Soulmates: Created Equal in God’s Image

by Juliana Geran Pilon (January 2025)

The Garden of Eden and the Fall of Adam and Eve (Jan Brueghel the Younger)

> *This article is based in part on the author’s book,* Soulmates: Resurrecting Eve*.*

I encountered my first Bible without knowing what it was. In communist Romania where I grew up, Hebrew was outlawed. That

is not a joke. When my curious little sister happened on my father's secret grammar book—he was teaching himself Hebrew in case we would ever be allowed to emigrate to Israel, though after some 15 years of waiting, he had pretty much given up hope—he told her it was Chinese. So its beautiful letters meant little to me. But I understood how much they meant to my grandmother, who would fetch the tiny jewel of a book on Friday evenings before she lit candles in near darkness, keeping it nearby without actually opening it—almost as if the little book were a kind of witness.

She would first cover her white hair with a beautifully embroidered kerchief that I never saw her wear on any other occasion. Then, she would slowly run her hands over the candles that flickered high in the tall golden candleholders, while she softly murmured, eyes closed, tears flowing quietly over her light cheeks. She shook a little as she cried without as much as a sound, but since it didn't take much for my grandmother to start crying, I didn't worry. She even seemed to smile sometimes as she cried; it never crossed my mind that she did so for my sake—perhaps to prevent my asking any questions. Then came the magical book: she would take it up closer to the flame to see better, then she would start reading. Or maybe she seemed to be reading, I wasn't quite sure, since she could hold the book open and speak while her eyes would close again. It seemed to me that the book had a power beyond the text itself, though I couldn't fathom how. Eerie, I thought, confirming once again my grandmother's magical credentials already established beyond dispute in both the culinary and the healing arts.

It was a gorgeous object: hardly larger than a cigarette case, the pages of the minuscule tome had golden edges which glittered in the dim light of the Sabbath candles. Its cover was of thick ivory with an intricate carved scroll, finer than the brooch my mother kept in a small blue velvet box, and its filigreed old clasp closed gently like a bracelet. I was

afraid that if I opened such a clasp I might not be able to shut it again, though I would have loved to know what the little book contained: maybe even pictures? I asked my grandmother, but she didn't answer; instead, she hugged me close to her and said I didn't have to think about it yet. I had no idea what I was supposed to wait for. When would it be the right time?

The time did come, eventually But not before I learned other stories that helped me navigate the oceans of experience, steering my little boat while the winds of unexpected storms threatened to run me off course, whatever that may have been. I found a compass in magical myths. I found it in the wise story of Psyche; the ballads of my home country, the hills of Transylvania; the fables of Aesop, and folk tales. After immigrating to the United States as a teenager, I discovered the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edith Wharton, and John Steinbeck; the poetry of Walt Whitman and Edna St. Vincent Millay; creation utopias used both in earnest, as by Immanuel Kant, and ironically, by Mark Twain. And I finally read The Book itself: *Biblia Sacra.* The simple, tectonic first sentence shook with symphonic thunder: "IN THE BEGINNING…" A mere lifetime later, I would finally come to understand why the book had meant so much to my grandmother.

Where better to seek the meaning of human existence than in its first pages: the magical narrative of Adam and Eve. This story captures as does no other, before or since, the profound moral drama that has defined the purpose of humanity. Nowhere is the intimate relationship between man and God, as mirrored in the first marriage, described more profoundly than in the words of that brief yet amazingly complex biblical narrative. Viewed in its full historical and cultural context, it helps us find a universal common human link capable of bridging seeming differences between the great monotheistic religions where originally none existed—and none should.

This is not to imply that "peace on earth" is a realistic

possibility; we humans are an angry, passionate lot and, for all our genius, pretty stupid. But I put my trust in the unquenchable human thirst for meaning and purpose. No other species seeks and needs transcendence as we do. *With Thee, I am; without Thee, I am nothing.* Salvation may not be for everyone, but without even its hope, there seems no point in living. Each one of us can feel that being is its own argument: I am, therefore I cannot help but think of God. And Who is He? And why has He created me? Why me and why now? How can we help wondering, lest we should wander aimlessly, to nowhere in particular. Man is a traveler in need of destination; and the story of Genesis can lead the way. What other reason need there be to revisit our First Ancestors?

I think we should start with Eve. But please, it's not *all* about Eve—anymore than it was ever all about Adam because it was never about Eve *as opposed* to Adam. The battle of the sexes and Eve's pre-eminent role in their damnation was partly the result of an unduly anthropomorphized figure of the "Father" Creator. The result has been nothing short of tragic—for men nearly as much as for women. Denigrating some members of the human family affects all the rest. Failure to appreciate the true reasons for the sanctity of life and the dignity of every human being is, after all, at the core of all violence. While degrading Eve comes close to moral suicide, resurrecting her permits not only a more accurate reading of the original story, it also helps recapture the true essence of our common humanity which, without her, is quite simply inconceivable.

This is obviously true in communities that purport to observe Islam most faithfully. It entails abolishing the barbaric practice (for which there is no koranic justification) of what is known euphemistically as female circumcision; allowing women to go to school and no longer be killed by their own brothers and fathers for the "crime" of having been raped; and, eventually, securing their civil and political liberties.

But it involves so much more, not just for Islam but all traditions, bar none—man's inhumanity to woman having been surpassed only by those of man's inhumanity to other men. The former are intimately linked to the latter: both disregard the spiritual basis for life. Spirituality is difficult but not impossible to define; far harder is to experience, feel it, trust it, and apply it.

I was frustrated by those militant feminists who urged women to overthrow the yolk of oppression by men, at one extreme, and by anti-feminists, content with playing second fiddle to their macho mates, at the other. Even the so-called "middle ground" which holds, sensibly, that men and women are equal and unequal respectively in all the right places, misses the point. For it is neither a question of which is better, A or E, nor whether A = E, but that A and E are spiritually one before their infinite Creator. It is neither A nor E but a mutual transformation through a transcendent relationship that itself was created in God's Image. Nevermind the most recent version of gender ideology that denies science altogether, claiming an indefinite number of genders—in the process failing to account for the transcendent import of co-creation of new life through the union of male and female.

Disillusioned with all traditional religions for what they see as their ineradicable misogyny, some feminists have opted for the obverse—an unrepentant, if not outright pathological, misandrogyny (from the Greek word *androgyn*, meaning male).

In his 1985 book *Eve: The History of an Idea*, for example, John A. Phillips describes feminism in at least one of its more activist forms as "the truly revolutionary movement of the twentieth century, because it cannot be reconciled with Western religion" as evidenced by its irrevocably jaundiced view of Eve. Unfortunately, writes Phillips, they go even one step further, selecting to "discover among themselves what they could not find in the company of men." How tragic; for if the result is Adam-hatred in the place of Eve-hatred, what has been gained? Two irreconcilable gender teams; score: zip-zip.

No game.
Phillips warns that irredentist feminists “could fall victim to various ideologized forms of self worship.” Viewed in that light, the feminist project to resurrect the Great Goddess (in fact, a plurality of such goddesses, in different pre-modern cultures) allegedly “killed” by the One Male God who took Her place, is hardly a spiritual advance over its corollary—glorification of the masculine. Writes Phillips: “Man was reminded in the Old Testament that God was God and not Man, but feminists have not been ready to tell themselves that Goddess is not Woman. To these criticisms, feminists reply that the Goddess image is indispensable; it frees women from the damaging image of the male God and provides the focal point for the construction of a nonsexist alternative religion.”

Yet surely “religion” is not the right word for what is at bottom a battle for symbolic supremacy. By contrast, the true traditional function of religion is spiritual, personal nourishment. Rejecting the possibility that Goddesses can be resurrected at will, Phillips’s own conclusion is chillingly Nietzscean: if God is dead, how much more so is the Goddess, whose demise preceded his by centuries.

It would appear that the two religious events are inseparable: The Death of God, and the Death of the Goddess. Since the history of Eve was so closely bound to the latter, the religious experience of women over several thousand years should tell us something about the former. If it is true that God is dead, Eve and feminism will still have much to teach us about the future possibilities of religion and our common life.

In effect, this amounts to spiritual capitulation. The allegedly self-evident assumption that both the God and the Goddess are “dead” is replaced by no discernable transcendent core. Why call this “religion” at all? It looks more like sociology.

If God is conceived in anthropomorphic terms, some theory of "His" (?) sexuality is inescapable. And if a "humanoid" God is neither a "He" nor a "She" (setting aside, at least for now, the hermaphrodite theory that God is both), the only alternative would be that God … does not exist at all. Yet instead of rejecting the Creator's existence, shouldn't we rather question anthropomorphism itself? That was in fact what Judaism thought it was doing: the Torah specifically warns on several occasions against too literal an interpretation of language that is metaphorical at its very core. God as the Author of the world and the Creator of mankind is not a superhuman creature, a kind of Zeus without an entourage.

Judaism introduced a revolutionary idea of a spiritual, nameless yet personal Creator, later adopted by both Christianity and Islam. And while all three monotheisms recognized spiritual intermediaries, from Moses and Abraham to Christ and Mohammed, the same Infinite First Mover suffuses all three faiths, informing their conception of human purpose guided by an ultimately inconceivable (i.e., unimaginable) Higher Being. Yes, even Mohammed—hard as it may be to believe, after Bolshevized Islamism has so poisoned a religion that, in another possible world, might have emulated the respect Mohammed himself expressed to the women in his life, notably his first wife and, by his own account, greatest love, Khadija. The slightly older, wealthy widow, of course, had been his employer.

Without succumbing to the moral equivalence that has castrated Western self-understanding, it is worth reconsidering Fatima Mernissi's quest, which had started in her childhood, into what true intimacy really means. As she noted in her 1995 memoir, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood,* she had always wanted to leave the prison of her overly strict home. She decided to "trespass," which she defined as *learning all about* the world, yearning to be a part of it, to feel, to be fully human. "To know or not to know?" Eve had paid dearly for

that impulse, but for Mernissi, the question answers itself and leads not to damnation but to intellectual salvation.

She was not expecting Eden. As she explained in her 1987 bestseller *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, she was "not concerned with contrasting the way women are treated in the Muslim East with the way they are treated in the Christian West. I believe that sexual inequality is the basis of both systems. My aim is not to clarify which situation is better, but to understand the sexual dynamics of the Muslim world."

She does not deny that there are differences, indeed great ones, between the two civilizations. Nor does she succumb to a relativism that uses the pretext of open-mindedness and holier-than-thou cultural so-called "sensitivity" to obliterate moral standards. Mercifully, she also evades the pre-woke Western feminism that pits male against female: "Nor am I concerned with analyzing women as an entity separate from men; rather, I try to explore the male-female relation as a component of the Muslim system, a basic element of its structure." Mernissi advocates taking a second look not merely at Eve but at Eve *and* Adam, as created together in God's image.

> *It appears to me that the Muslim system is not so much opposed to women as an entity separate from men as to the heterosexual unit. What is feared is the growth of an involvement between a man and a woman into an all-encompassing love satisfying the sexual, emotional and intellectual needs of both partners. Such an involvement constitutes a direct threat to man's allegiance to Allah, which requires the unconditional investment of all his energies, thoughts, and feelings in his God.*

To resurrect Eve is to redefine the nature of human love not only for one another but for man toward his—and her—Creator, which restores meaning to all life. It's about God creating a soulmate for "Him"self as well as for us, God's human children, for one another. Eve taught Adam many things just as he did her, but above all they taught each other how to face the hardest possible knowledge: that inescapable awareness of the reality and inevitability of death, and the compensatory beauty of the world—more exquisite for our brief presence in its mist. The realization of temporality can lead to madness or saintliness, to evil and murder or to boundless compassion and generosity. But when the Creator is invoked to justify the most unspeakable cruelties, turning to hatred in the name of divine love, to torture in the name of Creation, when men defile, humiliate, and even kill their own women in the name of "morality," when spirituality is a cover for bloodlust, when suicide is glorified and death is worshipped with barbaric pleasure, revisiting one of the most cherished sources of human identity so as to revive its original message is not merely edifying: it is urgent.

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