

Ryan's Distortion of America's Founding

Rep. Paul Ryan wraps his Ayn Randian philosophy of unrestrained selfishness in phrasing selectively lifted from the Founders, but the Republican vice presidential nominee misses the role of democracy and self-government in establishing human rights, says historian Jada Thacker.

By Jada Thacker

Mitt Romney's presidential campaign has been roundly criticized for being light on substance and long on fluff. But his running mate Paul Ryan is promoting a dangerous idea that refutes the historical foundations of democratic government. Practically ignored by the mainstream press, Ryan's manifesto demands closer scrutiny.

When Rep. Ryan accepted Mitt Romney's invitation as running mate, the Wisconsin Republican uttered a simple, but profound, statement:

"But America is more than just a place. It's an idea. It's the only country founded upon an idea: Our rights come from Nature and God, not government. We promise equal opportunity, not equal outcomes. This idea is founded upon the principles of liberty, freedom, free enterprise, self-determination, and government by the consent of the governed. This idea is under assault."

"Our rights come from Nature and God, not government?" Let us hope this idea is under assault, because it is powerful, and it is dangerous.

We know this idea is historically powerful because Americans once used it to overthrow the authority of the British Empire; we know it is imminently dangerous because contemporary American plutocrats are now using it to undermine our hard-won democracy.

Ryan's opinion that human rights are conferred by "Nature and God" is breathtakingly unoriginal. Witchdoctors and warlords have been inventing and re-inventing the idea of atavistic and supernatural rights since the first virgin was sacrificed on the bloodstained altar of some prehistoric bogeyman. But more recently, and more civilly, the concept was resurrected by English philosopher John Locke in the 17th Century.

Locke, a philosophical shaman of the today's Libertarian-Right set, hawked the idea that human rights were conferred by an imaginary "law of Nature," which he said pre-existed and superseded any law made by actual lawmaking people. Think of Moses bringing the tablets down from the Mount but without Moses, or the tablets, or a population that could read.

Please understand that Locke's "law of Nature" existed in a prehistoric "state of Nature," a sort of Garden of Eden where he said "men by nature all free, equal, and independent" existed without either the cost or any benefit of government. But there was a snake in Locke's garden: "For although the law of Nature be plain and intelligible to all rational creatures, yet men, being biased by their interest are not apt to allow of it as a law binding to them in the application of it to their particular cases."

The only solution to humanity's selfish transgression of the "law of Nature," Locke explains, was the establishment of government. "The great and chief end, therefore, of men uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property; to which in the state of Nature there are many things wanting."

So, according to Locke, man-made law (government) was invented by man to protect rights that man never made in the first place. (This is but one version of the long-running theory of the "Social Contract.")

But notice the shift from man in a "state of Nature" to man in a governed society: the "chief end" of this novel entity of government was not to protect mankind's original condition "by nature all *free, equal and independent*," which was their apparent birthright, but "the preservation of their *property*."

Does this reasoning sound at least vaguely familiar? It should. It was the same argument that was enthusiastically adopted by the well-to-do, property-owning, tax-evasive, English Colonial elite at the onset of the American Revolution. The current GOP's political base, if you will backdated a couple of centuries.

But in contemporary times, Locke's "natural law" has languished as a hot cocktail party topic for many folks. An interesting exception is arch-conservative Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who, when queried about his judicial philosophy at his 1991 Senate confirmation hearing, said he thought "natural law" provided "philosophical background" to the Constitution.

Now Paul Ryan, who like Thomas is a self-professed Ayn Rand devotee, has weighed in with his grandiloquent echo that humans' irrevocable rights do not originate from their fellow humans, but from somewhere out of the Blue.

The opinion that persons' rights derive from Nature, or natural law, has been rejected for centuries by philosophical luminaries from Baruch Spinoza to Jeremy Bentham, who pointed out the obvious: rights derive from law; and law as we know it does not and cannot exist without government.

To imagine "law" existing prior to government, said Bentham, is not only a contradiction of terms, but is "nonsense upon stilts." The world's greatest

scientists confirmed Bentham's conclusion: Charles Darwin, Gregor Mendel and Albert Einstein, for example, never discovered that "Nature" conferred "rights" to any animal, plant or thing in the known Universe.

Nature infamous for its so-called Law of the Jungle is a notorious transgressor of human rights. Any random rattlesnake, bubonic plague bacterium or tsunami stands ready to prove the point to humans foolish enough to fantasize otherwise. Anybody who has ever camped out for a summer weekend without bug repellent can tell tales of woe concerning the "natural rights" showered upon humanity by the natural world.

Whether God confers immutable rights upon humans seems to depend upon whom you ask. Contemporary radical Zionists would probably agree. So might a jihadist terrorist. Adam and Eve, interestingly, could not. Napoleon quipped that God assigned right according to who has the best artillery, but in the following century the Soviets, who in fact possessed the winning artillery at Stalingrad, claimed God did not exist. Go figure.

But even devout believers in the Western monotheistic deity Christian, Jew and Muslim alike must admit that, according to scripture, God-given rights apparently do not confer immunity from fatal inconveniences such as Death Angels, plagues, floods, eternal damnation, and, of course, crucifixion.

Declaration of Independence: First Edition

So it would be fair to say Ryan's "foundational idea" that Americans' rights come from "Nature and God" is not an established fact. Yet it does have a familiar ring to it, and for good reason. Ryan's idea was scribbled in stone, as it were, in Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, which states explicitly that "certain unalienable rights" are endowed by man's Creator:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.,That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed"

"Assault Thomas Jefferson if you dare," was the obvious subtext of Ryan's pronouncement.

But let's set the historical record straight here: Thomas Jefferson did not conceive that men "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." Others penned those words.

Let us recall that Jefferson was on a committee whose job it was to draft a

statement of independence based upon a Congressional resolution authored on July 2, 1776 by Richard Henry Lee (ironically, or not, the great grand-uncle of rebel leader Robert E. Lee). The committee's other members were Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman and Robert R. Livingston.

Some revisions to Jefferson's original document seem to have been made by Adams and Franklin, others by the Second Continental Congress as a whole but it is not known who edited what, exactly. We do know Jefferson's original words, however. Like any prudent writer, he retained his first draft. This is what he actually wrote:

"We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable; that all men are created equal & independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these ends, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed"

So Jefferson evidently did not mean that human rights are "endowed by their Creator," or by Nature, simply because that is not what he wrote. It is clear from his original draft that he personally conceived that inherent human rights derived from humans' *equality*, not from Locke's (or Ryan's) concept that rights come down to man from some pre-extant force *superior* to human creation.

This difference between the origins of rights *equality* vs. *superiority* is crucial. Equal rights have generally been repudiated by the economic elite who find it more profitable to claim that rights flow down from upon High. Those who champion equality have usually supported the obverse: that rights, if they flow at all, need to flow *up* from the people, "grassroots" style.

It takes no flash of genius to perceive that the elites' preference for the "superiority model" of rights was not only the basis, but also a prerequisite, for the long-discredited "Trickle-Down" economic theory which holds that the working class is best nurtured from the table scraps of the wealthy.

This pernicious idea has itself trickled down, like some generation-skipping genetic disease, from Jefferson's editors, to the Gilded Age, then to Herbert Hoover, thus to Ronald Reagan, and now finally to some guy named Paul Ryan.

Of course, the oligarchs' embrace of a trickle-down theory of human rights was hardly the only flaw in the self-serving reasoning of those who published the Declaration. That indentured servitude, debtors' prisons, slavery and bonded child labor were acceptable institutions by those who signed off on the idea that "all men are created equal" seems stunningly hypocritical today. Yet it did not quite seem that way to propertied men empowered by votes unavailable to

their servants.

To the mostly privileged soon-to-be Founders, social and economic equality as well as their peculiar idea of liberty applied only to the elite who already possessed it. Thus, the American Revolution was not led by an American Spartacus, but rather by the Colonial elite who risked treason against the British Empire in order to preserve for themselves the unequal social and economic prerogatives in their new, distinctly American, empire.

The elites' Orwellian crusade for "government by those who do not consent to be governed" should sound familiar to those who are afflicted by today's mainstream, corporate-owned media. This message was not intended to further the interests of a democratic society then, nor is it now, and those who value democracy should heed it at their peril.

The Declaration, Disestablishmentarianism and the Constitution

Its editors' revisions notwithstanding, the Declaration of Independence still served its purpose. But its purpose was not to "found a country" upon the idea that our rights come from "Nature and God," as Paul Ryan would have it.

Indeed, the Declaration's specific intent was not to establish any sort of political entity at all, but rather to *disestablish* a government that already existed and which, by the late 18th Century, had begun to threaten the prerogatives of the Colonial American elite. The secondary purpose of the Declaration was a public relations play, as its very first sentence makes clear:

"When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them to another a decent respect to the opinions of mankind require that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."

Despite Paul Ryan's belief in his mythical "founding idea," the Second Continental Congress, including Jefferson, weren't *founding* anything with all their eloquent words. They were, however, executing a calculated but gutsy gamble not unlike that of a disaffected wife serving divorce papers on an abusive spouse who was also the most powerful corporate CEO on the planet and hoping for the best.

How the divorce was to be justified would be critical to its success. To this end, the "opinions of mankind" (especially those of potential allies) were of paramount importance. This public relations task fell to Thomas Jefferson, whose true genius was to turn the logic of monarchical rule on its head, not to beat it at its own game.

For how many millennia had a rogues' gallery of pharaohs, emperors, kings, czars, sultans and khans decreed that their right to rule came, as Ryan insists, from "Nature and God, not from government?" The crucial challenge of Revolutionary self-government, Jefferson understood, would be to divorce itself not only from the raw power of the king and Parliament, but from the fundamental logic of despotism.

In effect, Jefferson justified the Colonial bride's right to divorce her abusive spouse on the grounds of her *undeniable equality*. But his edited argument based upon Locke and now parroted by Ryan was that the bride's right to divorce was justified by her claim to the same *assumed superiority* of her abusive husband. What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, in other words. The problem was that the sauce was not good for the goose in the first place.

Jefferson's vision allowed the moral authority of egalitarianism to challenge not assume the king's fictive mandate from heaven. But when Jefferson argued for inalienable rights based upon human equality, the elitist Paul Ryans in the Second Continental Congress struck his words and replaced them with rights based upon supernatural authority.

In so doing, neither they, nor Paul Ryan, repudiated the medieval principle of Divine Right of Kings. Their reasoning does deny the idea of rule consecrated by divine authority, but rather usurps it.

In any event, the United States of America was not founded, as Ryan announced, upon some extra-legal "idea" of divine authority, but upon the Constitution. Unfortunately for Ryan, who as a professional politician has sworn an oath to defend the Constitution on numerous occasions, our actual founding document contains no reference to the will of "Nature" or "God" at all.

Nowhere does the Constitution say, nor even imply, that persons' rights are "natural" nor "endowed by their Creator," nor does it even hint that "rights" are unalienable, inalienable, inherent, natural or somehow sacrosanct. The Constitution does not pass upon the origins of rights.

And it does not confer any rights. As a matter of fact, the word "right" only appears once in the original body of the un-amended Constitution, and only then in reference to patents, of all things. In more bad news for folks like Ryan, neither the Constitution nor any of its Amendments mentions "government by the consent of the governed," or "self-determination," or "free enterprise."

Ryan, in point of fact, is just making this stuff up and hoping the rest of us have never actually read the Constitution, or can distinguish it from the Declaration of Independence, which carries no authority of law.

American Anarchy vs. Fake Patriots

The Declaration of Independence inspired other independence manifestos, including the 1789 French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* and the American feminists' *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* in 1848. With crushing irony, even the Vietnamese explicitly copied Jefferson's masterpiece in their own declaration of independence *from* the French in 1945.

(Note: one year after the Vietnamese declaration, the United States of America Ryan's visionary champion of "self-determination" re-imposed French colonial domination over the Vietnamese homeland.)

These revolutionary movements that copied our Declaration were the underdogs of their times. But they all eventually succeeded in overcoming the non-consensual rule imposed by the presumed "natural" or "God-given" prerogatives of state-sanctioned religion, male chauvinism, and Euro-American colonial overlordship.

They, like Paul Ryan, extolled the ideas of The Declaration. But what possible common ground do religious right-wingers and Ayn Rand cheerleaders such as Ryan & Company share with malcontent, progressive revolutionary movements whose anti-paternalist and anti-capitalist causes were so clearly at odds with Ryan's neoconservative base? Perhaps the surprising word we are searching for is "anarchy."

The word comes from the Greek *anarchos*, "having no ruler." Anarchy is not a word that any respectable American is supposed to use nowadays to describe a credible political or social movement. This no-no word has associations with evil, alien, bomb-heaving zealots bent on the nihilistic destruction of the "American Way of Life," apparently just for the hell of it.

Yet this is an odd taboo for a country whose national capital is named in honor of the most famous leader of the most celebrated bomb-heaving radicals of the 18th Century.

The long war these anarchists fought from 1775-1783 was messy. American "Sons of Liberty" gangs nailed shut the doors of peaceable, but "politically incorrect" churches. The Crown set slaves free to fight their liberty-loving masters. Patriot forces unleashed preemptive genocidal military campaigns against unsuspecting Indians. British officers led loyalist Americans in atrocities against the own countrymen and vice versa. Lord Howe's invaders kidnapped and gang-raped New Jersey farm girls for days on end, while some unpaid Patriot volunteers were beheaded for desertion by Patriot freedom-fighters.

Atrocities, spies, mutinies, traitors, counterfeiterers and war profiteering were commonplace. Though only a minority of Americans supported the revolution

against aristocratic rule, the Revolution's top leaders came from the colonial elite, and many of the best were foreign noblemen: Count Pulaski, Baron von Steuben, Lord Sterling, and Marquis de Lafayette. George Washington once personally threatened to shoot his own Patriot troops and a few guys dumped some tea into Boston Harbor. Let's not forget that.

If there were a war today that killed the same percentage of the American population, we would have over 3,000,000 graves to dig ten times as many as we dug for combat deaths in World War II. If this level of disorganized carnage were visited upon America today, would we not be inclined to call it "anarchy?" And what should we think of the document that called us to arms?

The Declaration of Independence is nothing if not a profoundly "anti-ruler" screed. It declared the radical dissolution of the "political bands" which had bound the American colonies to the British Empire for more than 150 years, *but it instituted no new government whatsoever to take its place*. It is difficult to imagine a more anarchical statement.

But the government the Declaration despised was an astonishingly inequitable system based on aristocratic pretensions and class-based privilege. Even the English Parliament was held hostage to the hereditary wealth and membership of its Upper House of Lords.

The corrupt British government both chartered and owned stock in neo-global corporations such as the British East India Company, whose tea was dumped into Boston harbor, and the Hudson's Bay Company, that once dominated the resources of an area of North America larger by far than the land mass of the Roman Empire at its height of power. But nowhere in the vast holdings of the British Empire could a man without property cast a vote.

When the truly radical American revolutionary Thomas Paine said, "Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one" *this* was the system he meant. Indeed, it was the only kind of government that then existed: an oppressive racket of "God-endowed" kings and hereditary dynasties.

Backed by a proto-military-industrial complex whose sole purpose was to protect the profits of the investor class, these privileged parasites cared little for the toiling masses that physically produced the wealth of the Empire. They cared nothing at all for the millions of indigenous peoples whose lands, lives and cultures were decimated by a pre-planned colonial holocaust that was but a half-step removed from a policy of outright extermination.

This may sound familiar to contemporary Americans whose military-industrial-

financial imperium spans the globe under the twin banners of Free Trade and American Exceptionalism. But however problem-ridden our civilization may seem today, it is immensely superior to the system in place the day our Constitution was ratified. Tossing out a king and founding a government were just the first baby-steps in our long journey toward domestic social justice.

Through the power of the democratic process, the American people first unshackled themselves from aristocratic colonial landlords and later from Gilded Age industrial robber-barons; from chattel slavery and child labor; from the criminalization of organized workers; from the disenfranchisement of women, minorities, and the un-propertied; from the specter of old-age squalor and hopeless poverty; from the degeneracy of company-store peonage and sweatshop labor; and from the futility of private-only education.

Having accomplished this much for ourselves, we finally made some small provisions to preserve for our posterity what little was left of our remaining physical resources.

Despite a Constitution which tolerated these gross inequities, and despite the profits that accrued to the wealthy who promulgated them, the American people cast away this rule of cruelty. Eschewing the orchestrated violence of elitist, trickle-down, anti-egalitarian leaders, common Americans achieved their goals legally not naturally or supernaturally.

With man-made law the American people upheld equal rights which originated, and continue to be held in common, in the minds of our fellow human beings. Truly "anarchic" Americans thus chose to live "without rulers" excepting ourselves. To re-direct the famous Patrick Henry line: "If this be anarchy, we made the most of it." And it worked.

But that was then. Now, a media-multitude of freedom-fetishists such as Paul Ryan would hijack the genuine anarchy of American Progressivism by cherry-picking self-serving phrases from the Declaration of Independence. They borrow the language of violent Revolutionary elitism in order to wage an economic campaign against an American government that was reconfigured by a century of legal, democratic revolution.

They, as ever, are corporate-men who envision America only as a place worth owning, while they vilify those who envisioned America as a place that should be worth living in. It is enough to make one wish for a law against criminal farce.

These Revolutionary imposters would have Americans believe that any American democratic-collective institution is synonymous with Soviet state-socialism; that the licentiousness of the privileged few is a necessary precondition for

the economic prosperity of the multitude who work for them; that their business corporations are legal persons and worse yet that the constitutionally protected rights of such fictitious persons come from some mumbo-jumbo agency of "Nature and God," quite beyond the authority of a citizen in possession of a ballot.

Then, almost as an afterthought, the Ryans and the other *Randistas* among us offer the fraudulent consolation that opportunity is somehow more valuable than outcome as though an equal turn at rolling the dice gives all players the same stake in the game.

"We promise equal opportunity," Ryan comforted his audience, "not equal outcomes."

This is the logic of sperm. Perhaps the biologists among us may offer congratulations. Predictable outcomes make opportunities valuable, not the other way around, and if Ryan does not understand this concept perhaps he should find a stockbroker to explain it to him.

Most grievous, these faux Revolutionaries claim some hocus-pocus "natural law" as superior to human rationality, which admittedly is imperfect, but is arguably the sole attribute elevating the human condition above that of asparagus. In so doing, the worshipers of irrationality simultaneously deny Jefferson's moral vision that human equality is the *sine qua non* of any civil society that deserves the consent of the governed.

"Our rights come from Nature and God." Can this be true simply because some guy said so? More important, is this really the "idea" upon which the American nation was either founded, or ought to exist today?

No, it is not, and we know why it is not.

Ryan's "idea" is the fantasy of a self-indulgent class who, like many of our elitist forebears, would arrogate to themselves the authority to say whose rights will bloom and whose will wither on the vine. His grand idea is merely the scheme of anti-democratic con-men, of fake Patriots, who would rescue self-government not from any enemy, foreign or domestic but only from itself. As ever, it is the idea of men who would be kings.

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An Iran Nuke Deal Within Reach

The Obama administration is hesitant to close a deal with Iran in the last weeks of Campaign 2012, but is eyeing a likely agreement if President Obama is reelected. Iran appears ready to accept a phase-down of its nuclear project for sanctions relief, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

An Iranian proposal reported by David Sanger in the *New York Times* confirms the outlines of an eminently achievable agreement that would end the impasse between Tehran and the West over the Iranian nuclear program.

Both sides are looking at a deal (although the P5+1 side has so far failed actually to put such a proposal on the table) in which the basic trade would be curtailment of Iran's enrichment of uranium to the 20 percent level in return for relief from economic sanctions. Such an agreement along these lines makes sense because it would meet the major concerns of each side.

The West's major concern is about an Iranian enrichment program that would give Iran enough fissile material to make nuclear weapons if it ever decided to do so. The 20 percent level is of specific concern because it represents a possible step toward enrichment to weapons-grade uranium. Iran's major concern, indeed, its preeminent reason to negotiate at all, is to end the economic damage from the sanctions.

It would be hard to overstate the significance of this concurrence of views on the fundamental outlines of an agreement. Many international negotiations, even between parties that do a lot more talking with each other than the West does with Iran, never make it this far. They take a long time to get to the details of an agreement, or never get to them at all, because they remain at odds regarding the fundamentals.

The remaining disagreement between Iran and the West about the nuclear program involves details, in two areas. One concerns exactly what restrictions Iran would have to observe regarding 20 percent enrichment. To be acceptable to the West an agreement probably would have to prohibit not only further enrichment to this level but also any continuing possession by Iran of uranium previously enriched to this level, in a form that would leave open the possibility of enriching to higher levels.

Fortunately the Iranians already have gone a long way to resolving this issue by converting most of their 20 percent stock into reactor fuel plates (which they

have contended all along is their purpose in enriching to this level), which is a form that precludes any further enrichment.

The other set of details involves sequencing: exactly when one side is to fulfill its obligations, relative to when the other side fulfills its obligations. This is one of the most common matters that arise in complicated international negotiations. Naturally each side would like to get everything it is looking for before giving up anything itself.

This is also one of the issues most readily subject to compromise. The stakes are not indivisible. Neither side will get everything it wants at once. The obvious shape of a compromise, for which there is plenty of precedent in other negotiations, is to implement the agreement in stages, each side both giving something and getting something at each stage.

Do not be misled by what may seem like a big distance between the two sides' current positions, as highlighted by hard-line statements on either side that emphasize the unacceptability of the other side's current position. That too is standard in international negotiations. Each side stakes out a "bargaining position" that is not to be confused with a final requirement.

The Iranians, expert bazaar bargainers that they are, would expect nothing less from us, and we should expect nothing less from them. Bargaining positions are chipped away and converge during negotiations. That's what negotiating is all about.

To the extent that any of the hard-line statements do not just represent bargaining positions, they may be ill-conceived and ill-informed. Sanger quotes an anonymous U.S. official, taking a hard line on the sequencing issue, as saying that Iran could restart a suspended enrichment program in a "nanosecond" but that reimposing sanctions would take "years."

It would take a whole lot of nanoseconds for Iran to do anything in violation of an agreement that would have significance for the development of nuclear weapons. And as for sanctions, the reality is the opposite of what the official said.

One visit to Capitol Hill to listen to anything said there about Iran is enough to realize that politically it is far easier to impose sanctions on Iran than to lift them. If Tehran were to renege on a nuclear agreement, it would be easier still (not just in Washington, but in other Western capitals).

Keep all of this in mind when anyone talks about alternatives to negotiating a nuclear agreement with Iran, with the most momentous alternative being a resort to war. It would not be a war to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon,

even if military force could do that, which it can't.

It would be a war over the *difference* between one possible agreement that trades restrictions on uranium enrichment for relief from sanctions, and another possible agreement that trades restrictions on uranium enrichment for relief from sanctions. It would be a war over negotiating details. Not only that, but details that are very resolvable.


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The Backlash against Women's Rights

Religious fundamentalism Islamic, Judaic and Christian is pushing back against progress toward equal rights for women. The fundamentalists want to restore patriarchal dominance and are gaining ground in the Muslim world, Israel and the United States inside the Republican Party, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

People often take things for granted, like the concept of progress. My students all assume that progress is continuous, indeed, inevitable.

Mostly they conceive of progress in terms of technology: smart phones and computers of every sort. However, there is also a sense that there is a steady and inevitable movement toward the realization of social ideals. Whether they are conservatives, liberals or libertarians, they all assume that the kind of world they want to live in is the kind of world that will evolve. 

That is also true for the feminists in my classes. They know that they have to fight for gender equality and they are willing to do so. Yet they also assume the betterment of women's conditions will be continuous and that victory for their cause is inevitable.

In terms of their own local communities, they are sure that conditions for women today are better than they were in their grandmothers' day and that conditions will be better still for their own granddaughters. They can't imagine things going backward.

But they may be in for a shock. It is reasonable to conclude that conditions for women, not only in places far away, but right here at home are deteriorating. That they will continue to do so is not inevitable, but it is certainly possible.

Let's take a look at the trends. We will start with the ones manifesting themselves abroad and end with the ones here in the U.S.

Most of my feminist students see the Middle East as a central battleground for women's rights. Of course, they define those rights in terms of Western secular culture and ideals and have a hard time suspending that point of view long enough to consider women's rights from the standpoint of Muslim cultural ideals. Nonetheless, trends in the Middle East do not bode well for women's status even in terms of Islamic precepts.

Middle East Trends

Last week authorities in Saudi Arabia refused entry to over 1,000 Nigerian Muslim women who had arrived for the annual pilgrimage known as the Hajj. The Saudi Ministry of Pilgrimage claimed the women were not accompanied by "male guardians" as required by Saudi law.

Actually, the women were accompanied by "male escorts," but the Saudis had segregated the Nigerians, male from female, and then claimed the women were unescorted. When their mistake was pointed out to the Saudi officials, they refused to listen. I seriously doubt that Prophet Mohammad would have reacted this way.

Perhaps an American feminist would just dismiss this as Saudi backwardness. After all, we are talking about a country that refuses to let its women drive cars, which is a ban that cannot easily be drawn from the Quran or Hadith, the central books of Islamic law that date from the second half of the first millennium, long before cars were invented.

Perhaps feminists feel that, over time, outside pressure will bring the Saudis around to conform to Western standards of gender relations. Yet it is quite possible that influence could flow the other way.

For instance, in early October it was reported that IKEA, the Swedish furniture company with worldwide sales, purged the company's Saudi catalogue of pictures of females. They just airbrushed them out.

The Swedes generally pride themselves on their equitable gender relations, but

obviously some of their business executives are quite willing to accommodate Saudi standards when money is to be made. And, we all know that money, rather than feminist ideals, makes the world go round.

Then there is Iran. An American feminist would again dismiss Iran as a backward place when it comes to women's rights. But, despite the chadors (under which one can often find designer clothes), this is a Western propaganda image that does not tell an accurate story.

Upon the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, most women's rights were expanded. They had open access to the job market and earned the same wages as men for the job they held. They also had open access to the country's universities including those courses of study usually considered male preserves.

Today, women make up more than 60 percent of those enrolled in institutions of higher learning, and women engineers, scientists, doctors, architects and the like are common. That is progress by any standard, east or west.

Yet, progress is not necessarily continuous. In September 2012, it was reported that 36 Iranian universities have prohibited women from registering for courses in a range of subjects from chemistry and mathematics to education and business.

Apparently, this was a measure demanded by powerful conservative factions who feel that women have become too "active in society" and should "return to the home." It remains to be seen if this change is long-term.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are countries with Islamic governments, but within the Middle East the challenge to gender equality is not just a product of a conservative Muslim outlook. Thus we can move on to Israel.

According to a recently released report of the *Israel Women's Network*, women have made little or no progress over the last decade: "Discrimination against women in this country is spread across all sectors of society and culture." Twenty percent of Israeli women live in poverty (it is even worse for children and the elderly). This is so even though Israeli women tend to be better educated than men.

In the last few years, the Israeli problem of gender discrimination has been illustrated by the "back of the bus" scandal occurring in Israeli cities. Orthodox Jewish communities in Israel often impose gender segregation and, as those communities expand out from their traditional urban enclaves, they insist that secular Israelis conform to their standards rather than the other

way around.

Thus, busses running routes that go through both Orthodox and secular communities often try to get women to restrict themselves to the back of the vehicle.

Here is how Mickey Gitzen, the director of *Be Free Israel*, an NGO promoting religious pluralism, explains the situation, "It's a slippery slope. What starts with women boarding the bus in the back because of modesty can turn Israeli society into a segregated society in which women don't have a place in public life." How very Saudi of the Israeli Orthodox!

Struggles in the U.S.

That is there and not here in the progressive U.S.A. Really? Consider the following:

Conservative Christians make up more than 20 percent of the voting public in the United States. Their influence runs deep in the Republican Party, as can be seen by the statements of many of the recent contenders for the Republican presidential nomination. And, among the lines pushed by this conservative Christian element is an exceedingly patriarchal view of the role of women.

The American Christian fundamentalist Pat Robertson runs a TV program called the 700 Club with a daily average audience of one million viewers. Here is what Robertson is telling his audience about the role of women:

"I know this is painful for the ladies to hear, but if you get married you have accepted the headship of a man, your husband. The husband is the head of the wife and that is the way it is, period."

In an Alternet interview with author Kathryn Joyce, who has researched and written on the subject of conservative Christian views of women, she makes the following points:

1. There is a growing movement among conservative Christians that preach that women should be married homemakers and that each must have "as many children as God will give you." They see the God-given structure of human society as patriarchy.
2. This point of view has been endorsed by Christian leaders whose long-range goal is to so powerfully influence the U.S. government that they will be able to frame patriarchal precepts into law.
3. For these Christian conservatives the major enemy, the "root of the problem," is feminism and all those who assert a woman's right to control her own

fertility.

Some of these sentiments can be found in the Republican Party's national platform. According to Jill Filipovic writing in the Guardian UK, "the entire Republican social platform is structured around the idea of the traditional family where men are in the public sphere as breadwinners and heads of households, and women stay in private, taking care of children and serving as helpmates to their husbands."

If this Christian conservative sentiment has captured the outlook of one of the nation's two major political parties, you know it must not stop there. A *New York Times* report recently asserted that there is widespread social anxiety among American men caused by the confusion of gender roles that has allegedly come with growing gender equality in the U.S.

The report said that this development has brought about a backlash: "The masculine mystique is institutionalized in work structures" and both men and women who try to challenge this are "often penalized."

You might have noticed how the attitudes toward women of Muslim, Christian and Jewish fundamentalists are quite similar. Each has fixated on the feminist drive for greater gender equality as a threat to their patriarchal concept of social life.

But, as the *New York Times* piece suggests, the problem is by no means restricted to those who describe themselves as religious conservatives. It is a society-wide, worldwide happening.

In the end, it is much harder to realize social progress rather than technical progress. For the latter, all you have to do is the research necessary to master elements of nature. These elements might take a lot of work to get at, but they do not consciously fight back.

To achieve the former, however, you must go up against vested interests that do fight back. That is why progress in society is hardly ever continuous and never inevitable.

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