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I
believe
her.

The politics of bigotry-motivated belief

By Ferrel Christensen

Scene One, circa 1991:

An innocent-looking teenage girl weeps as she testifies before the U.S. Senate. A Kuwaiti who, she says, has just fled the invasion of her country, she tells of witnessing Iraqi soldiers remove premature infants from their incubators and leave them to die on the hospital floor. Her story is perhaps crucial in motivating the Senate to declare war: the declaration carries by only five votes, and six of the speakers before the vote use the incubator incident as proof of the need for such action — as does President Bush, many times, in the preceding weeks of whipping up support for war. Who but a hardened cynic, we might ask, could *fail* to believe her? What motive could such a naive, sweet person have for telling anything but the truth?

She was lying through her teeth. This was later revealed exhaustively in a CBS *60 Minutes* exposé. Though it was kept secret at the time, Nayireh was the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador in Washington, Nasir al-Sabah of the royal family of Kuwait — she did have some possible motives for untruth. More to the point, exhaustive investigations by Amnesty International, Middle East Watch and local doctors found that no such event had ever occurred. In its own later investigation, the Kuwaiti government concluded that *maybe* one baby had died in that way. (A far cry from the original claim of 312 murdered babies — impressively precise, a figure like that is.)

Sandwiched among the many interviews on the program was one with a woman who had been instrumental in getting the girl before the Senate. She provided no evidence, no reasons for accepting the story; nor did she even claim to have any. It came down to a matter of faith. She said, simply, "I believe Nayireh." I got sick to my stomach when I heard those words. I have heard them before.

Scene Two, any time between 1870 and 1970:

A mob of white men and women is screaming for the death of a frightened black man. He is accused by a white woman of raping her, and they want vengeance. Later, perhaps, a group of hooded men drag him from jail. All the while, he is protesting his innocence. They lynch him. "After all," they might say if they bother to give any justification for their actions, "We believe her."

"And why *shouldn't* we believe her?" They might ask.

"Why would a white woman lie about a thing like that? And if the legal system, with its pusillanimous concern for evidence, were allowed to decide the issue, justice might not be done. And she would have to suffer the indignity and further victimization of a trial process that considers *her* word on a par with the word of *one of them*." Behind all of these fraudulent reasons is an act of faith: "We believe her." What lies behind the act of faith is bigotry.

Lest anyone put too much blame on Nayireh, let us be clear that others either pushed her or allowed her to tell that lie. What matters here is the apparent reason they did so: being young and especially being female, she would be seen — she *was* seen — as singularly credible. A governing myth of sexist chivalrists and sexist feminists alike is the moral inferiority of males. (The manner in which they promote that myth, by constantly suppressing half of the evidence — the Big Half-Truth — is a long story that must be told elsewhere.) As for the lynching scenario, it grew from basically the same roots: the presumed moral inferiority of the black man to the white woman. When it's a case of his word versus hers, that settles it.

Today, though that attitude toward blacks has not been eliminated, it has been much reduced by consciousness-raising about racism. (Indeed, in many quarters it is the black whose word against a white is automatically believed, a grounds of the moral superiority of the oppressed; the cast has changed, the basic plot has not.) What is stronger than it ever was, however, is the pervasive belief in the moral inferiority of men, and the willingness of some people to exploit that myth.

Scene Three, anywhere in Canada or the U.S. today:

A man is accused by a woman of a crime against her: rape, spouse abuse, sexual "harassment," whatever (or else she is accused of a crime against him, and her defence is a claim of some such abuse by him). The trial is just beginning, so as yet only the accusations, not the evidence pro and con, have been made public. No matter; feminist extremists are already making public statements and staging demonstrations. They are wearing "I believe her" buttons. (These surfaced, the reader may recall, during the long run-up to the trial over charges of rape laid by Patty Bowman against William French-Smith, and were meant to apply to both her and Anita Hill.) Next, one of two things happens. (A) The man is found not guilty (or the woman, guilty). The extremists march in the streets

The politics of Bigotry-Motivated Belief continued

(throw blood on the courthouse steps, etc.) and scream at the judge in the media. "That decision clearly reveals how little this society cares about the victimization of women," they charge. (B) The man is found guilty and punished heavily (or the woman, found not guilty). No one marches in the streets. A few may publicly protest the verdict, on grounds that the evidence pointed the other way, but no one — certainly not the sexist feminists — blames the outcome on lack of concern about the possible victimization of innocent men by false accusations.

If you haven't been exposed to scores of incidents of this type in the last 10 years, you've been living in a cave somewhere. Cases like that of Hill and Bowman and Desiree Washington (who successfully charged Mike Tyson with rape) are merely the most high-profile instances. You may also have heard some of the evidence, brought out only later on, said to reveal that the women were not telling the truth. The point I wish to make here, however, has nothing to do with the actual facts in such cases. It is about people who *do not know* what the facts are, yet *go ahead as if they did* — and who do so for blatant reasons of prejudice. (Literally, prejudice is "prejudgment," or drawing conclusions before knowing the evidence.)

Just imagine — if you can imagine it, given changes in attitudes regarding race since the '20s — a mob of protesters wearing buttons that announce "I believe the white." Imagine these people writing book after pamphlet after article about interracial violence saying: "When a white accuses a black, it is your duty to believe the white."

I submit that there is not one iota of moral difference between the attitudes of 1920s lynch mobs toward accused blacks and those of present-day extremist feminists toward accused men. In both cases, *they don't know the facts*. They weren't there, and haven't seen the evidence. All they know — all they *need* to know, in their minds — is that it is one of "our kind" accusing one of "their kind." If in either case they *should* feel a need for evidence, it wouldn't involve *this particular* charge but generalizations about "their kind" victimizing "our kind." (The generalizations might be stereotypes or doctored statistics or even accurate statistics; in any case, the effect of the prejudgment on the legal verdict is apt to be to turn *this* case into another one of those statistics.)

Just imagine — if you *can* imagine it, given changes in attitudes regarding race since the '20s — a mob of protesters wearing buttons that announce "I believe the white." Imagine these people writing book after pamphlet after article about interracial violence saying: "When a white accuses a black, it is your duty to believe the white."

This kind of bias works in all different directions. Certain men's rights activists embarrass their cause by consistently siding with the male in such situations. And recently in rural Alberta, it is reported, a whole town sided with a young man accused of rape — "such a nice boy, and one of our own" — only to discover later that the young woman was telling the truth, after she had been reviled and driven away. (A *genuine* and tragic case of "second victimization.") *All* such bias should be denounced, and stopped. But the powers that be in our society (media and government) promote an incredible double standard when it comes to bigotry. Any right-wing extremists who dared to wear those hypothetical buttons, or to reveal in some equally blatant way their reflexive reaction whenever it's a white vs. a person of color, would be denounced from one end of the country to the other. But the bigotry of the extremist feminists is not only not denounced; it is honored, parroted and subsidized.

Scene Four, in the late 1950s:

Two five-year-old neighbor girls, talking with their mothers to my mother in our living room, one accusing my three younger brothers and me of "playing doctor" with them the previous morning. For me as a teenager, it is a very serious matter. (For the two youngest boys the charge *should* be of no consequence, since they are the same age as the girls and it is alleged to have been by mutual consent. Even at that age, however, they have all absorbed this culture's notion of sexual behavior as something bad that a male commits against a female.) The story begins to unravel when it is pointed out that the second brother was out of town the entire day with his father. Meanwhile, I am not only horrified but totally baffled: What could be motivating the making of these false charges? Then I recover enough to notice the behavior of one of them. Five-year-olds are not yet practised at concealing their emotions, and hers are plain: she is prancing around and positively beaming. Neighborhood lore has it that the kids in that family get little attention from their parents except for a razor strap. Now here she is, the center of concerned attention, getting in some licks at someone else for a change.

Whatever her actual motives may have been, I sometimes think of that little girl when I hear someone recite the mantra: "Children don't lie about sex." I sometimes think of her when I hear someone say: "A female wouldn't lie about a thing like that" — the unspoken corollary being, of course, that a male would. And every time I think of her, I get a chill: What if that accusation against me had been made in the sort of climate the sexist feminists are so successfully promoting today? I don't have to wonder — I've already seen too many victims of that climate.

The powers that be would very likely have said: "We believe her."

Submitted FYI by Professor Emeritus Ferrel Christensen (PhD in Philosophy of Science).
Originally written for a gender-issues newsletter years ago.