

“ I came from where? Approaching the science of human origins from religious perspectives” – were women cheated by evolution? Sexism in science and religion

This video was recorded at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History on March 28, 2011

Audience member: 00:22 As a scientist and as an atheist, I am very, very happy about the theory of evolution. But as a woman, I feel disappointed that we have, in fact, two kinds of human beings and two kinds of animals, the women and men and [inaudible 00:00:48]. I feel that women have been cheated by evolution. And I wonder if there is a new hope that things will get better.

Nancy Howell : 00:58 What was your last phrase? Women have been cheated by what?

Fred Edwards: 01:05 Religion- [crosstalk 00:01:07]

Nancy Howell: 01:06 By religion.

Audience member: 01:12 Evolution.

Nancy Howell: 01:12 By religion.

Audience member: 01:12 By evolution. I mean-

Nancy Howell: 01:15 Oh yeah. May I give-

Connie Bertka: 01:16 Go for it.

Nancy Howell: 01:17 May I write a book about this. Yeah, amen to that, is all I can say. I will advertise someone else's book that I respect a great deal. Nancy Tuana has written a book called the Less Noble Sex. And if you think science and religion are at war, you will find by reading her book, that science and religion historically have been very much in agreement about the inferiority of women. And her book wonderfully begins with Greek philosophy and different concepts of humanity and the soul and social status of women. And she worked as she explains how that is affected Christian thoughts. In Christian thought, there were a range of views

from the idea that women did not have a soul and were not made in the image of God, to the idea that women were a lesser image of God or ahead a lesser soul of some kind. Lest we punish religion alone. (02:26) She claims, the philosophers followed along with that, but culture does not segregate its parts. So science actually colluded in some of that cultural thinking. So one of the reasons I felt a little internal discomfort about talking about brain size and human superiority is that the same logic was used. We must be superior to the animals because of our brain size. The same logic was used historically in the late 19th century and early 20th to argue that women were inferior, not as intellectual as men and that Africans were inferior intellects. And there were even falsified kinds of information. Tuana really shows that science and religion have a trajectory of discrimination of that sort in spite of certain kinds of profess neutrality in some places and claim to the truth and others. And so some of the work I do actually with these primate studies are to ask the question where have we drawn the wrong lines when it comes to thinking about inferiority, superiority advances or primitive natures? Because there are lots of people who have gotten the short shrift because we have been uncomfortable with who we are as humans. And whatever makes us uncomfortable, we tend to attribute to, to gender or race in some unfortunate ways.

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