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Fundamentalists' wet dream

All religions, including Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism, have an unhealthy obsession with virginity. It is a form of terrorism that fundamentalists inflict as a means to control women



VEILED OPPRESSION: Muslim women offer prayers during Eid al-Fitr at a school ground in Chennai in September. Women are the primary targets of fundamentalist Muslims and the Sharia laws they seek to impose.

I'M ALWAYS TORN between two emotions, amusement and horror, when I read stories like a recent one reported by BBC News' Arab Affairs analyst Magdi Abdelhadi, "Egypt anger over virginity faking" (Sept. 28). Abdelhadi reports how leading Egyptian scholar Abdul Mouti Bayoumi from al-Azhar University argues, "that people caught importing a female virginity-faking device into the country should face the death penalty."

According to Islamic Sharia law, any item that facilitates the spread of vice is punishable by death. In this specific instance, the "instrument of evil" is the Artificial Virginity Hymen Kit, a contraption that releases liquid meant to appear as blood from a freshly penetrated hymen. The contraption is a safer and less costly alternative to hymen repair surgery, an operation performed in clinics throughout the Middle East.

Bayoumi claims this contraption's introduction into Egyptian

society will facilitate the spread of promiscuity. A prominent member of the Egyptian Parliament's committee on religious affairs, Sheik Sayed Askar, was more specific, focusing on the fact that the kit would enable women to lead more sexually active lives.

One need not look too long to find recent instances where female virginity is the central focus in a religious community erring toward fundamentalism. Even in India's Madhya Pradesh, from which my family originates, the Bharatiya Janata Party-governed state has recently demonstrated its own socially conservative philosophy with regard to tribal women. BBC News' Delhi correspondent Faisal Mohammad Ali reports in "India 'virgin test' claim dropped" (July 21) how brides-to-be were interrogated with regard to whether they were pregnant or not prior to participating in a mass wedding. While the doctor did not give an invasive internal exam, she did ask questions in order to

ascertain whether the 150 tribal women were chaste prior to marrying.

These two instances, where women are the object of conservative religious attitudes, are symptoms of a society enabling the proliferation of extremist views. And all too often, women pay the toll. So when I support the United States' military presence in countries beset by Islamist insurgencies, such as Afghanistan, I am conscious that if the U.S. were to prematurely pull out, the consequences for Afghani women at the hands of the Taliban are beyond what our overly protected Western imaginations are capable of imagining.

Terrorism is not cordoned off in the Muslim world as demonstrated by al-Qaida's attack on the World Trade Center and Lashkar-e-Taiba's November 2008 attack in Mumbai. New Yorker reporter George Packer, in his profile of U.S. special envoy Richard Holbrooke, describes him as championing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's suggestion to tap

into the educated, skilled Pakistan-American community to provide services and help to Pakistani refugees who are victims of al-Qaida's politics and fear mongering. And what of Indian Americans assisting where they can in Kashmir? Rather than seek the help and support of our vast Indian-American physicians community, the Indian government has decided to shield itself from being categorized with Afghanistan and Pakistan as another state under widespread terrorist threat.

What are the consequences of the politics of religious fundamentalism and terrorism for women in the Middle East, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India? The consequences are inclusive, but not limited to, the following: paralysis of women to demonstrate leadership in their communities, the inability to meet their own and their families' health and dietary needs and immobility in the face of brutal terrorist regimes.

The examples of the virginity contraption in Egypt and the mass interrogation in India are symptomatic and symbolic of that which is at the base of fundamentalist attitudes toward women. I argue that Bayoumi, the Egyptian scholar, is not fearful of increased promiscuity; instead, he is threatened by women armed with knowledge. It is no coincidence that the verb "to know" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse dating to bibli-

cal times. "To know" another individual is to have carnal knowledge, a powerful and equalizing force between men and women. Sex is the method with which to transmit knowledge. Sex does not require libraries or textbooks, PCs or Macs, pipettes or microscopes.

Thus, placing women's virginity on a pedestal is a way for fundamentalists to wield an invisible power over women without the use of a spade or a gun. Spreading propaganda about preserving women's virginity is a bloodless method with which to restrict women's participation in the adult community, their self-expression and access to education.

Virginity propaganda is one step toward sacrificing women's education all together and threatening their civil rights. Ensuring women remain virgins is all too often dependent on structuring society to ensure the segregation of women from men, automatically limiting women's access to and quality of education.

The connection between knowledge and women's purity is one embedded in the dominant Christian-Judaic-Islamist Book of Genesis. In the Old Testament, God forbids Adam from eating from the Garden of Eden's "tree of the knowledge of good and evil ... for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (2:17).

Later, the serpent tempts Eve to indulge in the fruit of the tree

of knowledge by telling her that when she eats from it, "your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (3:5).

Eve is tellingly more curious than Adam for she falls prey to the serpent, not Adam. She is hungry, literally and intellectually, and believes that which makes "one wise" is good (3:6). God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden where they spent their early days cavorting in naked oblivion, innocent of their nudity. And it is only when they shed their child-like innocence that they act as adults, "knowing" one another as husband and wife, and begetting Abel and Cain.

So at the foundation of the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) is a story that illuminates the treatment of women in fundamentally religious communities, particularly locations where terrorists are harbored.

Groups like al-Qaida fly in the face of world security and the preservation of peace. However, terrorist networks also play an insidious role in tearing apart the fabric of local communities by threatening and ignoring women's civil rights, seeing women as either merely vessels for child bearing or ingénue virgins ripe for the picking.

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SISTER ACT: Below left, nuns hold placards as they sit during a protest against virginity tests in New Delhi in July. The National Federation of Indian Women said women's organizations in the country demonstrated against virginity tests in India's Madhya Pradesh and Kerala states. The organization also said 151 young women were subjected to virginity tests by the administration in Madhya Pradesh during a state-sponsored mass marriage. Below, a Hindu priest oversees the traditional Durga Puja festival, which involves worshipping a young girl who plays the role of Kumari - the virgin personification of the Goddess Durga - in Kolkata.

