

Religion shouldn't appeal to our baser instincts

On Thursday I wrote about the uneasy relationship between spirituality and animal instinct. Religion is at its best when it calls us to something higher, to master our baser nature and rise above it. But at its worst, it can give our animal passions moral approval.

Today I want to tell you of lives impacted by an example much closer to home, a ministry headquartered in Colorado Springs.

Ransomed Heart Ministries teaches that men are inherently wild at heart, that we want a battle to fight and a beauty to rescue. These are all things God is calling us to do. Women, by contrast, are to be beautiful, seductive and subservient to their men. For women, God is the ultimate romancer, seducer and lover who will make them whole.

Ransomed Heart is a Christian ministry, and practices an elaborate New Testament-based theology developed by its founder, John Eldredge. Am I alone in finding the ministry's connection between spirituality and biology horrifying?

God talks to Eldredge, for example, in ways that reinforce his male-warrior fantasies. In one of his books, God tells Eldredge that he is "Henry the Fifth after Agincourt . . . yes, even Maximus." Why an eternal God would use a fictional character from a 2000 Hollywood film as a metaphor is a mystery only Eldredge knows.

Just like the other examples I included in Thursday's column, the feedback relationship between religion and biology can have devastating consequences. I know of two women whose marriages have ended under the influence of Ransomed Heart. In the words of one, "Ransomed Heart gave my ex-husband permission to abandon his responsibilities and expose me to financial ruin, all while claiming to be acting for a higher purpose."

If I know two such women, how many more are there?

Perhaps Ransomed Heart believes broken marriages fall under the category of acceptable losses. After all, men must fight battles, and battles have casualties. To which I'd reply, "That's why peace is better."



OPINION
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Eldredge's books consistently rank high on Christian bestseller lists. I wonder if that's because the chattering classes are always telling us sex differences don't matter, when everyday experience tells us they do. I can't tell you how many times as an academic I've had to sit politely with a straight face while some highly credentialed professor told me that masculinity and femininity were "socially constructed." To anyone who's raised a boy and a girl, that is obviously nonsense.

The modern convergence of psychology, cognitive science and biology has taught us a lot about human nature. We now know that men really are more violent. They take more risks, they are more comfortable with one night stands, and they look for youth and beauty in a mate. Women really are more nurturing, more emotional, prefer to hold out for romance and intimacy, and like status and power in a man. None of this will surprise any evolutionary biologist. Or an online dater.

Yes Virginia, there really is a human nature. But it was formed hundreds of thousands of years ago on the savannah, when life was harsh and man was fighting to survive. The question is, what do we do with it?

Religion has an answer: We fight back. Men may want to sleep around, but they shouldn't. Women may want to use their sexual power to get what they want, but they should dress modestly and behave chastely anyway. Men can fight if they have to, but only for something greater than indulging our innate predilection for violence. Risk taking is OK, but once you marry and have children, your behavior must change.

So what if the elderly millionaire and the trophy wife have their basis in biology? If biology is all they have, the marriage won't last. The answer to the spiritual seduction of our instincts has been known for a long time: Just because it's natural doesn't make it right. The purpose of religion and ethics is to channel our instincts in ways that make us better. If they do anything else, all hell will break loose.

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