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Women's Reality

Reta Halteman Finger
Messiah University, laretafinger@gmail.com

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Women's Reality— or Men's?

The Clash of Systems

Women's Reality

by Anne Wilson Schaeff
Winston Press, 1981
169 pages, \$5.95 paper.

Last year a subscriber mailed us Women's Reality, a book which she felt was significant enough to be reviewed in Daughters of Sarah. We decided it merited feedback and interaction from all the Daughters, so we scheduled a roundtable discussion at our July meeting. Sensing the need for male reaction to a book clearly written from women's perspective, we invited the men in our lives to discuss it with us at our August meeting. After an introduction to Women's Reality, we have recorded parts of both conversations, along with several explanatory quotes from the book.

* * *

Anne Wilson Schaeff is a psychotherapist who set aside a period of her life to learn about women. Through encounter groups, counseling individuals, consulting with organizations and training persons in group process, she watched and listened.

The more Schaeff entered into "women's reality," the more she saw it as part of a whole system of attitudes and behavior which challenges and stands in contrast to the dominant system which has developed in western culture. At the risk of polarizing, Schaeff labels two systems White Male and Female. (She also deals briefly with the Black, Chicana, and Native American Systems.)

It should be said near the outset that Anne really means it when she says that she is writing for and to women. She is un-

ashamedly telling us how things look from a woman's viewpoint, from a system that is, in effect, foreign to the accepted way of understanding reality. She does take pains to explain that neither the Female System nor the White Male System is right or wrong; they just are. She clarifies that not all white men fit into the White Male System, and not all women fit into the White Female System. Nevertheless, Anne is not trying to be either conciliatory or comprehensive—not even always logical in true White Male style. She makes it hard for white men to wriggle out of their system: "It's not *whether* you're sexist, but *how* you're sexist." Insecure, defensive, very logical, or quite ordinary men may be put off by the lack of expressed sympathy for their sometimes uncomfortable position as part of a dominant group. And in spite of Schaeff's attempts to be nonjudgmental of the two systems, her bias is clearly toward Female System thinking. Perhaps this is only fair, considering how much is usually taken for granted on White Male System terms.

In any case, if a woman will allow herself the luxury of only looking at one side—her side—for a time, she will find a book which is *for* her. Without anger, bitterness or hostility against men, this book explains and validates a woman's feelings, opinions and instinctive ways of relating.

Schaeff begins by explaining that the White Male System is like pollution in that we are all so immersed in it we never realize it. She discusses the "four great myths of the White Male System": 1) The White Male System is the only thing that exists. 2) The White Male System is innately superior.

3) The White Male System knows and understands everything. 4) It is possible to be totally logical, rational and objective. These four myths can be summarized by another that is unspoken: it is possible for one to be God—at least the way the White Male System defines God. A corollary accompanies these myths: “the beliefs and perceptions of other systems are sick, bad, crazy, stupid, ugly and incompetent.”

Schaefer discusses in detail the converse to Myth #2, that if the White Male System is innately superior, then women are innately inferior, weighted down with the Original Sin of Being Born Female. They can never be persons in their own right. The only way a woman is absolved of this sin and has the empty spot in her life filled up is through a primary relationship with a man, and preferably through bearing a male child.

Schaefer admits women do have an inner space, or emptiness in their lives. However, rather than needing a man to fill it, she believes it has to do with the need women have to look outside ourselves for validation and approval.

According to Schaefer, there are really two Female Systems. One is a method women use to cope in a White Male System, which often is destructive to their sense of worth. The other is what women develop after they “get clear,” come to terms with their own perceptions as females and are able to embrace and affirm them. A major chapter near the end of the book contrasts the Female System with the White Male System in terms of time, relationships, power, thought, communication, responsibility, morality and process versus product. For example, on intimacy, Schaefer writes: “In the White Male System, intimacy is approached physically. Men assume that in order to be really intimate with someone they must be physically close. In the Female System, intimacy is approached verbally. Women assume that real closeness involves sharing and discussing their lives.” (p. 117)

Annette: What do you think of this idea of two systems?

Andria: When I first got into the book, I had some problems with the terms the author uses, especially “White Male Sys-

tem.” It seemed offensive.

Jeanne: I felt the same way. But by the time I finished and understood Schaefer’s point of view, it seemed right.

Judy: I liked her analogy of the White Male System with pollution. You simply can’t see it until you step outside of it.

Gretchen: I noticed at seminary sometimes I would bring up a problem and the male students would say, “What problem? I don’t see a problem.” The Blacks, Chicanos and females have had to learn the White Male System because we’ve had to operate within it. Whereas people who naturally fall into the White Male System don’t have to acknowledge the presence of other systems.

Helen: When you’re outside the circle, it’s much easier to see what is going on inside. I remember talking with a woman who was doing some work on a conference, and she complained that the conference was run like men would run it. When I asked her in what way this was true, she talked about men tending to have a different concept of time and paying less attention to relationships.

Lori: One value of the book for me was Schaefer’s putting into perspective and legitimizing the Female System. I have always been very White Male System; I thought I had to conform to it in order to survive.

* * *

Annette: What do you think of Anne’s statement that the systems are value-free, that neither is right or wrong? I guess I have a bias toward the Female System since it seems more Christian. If you look at the myths of the White Male System, they’re absolutely demonic!

Helen: I think Schaefer was somewhat dishonest in her assertion that neither system was better than the other. It was quite clear she preferred the Female System.

Pat: But she had to do that.

Reta: Probably. But at the same time we need to recognize that not everything about the White Male System is bad. It is efficient, as Schaefer says. And the fact is, from a material and technological point, we would not be where we are now, were we entirely on the Female System.

Sheryl: But do you think that’s all to the good?

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Reta: Mercy, no! I could get along without a TV and many other things, I'm sure. But I do appreciate things like books and washing machines, and we'd have far less of them were we mostly on Female System.

Max: I too was bothered by Schaeff's contradiction in the value she places on the different systems. I like the first half of the book but not the second half, where she seems to put the White Male System in such a bad light. I believe there is something about maleness that is good. If the Female System were dominant, some aspects of it would be oppressive. I think we need to find both male and female values that are regenerative.

Pat: Christian values can evaluate both systems. What else besides efficiency is good about the White Male System?

Max: Basically, Schaeff points out the sinfulness of the White Male System.

Sheryl: It's not *being* male that's bad. It's doing what most white males *do*.

Max: The White Male System is a corruption of what maleness is.

Nathan: I was blown away by Schaeff's assertion that men feel they have to be God. It can be a real power trip. I need to see that I don't have to be a part of changing everything.

Max: Our definition of God may be White Male. We need to see God as Female System, dying on a cross, becoming powerless and vulnerable.

David: We often approach theology by way of the White Male System, using rationality. Perhaps we need to do theology in a different way. Evangelical theology and feminist theology may not come out at the same place.

Sheryl: But that makes me nervous. I see there being only one Truth. Perhaps neither evangelical or feminist theology are describing that Truth exactly.

Tim: In the Bible, Truth is a person, not a construct.

* * *

Women do experience an inner space. It is almost always in the solar plexus. Women use various words and phrases to name it—hole, pit, nothingness, void, "blank" space, cavern. We are fearful of it and vulnerable to it. In strange, unfamiliar, or threatening situations, we will often stand with our arms

folded over our solar plexus—our cavern. Women have also developed body postures that "sink in" and protect this area. We often cover it with fat.

Our cavern is central to our identity and wholeness, but it has nothing to do with penises and babies. Instead, it is related to the fact that we go from being our fathers' daughters to being our husbands' wives and finally our son's mothers. It is related to our Original Sin of Being Born Female and our need to look outside ourselves for validation and approval. When we begin to determine who we are from the inside, our cavern begins to get smaller (p. 34).

Annette: Do you think having this cavern is a universal experience?

Andria: I couldn't understand what she was talking about at first, until I remembered how I felt after the boy I'd had a crush on in the sixth grade moved away. I wrote in my diary that something had been torn out of me.

Judy: I think that what Schaeff is pointing out is that innate inferiority women feel just being a woman, that men really don't have any idea what that's like. Women may not be able to conceptualize it but they *feel* it.

Pat: But how do they feel it?

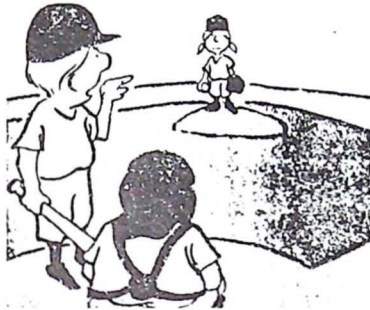
Judy: I felt it. Are you telling me you've never felt it?

Pat: I don't think I have—but I'm really white male. I read this book and there I am.

Judy: Well, in a lot of ways I think we all are, growing up in that system, but there have been experiences I've had that have let me know very clearly that I'm inferior. I've caught myself folding my arms over my solar plexus. How many times have you seen women in a threatened position, where they're either being confronted or diminished, stand or sit in that position—or with a pillow in their laps. I don't find men doing that.

Gretchen: I had a hard time identifying myself with that. I identified much more with the White Male System, and I couldn't understand a lot of the stuff she was talking about, the feeling of emptiness. I've never had a feeling of inferiority. I always felt I was just as good as anybody else, until recently when people started talking about women's exploitation. I never would have seen it otherwise.

I'll bet you can't throw a curve. My dad told me that girls can't throw curves.



It's not fair. They can have babies too.



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Nan: I finally realized that there are women who honestly never have felt inferior. They can't understand that other women do feel inferior.

* * *

In the White Male System, thought is perceived as a linear process. One moves from point A to point B to point C and so on, in order to reach a conclusion. In the Female System, thinking is seen as multivariant and multidimensional.

Linear thinking is efficient. It allows conclusions to be reached and information to be processed fairly quickly. It is not especially creative, however. Multivariant thinking, on the other hand, takes more time and makes use of more data, some of which—like feelings, intuitions, and process awareness—may seem irrelevant on the surface (p. 130).

Tim: I didn't understand Schaeff's discussion of logic. What's wrong with trying to be logical in conversation?

Andria: The thing that's wrong is that people who really stick to logic won't allow anything else. They don't see that there is a multidimensional thinking that is also important. Schaeff says that decisions reached by linear logic seldom have the full support of the group concerned, but decisions reached by multivariant thinking do tend to have the full support of the group.

Pat: Multidimensional logic works best when you're not setting up a win-lose situation. But both kinds need to be utilized at different times.

* * *

The White Male System has a product-goal orientation. The ends almost always justify the means, and it does not matter how a goal is achieved just so long as it is. What counts are outcomes. Men are constantly arranging their lives into a series of goals.

The Female System has a process orientation. A goal is less important than the process used to reach it. We have little difficulty in changing goals and seldom feel guilty for not attaining our original ones (except when the men in our lives accuse us of "failing") (p. 138).

Randy: I was struck by the contrast made between process and product. Schaeff puts a lot of emphasis on process. I work for an

architectural firm, where product is far more important. I understand the need to pay attention to process, but on the other hand, I need some structure to provide an atmosphere in which to work.

Rick: I got so fed up with the corporate structure I'm leaving it. I can't deal with devoting my life to producing things. I'm an electronics engineer with a company that produces organs. The company says a person's major goal is to produce things, and I can't stand it any longer.

* * *

Some more observations from the men:
Glen: I agree with Schaefer's judgment of the White Male System, but it makes me uncomfortable. I like to think I'm not that way—but Andria (my wife) tells me I am.
Nathan: I got so depressed while reading I couldn't finish the book. I was overwhelmed by how much I've been acculturated in the White Male System and felt like it will be a long process to really change. I saw many things I had never seen before. I consider myself a feminist, but at the core I buy into the White Male System.

—Compiled by Reta Finger

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