

# **Part One: Atheism, Gender and Self-harm**

# Introduction

In the Western world at the present time, many young males are committing suicide. Also young females are self-harming at an alarming rate.

This material started as an attempt to understand this twenty-first century tragedy from a biblical point of view. It may not be possible to completely get a handle on it – but this hopefully provides a worthwhile line of thought concerning what is going on.

On our shelves at home we have a copy of *The Dangerous Book for Boys*. It is a large hardback and consists of a collation of fact and fiction, prose and poetry, traditionally of interest to boys. These are things like Rudyard Kipling's poem 'If, the battles of Lord Nelson, the story of Scott of the Antarctic, how to navigate by the stars etc. It is about adventures and achievements in 'touch and go' situations. It is about fights and courage and chivalry.

Next to it we also have the equally large *Daring Book for Girls*. This is not quite the same – but again there is lots of adventure, risk taking and brave women. It includes the stories of people like Florence Nightingale and Amy Johnson, the first female pilot to fly alone from Britain to Australia.

There is a part in us all that responds – especially for men, but for women also – to these things. There is something in us which relishes 'the good fight'. Humanity seems made for a life of contending, of conflict, of striving for something better, of taking on the opposition and winning through. It is as if we were made with a necessity to find our significance as people through a worthwhile battle story. And that story we are able to tell ourselves about ourselves is very close to our deepest identity, our very self.

The story we see ourselves as living gives us meaning and purpose in life. If what we think of ourselves at the deepest level undergoes radical damage and disruption, our lives begin to fall apart.

# 1. Humanity according to Scripture

Where does that sense of fight and the need to achieve come from? Is it just a vestige of the battle for survival inherited from our (supposed) evolution and which needs to be discarded in the modern world? Or, changing worldviews, from a Christian standpoint is it something sinful? Is contending inherently wrong-headed as some would have us believe?

The story that we tell ourselves about ourselves invariably involves an element of battle. Our lives are about winning through in a difficult world. I want to argue that this has a proper place in a well-rounded humanity. But I also want to trace how it is subverted, misdirected by sin and so is ruining many lives. This ruination invades every area of our reality including our gender and our very humanity.

## Contending

Secularism asks all the right questions, but comes up with all the wrong answers. To understand ourselves we need to go back to the Bible book of Genesis and our creation by God.

Let's see seven things about who we are.

### **1. *Human beings, male and female, are made in the image of God.***

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness ... So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Gen. 1:26-27).

Men and women both have the astonishing privilege of God himself being the blueprint on which we are patterned. So there is a sense in which men and women are the same (don't be surprised that girls can be adventurous too). But of course, we are different as well. Just as there is equality, but unity and diversity within the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) – so we find the same in humanity at creation.

## **2. The work that God gave us involves multiplying and subduing.**

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen. 1:28).

This project, which God sets before Adam and Eve, involves not just multiplying, but conflict. They are to ‘subdue’ the earth – not to exploit it – but to bring it under their rule and so to fruition. The original word here translated ‘subdue’ is the word often used in the Old Testament for victory in a battle. For example, Zechariah 9:15 speaks of overcoming (or subduing) with sling-stones. The word is used of Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua (Num. 32:22,29; Josh. 18:1). So this task which God set at the beginning for humanity involves taking on the wilderness (‘wildness’). It was to be conquered – civilized. There is a contending for something better. This was to be, under God, our story.

## **3. The conflict for which we were made is outside the garden.**

Genesis 2 explains this in a more detail. Man himself is made out of the dust (Gen. 2:7) and then God puts him into the bit of the world which he has already subdued and made fruitful – the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:8). So the garden was a safe place, a place to meet with God (and therefore a temple), but also something of a first example. Adam is to subdue the earth and this is what it can look like. (We are reminded of the old *Blue Peter* TV children’s programme where the presenters would often be showing viewers how to build something and say, ‘Here’s one I made earlier’). So right from the beginning, even without the Fall, it seems there was a proper sense in which God expected Adam to go outside the garden into the wild to ‘fight’ to extend Eden across the earth. This is the task, the adventure, the conflict for which we were made. It seems to parallel God’s bringing order out of the earth’s original darkness and formlessness (Gen. 1:2).

## **4. Eve is made to help Adam in the task.**

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Gen. 2:18).

The designation 'helper' implies no denigration of the woman for it is a term used of God himself, for example in Psalm 46:1. The woman is to be man's companion in the task. She is made from him, understanding him, socializing him, complementing him; not just helping *him* per se, but helping him in the context of the work they carry out for God. Adam first of all is in the garden alone so he becomes the pioneer/leader. Eve comes after, alongside him. So if his task involves a fight it is not unfeminine but part of true femininity for a woman to be capable of fighting. And you will soon see that rightly if you touch her children, or perhaps even the reputation of her man.<sup>1</sup>

***5. Though men and women are equally made in God's image, they are different.***

Based on Genesis 2 – without going into details – masculinity has relatively pronounced features of work, leadership, strength to sacrifice. Femininity is relatively pronounced along the lines of help, people skills (harmonizing, team building) and sensitivity. I must emphasize the 'relativity' of this reality because we get into difficulties if we make things too black and white, for example, if we say men can't be sensitive or women can't be sacrificial. Of course we can because we are both human. But the way male and female are made means that we generally exhibit certain features more prominently.

***6. All this was originally to take place under the loving Fatherhood of God and in a relationship of trust in him and working for his glory.***

The Lord God, in one sense, is the 'audience' watching over all that is done. It is before him that mankind's achievements take place. Made in his image and carrying out his will, imparts true significance to Adam and Eve's lives.

***7. But now it is essential to note the way that those aspects of who we are have been subverted and misdirected by the Fall.***

Lured by Satan's deception, 'you will be like God', determining for themselves what is good and evil' (Gen. 3:5, my paraphrase), Adam and Eve fall. They step way beyond the bounds set by God, and become rebels against their Creator. The Fall brings many terrible consequences because of God's judgment. But what changes in the area of contending?

*First*, can I put it like this – whereas before they would have been contending for God – to see the world subdued for his glory – now that competitiveness becomes self-centred. Their choice to disobey God was self-centred – think of yourself – ‘you will be like God’ (Gen. 3:5). Therefore, the whole of our psychology becomes self oriented.

*Second*, our opponent changes from a wild world, to Satan and his seed. To Satan God says, ‘I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers’ (Gen. 3:15). This then flows over into a prophecy of the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ, ‘he will crush your head and you will strike his heel.’ Satan, this new opponent of mankind, who usurps power over the world, is far too powerful for us. Without the Saviour we must be losers.

*Third*, following the Fall, excluding God from the picture, in our minds, the audience of our lives mostly changes to ourselves, and what other people think of us. (Perhaps here are the roots of celebrity culture).

So hatred, injustice and selfish ambition break upon the world. Amidst all this there is what the apostle Paul calls ‘the good fight’ – against evil. But in every area of life there is selfish conflict. The part of us which has ‘fight’ in it, has been subverted. But for the purposes of our subject, I want to just flag up how conflict has entered in the area of gender and who we are as human beings.

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<sup>1</sup> I have highlighted the contending, ‘made for a conflict’, aspect of our original humanity. So immediately I want to say that, unlike the risk-averse outlook, a biblical understanding acknowledges that risk taking and a fight for the better, has a legitimate place in our humanity. It is there for both men and women – though especially for men. Courage and contending are rightly part of us. Life is not all about health and safety.

## 2. Male and female in conflict with each other

Since the Fall the genders made for harmony and unity in diversity (Gen. 2:24) are now pitted against each other. This emerges first when the man blames the woman (and hence God) for his disobedience (Gen. 3:11–12) and then in God's judgment on the woman, 'To the woman he said ... Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you' (Gen. 3:16). The word 'desire' is the same as that used of sin's desire to control or enslave Cain (Gen. 4:7). And sadly, in response the man will seek to rule, or 'lord it' over the woman like a king. This gender conflict is not always of the same intensity and has historically gone through many sad and damaging stages. But at present it manifests itself in that the Western world has become, in a sense, anti-male.

### Anti-male culture

I first became aware of this some years ago as my wife and I watched a TV police drama series about two women detectives. It was called *Scott & Bailey*. As I watched this over the weeks I realized that every male character in the show was either deviously nasty or an idiot. It occurred to me that if a TV series had portrayed women like that there would have been uproar. But, somehow, to do that to men was okay.

What are we to make of this? Where has it come from? Here are a few ideas. I'm using Jordan Petersen a little here. He is the Canadian Professor of Psychology who has become something of a YouTube phenomenon with his articulate and outspoken resistance to much of the prevailing political correctness. He has much to say about masculinity in his book *12 Rules for Life – an antidote to chaos*.<sup>2</sup> He is not a Christian, but has much very insightful common sense.

He says, 'Boys are suffering in the modern world'. Let me paraphrase how he argues this. Boys have always tended to be more disobedient, more independent. He says, 'Boys tilt towards things; girls interests tilt towards people' (p298). That's no surprise to us biblically. These differences are evidently more pronounced in societies, like Sweden, where gender-equality is pushed

hardest. The reason this is cited is because it is the opposite of what is expected by those who insist that gender is a social construct. It isn't. The facts say 'No'. The evidence of research is against it. Again biblically we are not surprised. God made the two genders (Mt 19:4).

With a heightened desire for a fight, boys like competition especially as they feel the need in adolescence to strive for independence. They want to be their own person, be someone in their own right and escape the shadow of mum and dad – even if it is as a nerdy computer geek who can outstrip mum and dad at all things social media, digital and online. In a fallen world, this attitude of boys has often been a problem for society. They need to prove themselves.

### **The secular confusion**

But now, as we have become more intentionally secular/atheist as a society it has led to a situation in which, it seems, boys can never win. That's how Jordan Petersen puts it.

Society's thinking has changed profoundly in recent decades. And the atheist/secular explanation of humanity brings with it an inherent contradiction which damns men.

*In the area of being* of course, everything is explained by godless, chance, evolution. But a hierarchy is innate to the concept of evolution. It works via survival of the fittest. The fittest = stronger = better. Because men are naturally stronger than women this inevitably (on the logic of evolution alone) leads to a male dominance/patriarchal society. I'm not defending the misuse of male power; I'm just noting the fact of male power and the way it is explicable in secular evolutionary terms.

*In the area of behaviour* things are different. In strict chance evolution there is no morality. All that prevails is 'might is right'. So, for example, in his recent best-selling book *Sapiens*, which proposes a thorough atheistic explanation of life, Yuval Harari comments on the US Declaration of Independence.<sup>3</sup> The Declaration famously speaks of holding equality and certain rights for individuals as self-evident. Harari dismisses it saying simply 'there are no such things as rights in biology' (p123).



But with our God-given humanity seeping through, generally, human beings can't stomach such hard-headedness. So the nearest thing to morality which might vaguely have some logic to it is equality. We are all human beings, we are all the same and so justice = equality. (Obviously this has some resonance with Marxism).

But step back a moment. There are these two explanations in the areas of being and behaviour. Here's the contradiction; equality doesn't fit with evolution, which is innately hierarchical. Why would the strongest want to work for equality?

And further, evolution doesn't work with equality. It works by 'survival of the fittest' and fittest means 'not equal'. So our society has this inner contradiction. And with these two contradictory sets of logic in play, the male of the human species finds he is inevitably condemned.

From the equality mindset, to use power to advantage yourself over others is to be oppressive. Men are accused of misusing strength (which of course as sinners, biblically speaking, many men sadly have done) to dominate women. And women claim victim status.

This means that many secular men feel they can never win or be the hero of their story. The conclusions are as follows:

- a) If men win in competition with women equality says they are being oppressive.
- b) If a man uses his strength to help women equality says he is being condescending and patronizing.
- c) If a man loses to a woman, evolution says he is a wimp.

Putting this all together takes us back to Scott & Bailey (and Peppa Pig). All men are either evil or idiots to be despised. And therefore

- d) If women are to gain equality men must be positively discriminated against because they are generally more powerful creatures.

### **Boys are in trouble**

So much has this form of thinking prevailed that Jordan Petersen writes:

There are whole disciplines in universities forthrightly hostile towards men. These are areas of study dominated by the post-modern/neo-Marxist claim that Western culture, in particular, is an oppressive structure, created by white men to dominate and exclude women (and other select groups); successful only because of that domination and exclusion.<sup>4</sup>

What we learn is this: If you move away from a biblical world view of the complementarity of men and women, 'boys are in trouble.' Thus it happens that many a male's estimate of himself sags. He feels 'I'm a loser' whichever way he turns. There will naturally be other factors involved once we start considering individual cases. These push in the same direction and influence the high rate of male suicides. Perhaps it is poverty or lack of opportunity. But it is clear that the underlying anti-male outlook will feed in to even those areas too for many men.

So we have young men who believe that they can never live a significant life (especially as, in a secular world, other people are the audience and give significance, not God). They feel condemned just for being male. This feeling of never being acceptable will be amplified by the particularities of a young man's own situation. For example, there might be an especially distressing break-up of a relationship or a brutal dismissal from the workplace. In the story of their life they can never win. They succumb to self-loathing and many to suicide.

The corollaries of this anti-male tendency should also be noted:

- Female mentality becomes the norm. Masculinity is dominant, abnormal – problematic
- Also it means that traditional femininity declines. Women must reach 'the top' which has previously been defined by male pursuits. Therefore, to be a successful woman is to do what men have done traditionally. So being a mother, not a wage earner, is to be a failure as a woman.

This is how the gender conflict works out. But the impossibility of winning goes deeper.

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<sup>2</sup> Jordan B Petersen, *12 Rules for Life: an antidote to the chaos*, Allen Lane Publishing, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Yuval Noah Haran, *Sapiens: a brief history of human kind*, Harper-Collins, 2011

4 Jordan B Petersen, *12 Rules for Life: an antidote to the chaos*, Allen Lane Publishing, 2018, page 302