

Valentine's Day: Jesus needs an Orgy

By Richard Leader

For a Hallmark Holiday, Valentine's is a highly political event. Beyond Eve Ensler's double or even triple billing of "V-Day" (Valentine's/anti-Violence/Vagina) for her "Vagina Monologues"—the theatrical production, like every other event in the world, is now all-inclusive of entire casts born with penises—even Christian fundamentalists look to the date as a chance to score points for the home team.

Minor league pundits of the persuasion turn to their secondary positions as armchair historians, citing how the good Pope Gelasius established the holiday in honor of the martyred Saint Valentine in order to reform a horrendous pagan institution, the Lupercalia. The February holiday was a lottery of sorts, performed with cards similar to the tokens now exchanged amongst school children, allowing men the chance to bed a young girl for the remainder of the year, an obvious abomination unto the Lord.

Only there's no historical evidence to support that assertion: in fact, while the festival, not even held on the 14th, might have been a bit ribald by some modern standards (two rich white boys were given the opportunity to run around the edge of the city and playfully flog women to promote fertility), nothing suggests the startling conclusions offered by, well, contemporary rich white boys. The fairy tale about the sexual lottery and its constant recitation is an invention of necessity: Christianity is sorely lacking in feminist street-cred, to say the least.

The commonly held belief that Christianity improved "the condition of women" in the time of Christ, and presumably beyond, is just about the only thing the faith has going for it when it comes to gender politics. This allegation, while perhaps containing a kernel of truth (even John Stoltenberg admits in his *Refusing to be a Man* that Jesus himself sounds like a standup guy), is full of cracks that do not stand up to reasoned scrutiny.

The early Empire was ostensibly a far more conservative—by modern standards—place than the late Republic, something that flies in the face of the "Red-State Republican Jesus putting orgies to the kabob (just like Brutus did to the tyrant Caesar)" theory, a peculiarly American reorganization of history. It is impossible to say how much stock one should put into the conservatism of Augustus, his Family Values plan was no better at disguising dirty laundry than Newt Gingrich's two millennia later, but one can conclude with great certainty that chaste women aren't necessarily free women.

Similarly, while poor women are often exempt from rigid and unjust standards of propriety demanded of rich women—a class presumably less likely to be Christian in their day—alienation from those standards is often a curse as much as it is a blessing. That African American women with college degrees now make more money than their white counterparts is not proof of their advantage but testament to the added weight they must pull in the workplace, against both sexism and racism, to make up for the racist discrimination that black

men suffer: discrimination that has historically prevented them from forcing black women into the often restrictive institution of homemaking. One can surmise that ancient women with little resources faced similar struggles in their time—even if they escaped being sequestered in palaces or whatever plight people like to imagine for the pagan women of Rome.

Valentine's Day, and its history, is a battleground for Christian men to proclaim that the religion of both the Patriarch (hey, they chose the name, not me!) and the Promise Keepers is good for women: and every year they remind us of that fantasy in the op-ed pages of newspapers, recycling the myth of the Lupercalian Lottery. Frankly, the Tooth Fairy has more credibility.



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