



AMERICAN REFRACTIONS

America's Misguided Gender Missionaries

MARTHA BAYLES

America's eternal secular messianic temptation has now alighted on gender equality.

As citizens of a nation shaped by prophetic religion and Enlightenment faith in reason, Americans have long been prone to messianic visions of a future day when our society, and that of the world, will be, if not perfect, then considerably better than it is now. Even during hard times, the American “religion of progress” has been sustained by the nation’s steady, at times spectacular, record of scientific-technological and material achievement. Recently, however, it appears that America’s messianic days are over. The religion of progress, deconstructed by academic historians, is now judged a mere pretext for imperial hubris and aggression, and is often tagged with the deprecatory label “developmentalist.” The triumphalism of the 1990s, when the United States imagined itself the first fully benevolent hegemon in history, is all but forgotten. Even the marvels of Silicon Valley are beginning to cast shadows in the form of threats to privacy, social trust and job security.

Yet amid the gloom many Americans are gripped by a new messianic vision, which, like its predecessors, is hard to discern precisely because we are in its grip. This vision has many points of origin, but a 1999 essay by political theorist Susan Moller Okin certainly points to one them. Titled “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?”, the essay answers its own question with a resounding “yes.” Okin’s logic is clear: Gender equality—now defined as a condition in which every individual, female and male, enjoys maximal freedom, autonomy and choice—is an overarching, primary human good. Western liberal democracy, while still patriarchal, has at least accepted gender equality as a fundamental principle. Non-Western countries have not, so any concession to their way of life on the part of a liberal government is perforce a betrayal of principle.¹

Okin's essay was focused on multiculturalism as it affects immigrant communities in the West. But the principle it asserts is clearly meant to be universal and uncompromising. The next step is to assert that the liberal West has a duty to undermine patriarchy wherever it appears on earth. Such is the logic of America's new messianic vision: its global gender agenda.

Amid today's bitter partisanship, this vision is bipartisan. In 2009, when incoming Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proclaimed "the oppression of women [is] . . . the last great impediment to universal progress", there were no outraged cries from Republicans. Likewise, the conservative media did not attack *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof when he called "the global struggle for gender equality . . . the paramount moral struggle of this century." Both candidates in the 2012 presidential campaign vowed to make gender equality a top priority in their foreign policy. Many millions of blue- and red-state Americans support with private donations efforts to heal the brutalized, free the enslaved, aid the resourceful and educate the deprived—especially if the sufferers are female.

My purpose here is not to discredit the ideal of gender equality. Rather, it is to highlight the difference between two very American ways of pursuing an ideal: the starry-eyed way and the clear-eyed way. In early 2012 the Burmese pro-democracy activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi warned the international community not to take an attitude of "reckless optimism" toward her country's immediate future. Suu Kyi was immediately criticized on the ground that her remark might dampen the enthusiasm of potential investors. Her response was sharp and commonsensical: "I did not say I was against optimism, I said I was against *reckless* optimism."

This distinction is crucial to understanding America's successes and failures throughout its history. On the one hand, there is the starry-eyed optimism that in the 19th century led American Protestants to embrace the post-millennial project of perfecting the United States as a Christian nation, then going forth as missionaries to perfect all the other nations on earth in anticipation of the Day of Judgment. In the 20th century this same starry-eyed optimism took the more secular form of a religion of progress, by which America would set the template for a modernizing, democratizing world.

Intoxicated by this reckless kind of optimism, Americans have done amazing things. But we have also done terrible things, and more often failed to do many of the good things we set out to achieve. In a complex and dangerous world, we need to temper our optimism with an awareness of limitations, both material and human. We are well advised to remind ourselves of America's distinctive ethos, which is to hope for human flourishing under conditions of liberty, but to temper that hope with distrust of concentrated power and prudence toward wayward human nature. In politics, this clear-eyed ethos is reflected in the wisdom of the Founders, famously distilled by James Madison in *Federalist* 51: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary."

America's Angels Abroad

In 2009 a young Peace Corps volunteer named Kate Puzey was murdered in the village of Badjoude, Benin. Three years later, Texas Republican Ted Poe co-sponsored a bill in the House requiring more accountability from the agency, because, as he stated, "The time has come to stand up and protect America's angels abroad." Poe's word choice is revealing: While he would surely agree with Madison that men are not angels, he seems to have forgotten that the same is true of women. By all accounts, Kate Puzey was good-hearted and sincere. But she was only human, and her tragic death resulted in part from an all-too-human lack of prudence.

While working as a teacher in Badjoude, Puzey started a girls' club where her pupils could talk about their problems. She did this because, in the view of a family member who visited Puzey there, "It's hard to be a girl in that part of the world." When some of the girls reported being molested by a local man

employed by the Peace Corps, Puzey emailed the Peace Corps office in Cotonou, asking that the man be fired—and he was. But as it happened, the molester’s brother was working in the same office. Many suspect that the brother intercepted the email, because shortly after the molester was fired, Puzey was found with her throat cut.

According to reports aired in early 2011 by the ABC News program *20/20*, the response of the Peace Corps to this incident was distressing. First it rebuffed the inquiries of Puzey’s parents. Then it stonewalled the media on the ground that it could not comment on an investigation pending in Benin. But also distressing was the way Puzey went about trying to protect her pupils. One need not question her motives or courage to ask why, after spending almost two years in Badjoudé, she could not figure out a way to deal with the problem locally. The sexual molestation of schoolgirls is not an accepted custom in West Africa any more than it is in the United States. Was there no one in Badjoudé to whom Puzey could appeal? Why did she resort to an email asking a U.S. official in a distant city to fire the offender?

Instead of raising these questions, the ABC reporters focused on a topic much easier for their American viewers to digest: the charge, brought by a group of former Peace Corps volunteers, that over the previous decade 1,000 of them had been sexually assaulted by men from their host communities, and that the agency had failed to protect them and sought to cover up the incidents. These charges led to the unanimous passage in November 2011 of the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act (S.1280), which requires the agency to respond to sexual assaults in a more timely, responsible and transparent manner.

The Kate Puzey Act briefly mentions the need for “cultural training relating to gender relations”, but its focus is overwhelmingly on “protecting America’s angels.” This is unfortunate, because what’s needed is a serious reckoning with certain un-angelic realities about both “us” and “them.” First, young Americans—both men and women—often unwittingly dress and behave in ways considered provocative in many countries where the Peace Corps sends volunteers. Second, most of the world’s people, even the poorest, have gained the impression from exported American films, TV shows and other entertainment that women in the United States are selfish, materialistic, hedonistic, disrespectful of family and community, and above all, sexually voracious. Third, many non-Western cultures still place the burden of sexual propriety on the female, a view diametrically opposed to the contemporary American insistence (once non-existent, then feminist, now mainstream) that no woman ever, under any circumstances, unwittingly invites sexual assault.

Tiny Battles

A good place to begin that serious reckoning is with a classic polemic about Americans overseas: *The Ugly American*, published in 1958 by political scientist Eugene Burdick and naval officer William Lederer. A fictionalized collection of interlinked character sketches based on real people, *The Ugly American* shows how diverse Americans were meeting, and failing to meet, the challenge of Communist insurgency in Southeast Asia. The book was a bestseller, often credited with inspiring the Peace Corps. It is still worth reading, less for its literary merit than for the bright light it shines on the distinction between the American tendency to seek quick, utopian fixes to complex human problems, and the equally American ethos of hope tempered with prudence.

The Ugly American is set partly in Vietnam and partly in a fictional country called Sarkhan (modeled on Burma). The time is the 1950s, but with minor adjustments the stories could be set in any global trouble spot. The authors’ prediction that the Cold War would be won or lost “in a multitude of tiny battles” occurring “mainly . . . in the minds of men” could also be applied to the ideological contest between Western liberal democracies and Islamist extremism, not to mention the evolving forms of 21st-century authoritarianism. Yet there is a glaring difference between then and now.

In the 1950s, policymakers and diplomats were concerned about foreign public opinion but believed, in the spirit of technocrats everywhere, that they could manage it. Hence, Burdick and Lederer recommended that the U.S. government deploy “a small force of well-trained, well-chosen, hard-working, and dedicated professionals” overseas, to “show by example that America is still the America of freedom and hope and knowledge and law.” Clearly a reference to the then-newly minted U.S. Information Agency, this recommendation now seems quaint, as torrents of information cascade daily through the internet, and millions of people flow across the world’s borders. Yet the metaphor of tiny battles still pertains, because the challenge has not disappeared. There are still only a limited number of competing worldviews out there, and the United States must contend with those most threatening to it.

One character in *The Ugly American* who fails to meet the challenge is Jonathan Brown, the “incorruptible” chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who travels to Southeast Asia not to engage in a “whiskey-drinking, social-butterflying” junket but “to dig into everything.” Despite his good intentions, Brown is putty in the hands of the U.S. embassy staff and their French counterparts, who conspire to prevent him from learning anything that might raise doubts about the generous aid flowing from Washington. They succeed, and Brown ends up endorsing existing policy. Worse, he is able to silence better-informed critics with the words: “Gentlemen, I was there.”

The Ugly American is an ironic title because the most beautiful American in the book is physically ugly, a Pittsburgh engineer named Homer Atkins. Homer and his wife Emma embody the American ethos by seeking the good for human beings, but not in a way that requires the “crooked timber of humanity” to be straightened out once and for all. Rather they seek the good for men and women as they actually exist. Ill-dressed and awkward next to the smooth diplomats he encounters at the U.S. embassy in Saigon, Homer nevertheless knows what kind of aid is needed: not big projects, versions of the Tennessee Valley Authority “scattered all over the country”, but small enterprises, like brick factories and canning plants, “that the Vietnamese can do themselves.” Unfortunately, Homer fails to persuade the “princes of bureaucracy” of his sensible views, especially after unguardedly telling them “to get off their asses and out into the boondocks.”

Eventually Homer gets to act on his convictions. Reassigned to a remote village in Sarkhan, he bonds with a local mechanic who shares his practical bent, and in quiet defiance of the village headman develops a system to irrigate terraced rice paddies without hauling the water by hand. Meanwhile, Emma settles in, learning the language and ways of the Sarkhanese. The most revealing moment comes when, flushed with pride at having invented a cheap, effective pump using a bicycle-drive mechanism, Homer is tempted to foist it on the locals without considering how they might respond. Wisely, Emma tells him:

You’ve a good machine there. I’m proud of you. But don’t think that just because it’s good the Sarkhanese are going to start using it right away. . . . You have to let them use the machine themselves in their own way. If you try to jam it down their throats, they’ll never use it.

The Ugly American ends on a gloomy note, with the superficial but politically palatable views of Senator Brown gaining a hearing in Washington, and the subtler but more difficult insights of Homer Atkins being ignored. Half a century later, the same scenario is just as likely, because Americans who have spent a significant amount of time overseas, learning the languages and ways of foreign cultures, are often distrusted and misunderstood by those who make key foreign policy decisions.

Behind this scenario is usually a simple but powerful distinction: When one is at home, the “answer” tends to be

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about “us”—our mental categories, phrases and habits. When one has done the arduous and time-consuming work of learning the language and culture of another society, the “answer” is more likely to be about “them.” If *The Ugly American* has a blind spot, it is a refusal to acknowledge the reasons for Washington’s distrust of Americans who appear to have “gone native.” It is hard to become part of a foreign society without distancing oneself from one’s own—and in extreme cases, this can lead

to conflicted loyalties.

Today it is getting harder to tell the difference between Americans who identify with the United States and those who identify with the “other”, because so many of the “others” we are likely to meet overseas are atypical of their own societies, having been powerfully influenced by projections of American culture, especially the dominant modes of thinking in our system of higher education. Thus, there are millions of elite women in the world, including in non-Western countries, who view their own society, especially those who live in traditional ways, through the lens of American feminism. And what that lens reveals, in all times and places, is patriarchy—the unjust domination of women by men.

An Army of Women

Published nine years after Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and five years before Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Ugly American* shows no trace of the “second wave” feminism inspired by those books. Today that wave is washing across the world, so perhaps it is time for an update of *The Ugly American*. What follows are two sketches of real Americans who have pursued two different ways of bearing the glad tidings of gender equality overseas. I will leave it to the reader to judge the relative ugliness and beauty of the portraits.

First there is Eve Ensler, the actress and playwright best known for her 1996 performance piece, *The Vagina Monologues*. Ensler’s signature style is to speak loudly and graphically about such topics as pubic hair, vaginal secretions, menstruation, masturbation, orgasm and rape—all in an effort to dispel the ignorance, shame and anger surrounding female sexuality. The original *Vagina Monologues* focused on the indignities of being a woman in America, which ranged from serious matters such as domestic violence and job discrimination to less serious ones, such as the discomfort of tampons and the insensitivity of speculum-wielding gynecologists.

In 1998, *The Vagina Monologues* began to take on graver topics, notably a sketch that year about war rape in Bosnia. Owing perhaps to its potent mix of self-dramatization and high moral dudgeon, *The Vagina Monologues* is now the centerpiece of “V-Day”, an annual event on thousands of college campuses in the United States and overseas. (According to the V-Day website, there were 5,400 such events in 2013, held in 2,280 locations, including all fifty states, Puerto Rico and 64 foreign countries.) In recent years V-Day has focused on “violence against women”, a capacious category that includes everything from date rape and workplace harassment to war rape, sex trafficking, child marriage, honor killing and female genital cutting. But the inclusion of graver topics has not fundamentally altered the general tone of these events, which Ensler describes as “fierce, wild, unstoppable” opposition to any practice deemed harmful to women through the use of “taboo-breaking” language and other mediagenic agitprop.

This tone marks the latest effort by Ensler’s NGO (also called V-Day) to stage an international event called “One Billion Rising.” According to the V-Day website, this event, held in February 2013, summoned “one billion activists in

207 countries . . . to strike, dance, and rise to end violence against women and girls.” By today’s media standard, it was a rousing success, “[taking] over media and social media worldwide for 48 hours, trending in 7 countries—4 times in the US alone.” You can watch a stirring video of the event on the website, which is laden with hot-pink and blood-red graphics; intimate messages from Ensler and her staff; urgent requests for donations; and pumped-up celebration of women (especially the ones doing the celebrating). The only thing missing is hard evidence that any of this frenetic activity is actually reducing violence against women.

The notable exception is V-Day’s affiliation with Panzi Hospital, a medical facility in the town of Bukavu in the extreme eastern edge of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Founded in 1999 by a consortium of European Protestant churches, Panzi Hospital specializes in the repair of vaginal fistulas and other traumatic injuries resulting from the war-rape epidemic that has ravaged the border region for the past twenty years. Panzi has received money and media attention from V-Day and in turn lent its support to the City of Joy, a recovery center for rape victims.

According to Ensler, the City of Joy is more than a recovery center. It’s also a “training center” for “an army of women” who will “take over the government” and “put an end to this rape problem fast.” She doesn’t say how. Likewise, it is unclear what Ensler means by saying her army of women will return to their home villages as “leaders” who can “empower others.” The harsh truth is that these women have been so violated that they would likely be outcasts in their home villages, assuming those villages even still exist. A more clear-eyed view is expressed by one of the women, who told a *New York Times* reporter, “I don’t want to go back to my village and get raped again. I want to learn to read and write so I can stay in Bukavu. . . . If I can get some skills, I can be an advocate.”

This woman’s comment points to Ensler’s real constituency: the international network of educated women’s rights advocates for whom patriarchy is the enemy and American-style agitprop the strategy of choice. At best, this strategy sways the thinking of political elites who may then pass laws, not only against criminal acts such as sex trafficking, honor killing and war rape, but also against customs that they and their American allies find abhorrent, such as child marriage, gender segregation and female genital cutting. The trouble with this approach is that the laws are rarely enforced, and when they are they tend to provoke resistance, especially when they treat customs as crimes.

How to Change a Custom

The distinction between customs and crimes has special relevance to female genital cutting (FGC), also known as female genital mutilation (FGM), the preferred term of advocates. For several years now, the age-old practice of “purifying” girls by excising some portion of their external genitalia has been a serious concern of NGOs, the United Nations and some governments around the world. Laws have been passed against FGC, and messaging campaigns have sought to educate the public about its many ill effects. But these efforts have not eradicated the custom. On the contrary, they have tended to further entrench it, because traditionally minded people concerned about external threats to their corporate identity do not like having alien elites meddle with what is sacred to them.

What *has* worked is an unusual NGO called Tostan, which means “breakthrough” in Wolof, the predominant language of Senegal. Tostan began in a few rural Senegalese villages in 1991, and now runs additional adult education programs in Djibouti, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Somalia and Gambia. Tostan was not founded for the purpose of ending FGC, but rather as a way to provide “informal education” to a population ill served by the formal schooling provided by most African governments. That schooling is authoritarian in spirit, based on rote learning and focused on preparing a small elite for university entrance exams.

Based in the villages, the Tostan program is rigorous. Students (called “participants”) are required to attend three classes each week for three years.

Teachers (called “facilitators”) must be from same ethnic group as the participants. The method is to use local folk crafts and storytelling to impart practical information about agricultural methods, health and hygiene, and the management of money. When the participants graduate, they are numerate, literate in their own language, and eager to use their new skills to tackle old problems. Today, Tostan is best known for its extraordinary success in ending FGC. To date, the organization has been instrumental in the decision of 6,778 communities in eight African countries to abandon the practice. But as noted earlier, this was not Tostan’s original purpose, and the organization did not achieve it by staging mediagenic events or shouting from a public rostrum.

Tostan provides an excellent second update of *The Ugly American* for a very simple reason: It was founded by an American. Molly Melching, a native of Illinois who studied French in college, traveled to Senegal in the mid-1970s.² There she learned to speak Wolof and made a career developing innovative educational programs. Melching is completely at home in the language and culture of her adopted country, but she has never “gone native” in the sense of rejecting her own background. On the contrary, the Tostan method is based largely on the theories of Western educators and social scientists, adapted to the very different world of rural West Africa.

Melching first encountered FGC in 1975 while visiting eastern Mauritania with a friend who had grown up in a small village there. During that visit, she met a local doctor who confided to her that he opposed “the tradition” but could not change the minds of his wife and mother, both of whom were intent upon cutting his daughter. Thus did Melching, after only one year in Africa, gain a sense of how hard it is to change a deeply ingrained custom. If a girl’s own father cannot keep her from being cut, what chance does an outsider have?

One of the elders in a village where Melching lived for several years compared her leadership style to that of a Fulani cow herder: sometimes out in front, sometimes in the middle, sometimes in the rear—wherever she is most needed. But to hear Melching tell it, she was not leading at all when the movement to abandon FGC began. The subject was first raised by the female participants in a Tostan class on women’s health, in the village of Malicounda Bambara. This was unusual, because the women of Senegal place great value on being able to endure pain and suffering without complaint. But as the participants learned basic medical facts about human reproduction, they began to wonder whether some of the female ailments they took for granted might be related to “the tradition.”

The discussion that ensued, in this village and others, was conducted with the utmost tact and delicacy—the exact opposite, if you will, of Eve Ensler’s “taboo-breaking” language. No doubt this was because the women, and the men who gradually joined the discussion, were dealing with a real taboo handed down through countless generations. Indeed, one of the more authoritative voices in the discussion was that of an older woman named Oureye Sall, herself a cutter who had inherited the position through the maternal line of her family.

The point is that FGC is not a crime that can be publicly denounced by a few emancipated individuals or rejected by a single village. When Malicounda Bambara announced in June 1997 that it was abandoning the practice, the story earned celebratory headlines in Dakar and Paris. But it also caused great consternation in the neighboring village of Keur Simbara, where most of the families in Malicounda Bambara had relatives. The problem was not that Keur Simbara was “backward” and Malicounda Bambara “progressive.” Rather it was that these two villages, and many others, were part of a larger kinship group within which young people were expected to marry. And FGC is, first and foremost, a link in a complex chain of marriage customs observed by the entire group.

It is one thing to read about kinship customs in an anthropology textbook, and quite another to hear about it from a village elder who is sitting across from you. This was Melching’s experience as she negotiated the issue with Demba Diawara, one of the most respected men in Keur Simba.

A staunch supporter of Tostan, Diawara was nonetheless opposed to any inclusion of FGC in the Tostan curriculum. His reason reveals the global dimension of seemingly isolated village life in the 21st century. A French journalist had published an article about the Malicounda Bambara declaration in which it was stated that the custom involved not only excising the external genitalia but also infibulation, or the sewing shut of the woman's vagina until her wedding night. This was not the custom in this region, so the article caused great consternation among members of the kinship group living in France. Angry letters and clippings were sent home, prompting Diawara to pay a visit to Melching and, with all deference and politeness, request that she drop the subject of FGC.

Melching responded in kind. She did not blare out indignation on a website or share this development with any journalists. Instead, she drew on the trust built up by Tostan, and asked Diawara to do three things: consult a doctor about the health hazards of FGC; ask his imam whether the practice is required by Islamic law (it's not); and invite the women in Keur Simba to speak frankly to him about what the practice involved. She included this third request because she understood that FGC is considered "women's business", off limits to men and never discussed in mixed company.

Diawara did what Melching asked, and it changed his mind. On his next visit he offered to help in any way he could. But, as he explained, it would not be easy:

This tradition is a very old custom that no one in our community has ever questioned. To decide to stop it is not a decision that one village can make alone. Our daughters intermarry in ten other villages. If we stop today, tomorrow our daughters will not have husbands, and no mother would do that to her daughter. That would cause insurmountable problems in a girl's life.

Diawara did not leave it at that, however. Shortly after this meeting, he set off on foot to those same ten villages, accompanied by a young niece and nephew, and through hundreds of discreet, patient conversations laid the groundwork for a collective decision made by the entire kinship group. Some of the comments he reported back might surprise American feminists. For example, in the village of Faajal, a young husband confided,

We men would like to see the end of the tradition, because to tell you the truth, we're tired. We want our wives to have sexual pleasure, but it takes so much effort that we sometimes just give up. Men in our ethnic group often marry a second wife from an ethnic group which does not practice the tradition just for this reason.

The United States has long been the world's largest exporter of optimism. But this export comes in different grades, from reckless to prudent. At the reckless end, Americans like to believe that the sky's the limit, anything is possible, and any child can become President. But the world knows, and Americans know, that not everyone can be a winner. Life is hard, people cheat, and most dreams do not come true. The most common reaction to this knowledge is to grow cynical—and selfish.

A better reaction is to follow the American ethos and temper our hope with prudence. Back in 1999 when Susan Moller Okin published her manifesto, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" several critics suggested as much. In particular, they warned that Okin's definition of gender equality had the potential to put America on a collision course with millions of socially and religiously conservative people around the world. To these critics Okin's reply was dismayingly rigid. Instead of engaging the substance of their remarks, she simply denied moral agency to certain large categories of human beings: older women, whom she dismissed as co-opted by the patriarchy, and community leaders, whom she invariably described as "self-styled" or "self-proclaimed."

Note to Americans wishing to bear the glad tidings of gender equality to the rest of humanity: If Molly Melching had followed Susan Okin's advice, Tostan would not exist. The American ethos of sustaining hope while coping prudently with harsh reality is admired by others not because it is American but because it

achieves better results than blind faith in the deity of progress, who (unlike the biblical God) promises only blessings. The truly ugly American, by contrast, is the one who believes that the world can be saved quickly, easily and on the cheap.

¹Okin in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, Joshua Cohen et al., eds. (Princeton University Press, 1999).

²This account of Melching's life and work is based on my interviews with her and a member of her staff, as well as on a biography by Aimee Molloy, *However Long the Night* (HarperOne, 2013).

Appeared in: *Volume 09, Number 4* | Published on: March 3, 2014



Martha Bayles teaches humanities at Boston College. This essay is drawn from her new book, *Through a Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America's Image Abroad* (2014), with permission of Yale University Press.



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