that person to "the source." The inner peace so generated enables a person to see oneself embedded in the matrix of a grander entity, and to intuit connections to all other living things. This insight engenders in the soul of the one so graced both wisdom and compassion, two attributes that characterise every prominent ancient religious leader.

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- 2 Leonard Shlain is also the author of other equally revolutionary books. First there is an earlier book, *Art and Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time and Light*, reprinted by Perennial, New York, 2001 (first published in 1991). There he argued, with many illuminating examples to demonstrate his claims, that art, as a distinctive (right-brain) mode of perceiving the world, has usually preceded physics, as a different (left-brain) perceptual mode, in announcing and articulating, iconically, a fundamental change from one epochal artistic representation to a new one. Invariably physicists have followed such artistic shifts only later, articulating analytically and in abstract, conceptual terms what artists presented in the form of image-configurations before them. The earlier book already touched upon many of the themes that Shlain later turned in the direction of the connection between literacy and patriarchy, images and femininity, in *The Alphabet versus the Goddess*. Before Shlain, other writers, such as Colin Wilson, had drawn attention to the as-yet unexplored potential of right-hemispheric thinking (see Wilson 1980). Then there is a later book by Shlain, *Sex, Time and Power* (2003), where he followed up his research on the origin of patriarchy in the earlier book (*The Alphabet versus the Goddess*) by looking for a deeper root of this social *malaise*, and found it in the attempt, on the part of man, to control woman sexually because of her ability, born in the evolutionary crucible of *Gyna sapiens*'s (thinking woman's) switch from estrus to menses, for the first time in the history of the species, to say "no" to sex. See in this regard Olivier (2008).

One cannot avoid being struck by the irony entailed in the etymology of the word “religion” that Shlain provides in brackets, namely “... reconnect (*religare*)”; after all, don’t we all know enough about history, both past and present, to realise that, far from “reconnecting” people without fail, religion has often been the very area of cultural practice where deep divisions, if not outright internecine conflicts have occurred? Just think of the present era, where fanatical groups of people who claim allegiance to a specific religion have attacked and murdered others whom they have identified, on religious grounds, as their supposed enemies—as I write I am listening to a radio report on another such attack in the capital of Burkina Faso in West Africa, where a so-called terrorist group with ties to Al Qaeda has claimed responsibility for the attacks, which were carried out, according to the radio report, as “revenge against France”. Add to this the frequent clashes between Muslims and Christians in countries such as Nigeria, and it should be clear that it is not only in Europe where, in France alone, two major, religiously motivated “terrorist” attacks were carried out in Paris against civilians in 2015; the African continent is no exception to this phenomenon, although until now South Africa appears to have been spared its irruption into social space.

These events remind one forcibly of American political scientist Samuel Huntington’s claim in the 1990s (first in the journal, *Foreign Affairs*, 1993), that future clashes between countries or regions in the world would not primarily be economically or ideologically motivated, but culturally or “civilisationally”—that is, on the basis of irreconcilable core cultural differences. Among these he stressed religions which, because their origin and history stretch over centuries, and therefore cannot easily be eradicated by modernisation, if at all. In his words (Huntington 1993, 25):

... differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion. The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear.

Since the publication of Huntington’s influential article (later, in 1996, expanded into a book), it has elicited a vigorous debate among scholars, with some supporting him and others rejecting, or even condemning his thesis in the strongest terms. This is not my concern here. I merely want to draw attention to the importance of fundamental (if not always fundamentalist) religious beliefs as an apparently enduring source of conflict among people, to prepare the ground for my ensuing argument, that women, in particular, are potentially able to contribute significantly to the amelioration of such conflicts, although probably not to their eradication, given their deeply embedded cultural roots that Huntington draws attention to.

What should be kept in mind, however, is Huntington’s observation that, with globalisation, the world has become smaller, so that interaction between people from

different civilisations (including religions) is more frequent, resulting in an increased awareness of the differences between civilisations and the “commonalities” within them (1993, 25). Significantly, in light of what recently happened in Paris and elsewhere, Huntington (1993, 26) reminds one that modernisation and social change globally have weakened “local” identities and the nation state which have been a part of their source since the advent of the modern age in the 17th century, creating a vacuum of what one might call non-belonging. In his view, it is religion that has filled this gap, and this explains, for him (and others), the emergence of religious fundamentalism (in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Islam) in an otherwise secular age. In other words, religion has returned with a vengeance, and perhaps surprisingly, not among illiterates. As he claims, fundamentalism is encountered today among young, middle-class, university-educated professionals and technicians. Huntington (1993, 26) also points to the “dual role” of the West, which is at “a peak of power”, but simultaneously provokes the phenomenon of non-Western civilisations wanting to return to their roots, for example in the form of a “re-Islamisation” of the Middle East. It is not difficult to perceive in the attempt, on the part of the group known as ISIS/ISIL/Daesh, to create an Islamic state in Syria and Iraq, just such an endeavour.

To be sure, the matter is more complex than this necessarily brief discussion of Huntington’s thesis regarding religion as contemporary source of conflict may suggest. For one thing, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s (2001) examination of the reasons for the rise in fundamentalism, today, has to be considered briefly, because they place it in the context of the “historical passage” to a new kind of sovereignty—what they call “Empire”; a new kind of sovereign power operating globally at various levels today, including the political, cultural, social and economic. Everyone in the world is subject to this massive reconfiguration in power relations, and to be able to put forward an argument concerning the possible role of women (as I wish to do here) regarding religious conflict, their understanding of the source of religious fundamentalism—which is arguably crucial to the manifestation of such religious conflicts—has to receive attention.

Hardt and Negri argue that fundamentalism as a “symptom” of the transition to fully fledged “Empire” must be understood against this background. Strictly speaking, there is a variety of “fundamentalisms”, usually connected by their perceived “anti-modernism” or attempts at “de-modernisation” (Hardt and Negri 2001, 146). Here they differ somewhat (2001, 146–147): “It is more accurate and more useful, however, to understand the various fundamentalism [sic] not as the re-creation of a premodern world, but rather as a powerful refusal of the contemporary historical passage in course.” A passage, one should add, which has witnessed the uprootment of many people’s traditional life-worlds. This passage to “Empire” entails an ongoing reconfiguration of power relations globally, which no country, and no one in them, can escape from.

Contemporary media tend to reduce “fundamentalism” to “Islamic fundamentalism”, which is further reduced, Hardt and Negri (2001, 147) argue, to “a violent and intolerant

religious fanaticism that is above all ‘anti-Western’”, despite its having a long history in the modern era and assuming diverse forms. Islamic radicalism today displays clear similarities with its predecessor movements. Nevertheless, they continue, “Islamic fundamentalisms are most coherently united ... in their being resolutely opposed to modernity and modernisation” (Hardt and Negri 2001, 147). One may wonder why this is the case, until you recall that a secularising effect has been inseparable from modernisation in political and cultural terms (something Huntington also notes), against which Islamic fundamentalisms have insisted on the centrality of sacred texts to political constitutions, and on the political leadership and power of religious figures (Hardt and Negri 2001, 147). Iran, with its theocratic structure, may be seen as a fundamentalist state in this sense. Just like Christian fundamentalisms in America, their Islamic counterparts appear as movements directed against social modernisation and its secularising effects, in the place of which a comparatively static and rigid religious order is promoted according to an imagined past society (Hardt and Negri 2001, 147).

Hardt and Negri (2001, 148) insist, however, that to imagine fundamentalism(s) as a “return” to a premodern society obscures more than it reveals, because the conditions they imagine to have existed never did; rather, these putative conditions (Christian as well as Muslim) are fictional—“... a new invention that is part of a political project against the contemporary social order.” It may come as a surprise that a Muslim scholar such as Fazlur Rahman (quoted by Hardt and Negri on p. 148) also emphasises the “original” character of contemporary Islamic radicalisms—they are only “fundamentalist”, Rahman points out, insofar as they claim that the foundation of Islam consists in the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad’s “Sunna”. Paradoxically, such fundamentalisms amount to the “... invention of original values and practices, which perhaps echo those of other periods of revivalism or fundamentalism but are really directed in reaction to the present social order. In both cases, then, the fundamentalist ‘return to tradition’ is really a new invention” (2001, 149). Hardt and Negri’s somewhat surprising claim must be understood in this light (2001, 149), that:

The anti-modern thrust that defines fundamentalisms might be better understood, then, not as a premodern, but as a postmodern project. The postmodernity of fundamentalism has to be recognised primarily in its refusal of modernity as a weapon of Euro-American hegemony—and in this case Islamic fundamentalism is indeed the paradigmatic case. In the context of Islamic traditions, fundamentalism is postmodern insofar as it rejects the tradition of Islamic modernism for which modernity was always overcoded as assimilation or submission to Euro-American hegemony.

They find support for their argument in the work of Islamic scholar Akbar Ahmed (Hardt and Negri 2001, 149), who confirms that while, in this context, to be a modern Muslim meant the embrace of Western technology and education, to be postmodern would entail rejecting the modern and returning to traditional Islamic values. Hardt and Negri acknowledge that Islamic fundamentalism is culturally paradoxical insofar as it is postmodern only to such an extent as it historically succeeds and opposes modern Islam.

Furthermore, for it to be postmodern *and* fundamentalist is an “odd coupling”, to say the least, because these categories are largely in opposition; the postmodern values mobility, difference and hybridity, while the latter valorises purity, identity and stasis (Hardt and Negri 2001, 149–150). This strange phenomenon must be understood, according to them, as a simultaneous response to the emergence of Empire, but at *opposite extremes* of current global power hierarchies. Hence, they explain, “... postmodernist discourses appeal primarily to the winners in the processes of globalisation and fundamentalist discourses to the losers ... the current global tendencies toward increased mobility, indeterminacy, and hybridity are experienced by some as a kind of liberation but by others as an exacerbation of their suffering” (2001, 150). Significantly, what Hardt and Negri discern as the novel element in the current resurrection of fundamentalism is its forceful “... refusal of the powers that are emerging in the new imperial order” (2001, 149). This, coupled with the values that are fundamental to it, especially “identity” (recall Huntington’s argument), might be an indication why so many young people are embracing it at a time when a large percentage of them may have the experience of being rudderless in a globalising sea of “mobility, indeterminacy, and hybridity”.

Against this historical and theoretical backdrop concerning religiously motivated violence in the contemporary world, I want to return to the work of Shlain, who was quoted at the outset in this article, to demonstrate that he provides ample evidence of the peculiar capacity of women—but also of men, who might emulate them in this regard—to ameliorate the conditions that give rise to such conflicts.

WOMEN, MEN, RIGHT-BRAIN VALUES AND LEFT-BRAIN VALUES

Late in the 1990s, a groundbreaking interdisciplinary study, referred to earlier, appeared that shed light on an age-old struggle, and did so in a novel way. In his book, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess* (1998), Leonard Shlain, neurologist and neurosurgeon turned philosopher, offers a novel argument against the naive belief that images and words are distinguishable, but equivalent, means of representing things in the world. In fact, he provides convincing evidence that images and written words represent irreducibly different perceptual modes, which are linked to women and men, respectively, in surprising ways (see also Olivier 2009):

To perceive things such as trees and buildings through images delivered to the eye, the brain uses wholeness, simultaneity and synthesis. To ferret out the meaning of alphabet writing, the brain relies instead on sequence, analysis and abstraction. Custom and language associate the former characteristics with the feminine, the latter, with the masculine. (Shlain 1998, 5)

Shlain acknowledges that many people would claim the opposite in the light of studies that have attributed better linguistic skills to women than to men, and superior skill at handling three-dimensional objects to men than to women. He therefore reminds his

readers that what he is arguing, backed up by overwhelming historical, cultural and mythological evidence, is that there is an undeniable connection between writing and the “masculine principle”, on the one hand, and between the “feminine principle” and the image, on the other. On a methodological note, before continuing my reconstruction of his argument, I should stress at the outset—as he does in the book concerned—that, in light of Shlain’s reliance on neurological evidence to support his claims, what might come across as a kind of “neural determinism”, is nothing of the sort. He constantly correlates neurological evidence with social and axiological insights concerning the values attributed to masculine, as opposed to feminine, capacities. This will become more apparent in what follows here.

My reconstruction of the book’s panoramic scope will unavoidably have to be succinct, because it is impossible to provide an adequate summary here of everything he proceeds to uncover with astonishing consistency in every historical epoch since the appearance of the first alphabet more than 3 000 years ago. He adduces supporting evidence that the emergence of literacy (particularly alphabet literacy) has gone hand in hand with the rise of patriarchy, and that the relatively recent resurgence of an interest in (especially) the electronic distribution of images has been noticeably accompanied by an improvement in women’s social status. In a nutshell, Shlain was struck by the correlation, in the ancient world, between the transition from goddess-worship to masculine god-worship in various cultures, the simultaneous spread of (in particular alphabet) literacy, and the rise of patriarchy and misogyny in the place of the preceding social egalitarianism that had characterised goddess-worshipping communities (Shlain 1998, VII–IX). In a manner befitting a scientifically thinking person, this led him to hypothesise that there is a historical link between literacy and patriarchy, which he then set out to test throughout history and in various cultures, every time with resounding confirmation.

To dwell briefly on some examples investigated at length by Shlain, in ancient Greece there was a marked difference between illiterate Sparta, where women had a high social and political status, and (ironically) literate, supposedly “democratic” Athens, where women had no political rights and a much lower social status than in “illiterate” Sparta (Shlain 1998, 149–158). Among the extremely writing- and (abstract) law-oriented ancient Hebrews, women similarly enjoyed hardly any social and political rights worth mentioning, while, among the image- or hieroglyph-oriented Egyptians, women had many social, economic and political rights, such as the right to own and administer property (Shlain 1998, 53–63; 72–86). One of the telling test cases discussed by Shlain pertains to the so-called “dark” middle ages when, after the fall of Rome, illiteracy spread rapidly. In accordance with Shlain’s hypothesis, the status of women rose conspicuously during this era, culminating in a veritable cult of women-worship associated with the medieval knights’ code of chivalry towards women (1998, 261–277), as embodied in the Arthurian myth of the “round table”. When the late middle ages witnessed the return of literacy, and eventually Gutenberg invented the (European)

printing press in the 15th century (the Chinese had already done so centuries before), the oppression of women returned with a vengeance, culminating in the horrendous persecution of women as “witches” in the course of the 16th-century Protestant reformation (Shlain 1998, 311; 323–377; see also in this regard Mies 1998, 83–88). It is in the context of this witch-hunt craze that Shlain observes (1998, 362–363):

What, then, are we to make of religious “leaders” who claim that they alone have access to the “truth,” and sanction the murder of those who disagree with them? How could men incite hatred, practice torture, and foul the air with their invective, and still be considered spiritual pillars? What level of demonic violence and mayhem must be attained before the judgment of history steps in and strips such zealots of their clerical camouflage? Were the sadists who perpetrated the Inquisition and other persecutions, enslavements, and genocidal atrocities “religious worthies” entitled to the respect we traditionally render the collar and cowl?

Everywhere his investigation led him, the connection so clearly visible in the time of the European witch-hunts, between the spread of alphabet literacy and the oppression or violent persecutions of women, is *clearly* established, leading him to propose that literacy *promotes the interests of (that is, values associated with) men and undermines those of women*, while an appreciation of images promotes the interests of women and of an egalitarian society (Shlain 1998, 1–7). Small wonder that the lot of women has improved substantially since the first inventions, in the modern age, that made the reproduction of images on a large scale possible (1998, 407–429). His explanation of this strange phenomenon is that there is a cortico-cerebral hemispheric connection between images and the values of femininity or women, on the one hand, and between conceptual abstraction (as required for written language) and the interests of masculinity, on the other. In a nutshell: images promote feminine values and abstract thinking (in writing, for example) promotes masculine values. As emphasised earlier, this is no neuro-determinism, as some of my philosophical colleagues may suspect. It is the values associated with left and right-brain functions, respectively, that make the difference between a patriarchal (metaphorically speaking, a left-brain dominant) and an egalitarian (right-brain dominant) society.

One of his “test cases”, apart from those already mentioned, is the fact that there was religious tolerance between Indian Muslims and Hindus during the approximately thousand years when literacy declined substantially, following the Muslim conquest of India in the eighth century, and that internecine religious strife between these two religions only erupted in the wake of the British colonial reintroduction of large-scale literacy to India in the 19th century (Shlain 1998, 423). Moreover, during this time of relative illiteracy, the Muslim architectural achievements included the design and construction of the Taj Mahal—not only a major piece of architecture, but one dedicated to a woman (Shlain 1998, 423). It is illuminating to compare this to the relentless patriarchal oppression of women in recently literate, so-called fundamentalist Muslim countries such as Afghanistan under the Taliban (Shlain 1998, 424), before the recent

American occupation and the subsequent reinstatement of women's right to study and practise certain professions.

Since the invention of photography and the discovery of electromagnetism in the course of the 19th century, there has been a succession of improvements in the social and political status of women—events between which Shlain persuasively establishes correlations; the point being that photography introduced the circulation of images on a scale never experienced before, and that electromagnetism laid the basis for other inventions such as the telephone, the phonograph, the radio, cinema and film, television, tape recorders, video recorders and the personal computer, all of which promoted right-hemispheric activity and the feminine values associated with it, and reduced the hegemony of the masculine values associated with left-brain abstraction as embodied in the printed word (Shlain 1998, 386–392). Shlain is optimistic about the prospect of a relationship of harmony and equality between women and men, given the current pervasiveness of images and icons of all kinds in the media (1998, 407–432)—something elaborated on by Richard Kearney in his *The Wake of the Imagination* (1988)—it is no less than a return of what Shlain calls the “goddess” as metaphor for feminine values to temper the patriarchal masculine values that have been dominant in society for millennia. What the world needs, he argues, is a balance between the two, instead of either being dominant; humanity needs images and the accompanying feminine values, as well as writing and its concomitant masculine values—we cannot do without either. If Shlain is right about this, the long reign of the dominance of the written, printed word, and the suppression of images, together with the oppression of women, may just be over at last. To be sure, as Susan Faludi argued in *Backlash* (1991), there has been a conservative reaction by many men and men's organisations to the gains on the part of women, but ultimately men, too, are influenced (as Shlain shows in the final chapters of his book) by the ascendancy of the women-promoting image.

In the light of Shlain's strikingly “lateral” research, made possible, no doubt, by his interdisciplinary knowledge, it appears to me that a novel approach or angle of incidence is possible, which could make a difference, whatever time it might take, to the hatred that evidently motivates the religiously motivated attacks that were discussed in the first section of this article. To be sure, there are many approaches that one could propose, such as one that, in view of Huntington and Hardt/Negri's work, would emphasise the need for the wealthy countries of the North to reconsider their motives before imposing their economic policies by means of military might on other, culturally distinct countries. But although I believe that such an approach has merit, this is not what I would like to propose at present. Rather, I would like to put forward an argument that takes as its point of departure one of the central claims in Shlain's book, referred to above, namely, that the history of humankind is testimony to the fact that, although men and women share a common humanity, there are important differences between the two genders, and that—although men and women are capable of performing the same kind of tasks (Shlain 1998, 1–5)—the differences in question point to divergent predispositions on the part of

men and women respectively. The question of “women and religion” may therefore be approached from the perspective that the very human, specifically “feminine” capacities that make women distinctive as a gender, enable one to draw some consequences for the practice of religion. I do not mean any specific religion, but all religious practices, understood as the worship of a deity or deities, and a way of living that is understood as being in accordance with what such a deity or deities represent, for example universal love. I hope to draw attention to the tremendous potential that women have for dealing creatively and compassionately with some of the demands of a religious or spiritually-oriented way of living.

But why accentuate women’s potential, as opposed to men’s, in this respect? Do they have something that men lack in this respect? Yes and no. In light of Shlain’s research, one might answer *no*, insofar as all “functionally normal” humans of both sexes are able, contrary to stereotyping prejudices, to perform analytical, logical, conceptually abstract tasks, on the one hand, as well as holistic, affectively synthetic, concrete, iconically oriented tasks, on the other, because of being endowed with similar cerebral-cortical capacities. *Yes*, because of three important considerations.

To begin with, there is the neurological fact, emphasised by Shlain (1998, 8–27) that the distinctive tasks that women have had to perform over millions of years dating back to hominid hunter-gatherer communities, have equipped them with correlatively distinctive capacities or predispositions that are of great benefit to them in certain areas of human cultural practice, including music, art and architecture, and, I want to add, religious practice. For example, in women the *corpus callosum*—a connecting “bridge” of neuronal fibres between the right and the left hemispheres of the human brain—contains more connecting neurons than in men, so that there is a greater integration between them (Shlain 1998, 23). From Shlain’s discussion of the kind of tasks performed by women and by men, respectively, in early hunter-gatherer communities, it is clear why a different neural “sedimentation” took place on the part of women compared to men. Women were the gatherers; men the hunters. As hunters, men had to be able to set emotions such as fear aside when faced with a dangerous animal—they had to be able to focus on the task of killing, in an “objective”, dispassionate manner, even if the animal in question was their totem (protector) animal. This led to masculine values being associated with “being objective”—a left-brain function—and all that goes with it. On the other hand, women as gatherers had to be able to pick berries and dig out roots while carefully (and caringly) maintaining peripheral-vision surveillance of children—right- and left-brain functions combined—lest they wander too far from the mother’s protective presence. It is not surprising, then, to find that women have more “rods” (responsible for peripheral vision or field perception) in the retinas of their eyes than men, who have more “cones” (enabling one to focus well on specific objects). It therefore makes sense that women generally handle multiple tasks at the same time more readily than men do (see Shlain 1998, 23–26).

To stress once more, this does not mean that men cannot do the kind of “integration” that comes more readily for women; it is a matter of predisposition. Keeping in mind what neurologists call “lateralisation” (specialisation of each of the brain’s hemispheres) in humans, this means that right-brain functions which are basic to all kinds of “imaging” such as in painting, is a peculiarly feminine strength. In other words, holistic, particularistic, iconic (image-based) thinking, synthesis and affectivity—including empathy as the affective capacity to identify oneself in terms of feeling with someone or something else—are more readily integrated with left-brain functions such as abstraction, analysis, universalisation, conceptualisation and numeracy by women than by men. Marilyn French’s prescient remark (1986, 546; see also Shlain 1998, 18–23) about the increasing trend in the business world to turn to “right-lobe thinking” for cooperative and effective managerial solutions, in this way promoting a (characteristically feminine) facility for coordinating business tasks, is consonant with this insight on the part of Shlain. Needless to say, this has important implications for women’s “natural” (note the scare-quotes!) aptitude to perform both largely iconic, image-oriented tasks as well as more analytical tasks (“breaking down” iconic syntheses into smaller units) required by many cultural practices—not only business management, as French suggests, but architectural design, engineering, and, I specifically want to argue here, the kind of intervention required in situations where there is potential for religiously motivated conflict. Understanding totalities such as cultural groups characterised by unifying cultural, including religious, values, requires analytical tasks such as “breaking (them) up” into their constituent parts. However, this relies in the first place on iconic, holistic imagining, which is a right-hemispheric, metaphorically “feminine” activity, even in men who excel at such image-oriented design, and given the enhanced cerebral-neural (*corpus callosum*) connectivity possessed by women, the integration of the holistic and the analytical (which French identified in the 1980s already) would serve them particularly well in cultural contexts where religious differences on the part of culturally diverse groups are involved.

To this must be added the important point, that—combined with the right-hemispheric cerebral functions already mentioned, such as musical perception and holistic, image-based thinking—there is the (for present purposes) significant function of affectivity, that is, the common human capacity for feelings, emotions and moods, which has historically been associated with women or with feminine values such as nurturing (Shlain 1998, 19–23). (Although men are equally capable of such feelings and emotions, it is well-known that traditional education in most societies has emphasised the importance of boys and men *not* showing their emotions, which is generally considered “unmanly”; see in this regard also the important work of Raewyn Connell [2002].) Then one can further adduce the historical fact that, after thousands of years of patriarchy—because of certain “woman-friendly”, image-promoting changes in culture over the past two centuries, such as the invention of photography and the discovery and harnessing of electromagnetism for purposes of communication and

image-dissemination (Shlain 1998, 382–392; 407–429)—this yoke has only relatively recently begun to lift. This has released creative powers on the part of women (and some men) who excel at “feminine”, right-hemispheric, image-based invention and affective functions such as sympathy and empathy, which were previously kept in check by a host of legal, social and political mechanisms of patriarchal provenance. My argument is, in light of the substantially evidence-based claims by Shlain, that religious tensions could be meaningfully alleviated by the capacity, on the part of women, for sympathy and empathy, combined with their cerebrally enhanced ability to grasp cultural totalities and analyse them in terms of their constituent parts.

Related to the previous two points, consider the fact that the customary associations of particular capacities (including empathy, affection and holistic thinking) with feminine values, and others (including abstraction, logicality, numeracy and “objectivity”) with masculine values, have gradually been subverted by recent cultural changes such as those mentioned above—which can be linked to the gradual improvement in women’s social, economic and political status (Shlain 1998, 386–392)—with the result that women are largely free to pursue careers and professions previously regarded as being closed to them, including, I would submit, that of being office bearers in a variety of religions. By the same token, the lifting of the stigma that was for so long attached to the image (see in this regard Kearney’s *The Wake of Imagination*, 1988), as opposed to writing (in the literal sense of the word), has also liberated the “feminine” capacity on the part of large numbers of men, to invent, disseminate and elaborate on images in multiple forms.

The implications of Shlain’s astounding, thoroughly researched writing(s) for the ability of women to exercise their creativity freely and unfettered in contemporary society, cannot be overestimated. Needless to say, the field where these powers may be exercised includes religion, especially in light of the large role played in religious practices by the *ability*, but also the previously often absent *liberty* to sympathise openly, without any cultural restrictions—such as those often holding men back—with those who are suffering, and to enter into the much-needed affectively oriented, albeit linguistically articulated process of mediating between and among hostile religious groups with a view to reconciliation and the prevention of conflict and violence. As emphasised earlier, men and women share this ability (as well as those requiring abstraction), but women bear a special, distinctive relation to right-brain functions such as freely demonstrating their feelings and empathy—an association that stretches back beyond history into the mists of pre-history. The long reign of the dominance of the written, printed word, and the suppression of images (Kearney 1988), hand in hand with the oppression of women, may therefore *seem* to be largely over, except for some pockets of patriarchy that still persist in the world, were it not for the fact that (as a benevolent critic has reminded me), the dominant economic system today (neoliberal capitalism), is inherently patriarchal, and the only women that may be said to be free in a certain sense are those who participate in the money-economy on masculine terms.

Then there is the still widespread (albeit iniquitous) belief that women are essentially resources as far as sex and reproduction are concerned. This means that the creative contribution of women in and to religious practice in the globalised, postmodern world has only relatively recently begun, and should be encouraged.

A DIFFERENT ETHICS

Lest some lingering doubts about the validity of Shlain's research for my argument regarding women's special capacity to defuse instances of religious conflict still persist, I would like to point to findings in a different area of research, to corroborate Shlain's claims. I am thinking of the work of Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (1982), that makes out a case for an approach to ethics which is fundamentally different from a rule-based approach (an "ethics of justice"), where Gilligan associates the latter with a typical masculine approach. This contrasts with what she proposes as being a characteristically feminine approach, namely "an ethics of care". Em Griffin (1997, 82) summarises Gilligan's position succinctly as follows:

What distinguishes an ethic of care from an ethic of justice? According to Gilligan it's the quantity and quality of relationships. Individual rights, equality before the law, fair play, a square deal—all of these ethical goals can be pursued without personal ties to others. Justice is impersonal. But sensitivity to others, loyalty, responsibility, self-sacrifice, and peacemaking all reflect interpersonal involvement. Care comes from connection. Gilligan rejects biological explanations for the development of a given moral voice. She believes that women's greater need for relationships is due to a distinct feminine identity formed early in life. The greater need for relationships in turn leads to the ethic of care.

The compatibility between Gilligan's conception of the distinctively feminine ethic of care, on the one hand, and Shlain's notion of women's predisposition towards affectionate, sympathetic behaviour, should already be apparent at this stage. Gilligan arrived at the distinction in question on the basis of considering, first, Freud's inability to discern as clear a development of the sense of relationships, morality and the self on the part of women as in the case of men (Gilligan 1982, 24), and second (in a more sustained manner) one of a series of "measuring experiments"—the "rights and responsibilities study"—involving boys and girls, devised by the psychologist Kohlberg and conducted in a sixth-grade class at a school. In the case of the latter, discussed at length by her (Gilligan 1982, 24–39), she painstakingly unravels the implications of the divergent responses by the boy and the girl to an imaginary moral dilemma posed to them by the interviewer, arriving in the end at the conclusion that, while Kohlberg arrived at a similar conclusion to that of Freud regarding women's/girls' moral development—that it is not on a par with that of men/boys—he had overlooked the complexity of the girl's position, which fundamentally differed from that of the boy in one crucial respect: while the boy, Jake, used logic and conventional "rules" to arrive at his considered judgment,

the girl, appropriately named Amy, made her judgments on the basis of what was to her the primacy of human relationships.

Condensing rather brutally, the two children were asked to respond to questions concerning an imaginary situation which poses an ethical dilemma, namely, where the wife of a man, Heinz, is dying of cancer and the drug she requires is more expensive than he can afford. Furthermore, the pharmacist refuses to lower the price. What should he do? Steal it, or abide by the law and attempt to get the money somehow? The interview is designed in such a manner that the moral implications of the children's responses can be gauged at length. The divergence between the boy's moral thinking, or judgment, and the girl's is immediately apparent. Jake does not hesitate to state that Heinz should steal the drug, because life is worth more than money, and also emphasises the uniqueness and irreplaceability of his wife's—a human's—life. He also shows insight into the fallibility of the law, which could be revised, and ultimately it is clear that what underpins his (very mature, in terms of Kohlberg's hierarchy of moral stages) reasoning, is his consciousness of agreement or consensus among human beings about moral values—a matter of convention.

Amy's responses stand in marked contrast to Jake's—initially she seems to display an inability to conceptualise the moral conflict between stealing the drug and attempting to get hold of it in another way. She insists that Heinz should not steal the money, nor should his wife die. The interesting, and crucially differentiating factor emerges when she is questioned about the reasons why theft should not be an option: according to Amy this would jeopardise the *relationship* between Heinz and his wife. Gilligan sums Amy's position up in a very telling manner:

Seeing in the dilemma not a math problem with humans but a narrative of relationships that extends over time, Amy envisions the wife's continuing need for her husband and the husband's continuing concern for his wife and seeks to respond to the druggist's need in a way that would sustain rather than sever connection. Just as she ties the wife's survival to the preservation of relationships, so she considers the value of the wife's life in a context of relationships, saying that it would be wrong to let her die because, "if she died, it hurts a lot of people and it hurts her." Since Amy's moral judgment is grounded in the belief that, "if somebody has something that would keep somebody alive, then it's not right not to give it to them," she considers the problem in the dilemma to arise not from the druggist's assertion of rights but from his failure of response.

It is not difficult to perceive in this characterisation the implicit contours of what Gilligan describes as "an ethic of care", which she further claims is characteristically feminine. Nor can one ignore the resonance between her position and Shlain's on women. In both cases evidence is brought forward to substantiate their respective claims that women, while certainly being capable, no less so than men, of thinking logically, prioritise other considerations that have to do with affection, care, sympathy and empathy. In Shlain's case this is supported by a thoroughgoing historical study guided by his hypothesis that men's way of thinking and acting is oriented according to the masculine values

attached to left-brain functions such as objectivity, logic and abstraction, while (judging by the feminine practices considered here) women appear to value, perhaps intuitively, right-brain functions such as holistic, image-based thinking and affective states such as compassion, sympathy, empathy and caring. Gilligan, taking a completely different point of departure, arrives at the same conclusion: while boys (and by implication grown men) tend to use logic, rules and conventional thinking to approach moral questions and dilemmas, girls (women) intuitively focus on the human relationships involved, and orient their ethical thinking according to this.

CONCLUSION

Hence, I believe that Gilligan's moral theory offers support for my contention—based earlier on Shlain's work—that women, in light of their demonstrable predisposition towards nurturing, empathy, sympathy and caring, are in a position to contribute significantly to defusing tensions and conflicts among people with different religious allegiances (in fact, far more significantly than hitherto allowed by conventional patriarchal practices that tend to deny them, or limit, their right to hold office in religious circles and institutions such as the church). In light of the contemporary proliferation of religiously motivated violence and conflicts, as was argued in the first section of this article, the time is overdue for women to contribute towards defusing and resolving this situation globally, from within their own religious contexts or cultural situations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Financial support from the National Research Foundation and the University of the Free State, which contributed to making the research underpinning this article possible, is hereby gratefully acknowledged.

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