Questions both ancient and new are being raised—do women think differently than men? How are biological and social determinants? Is equality among the sexes possible, and, if so, what does this really mean? The following articles detail the current debates being raised about these issues in feminist circles. In addition, they show the important role that freethought, particularly the criticism of religious dogmas, has played in bringing about increasing equality for women.

As Dewey pointed out, in a paper written in 1931,

The growing freedom of women can hardly have any other outcome than the production of more realistic and more human morals. It will be marked by a new freedom, but also by a new severity. For it will be enforced by the realities of associated life as they are disclosed to careful and systematic inquiry, and not by a combination of convention and an exhausted legal system with sentimentialty.

The significance of this new freedom is explored in the following pages.

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**FI Interview**

**Camille Paglia on Freethought, Feminism, and Iconoclasm**

*conducted by Timothy J. Madigan*

*One does not really interview Camille Paglia—author of the best-selling works Sexual Personae; Sex, Art, and American Culture; and Vamps and Tramps—one gives her a forum to express her free-wheeling opinions in machine-gun delivery style on whatever issues she wants to address. What follows is a prime example of what might be called her “in-your-face feminism.”—EDS.*

**FREE INQUIRY:** You're one of the few public intellectuals whose work is discussed both on college campuses and in working-class bars. Why do you think you've touched such a nerve?

**CAMILLE PAGLIA:** It's pretty amazing. Don’t forget by the time I burst on the scene five years ago, I was in my forties, and I'd gotten absolutely no attention whatsoever. I couldn't get published. Not only was *Sexual Personae* rejected by seven major publishing houses, but parts of it had been rejected for years by magazines.

But by the beginning of the 1990s, the culture seemed to change, and suddenly people were listening to me. There was a big shift. I represent the best of the 1960s, which was all about freethought and free speech. I hate dogma in any form. I hate it in the Roman Catholic church, which is why I left it twenty-five years ago. I hate it in gay activism and feminism now. Dogma has also taken over the humanities departments in elite schools—poststructuralism and so forth. I think people are sick of the ideological and clichéd ways in which cultural issues were approached in the 1980s. So I came like a breath of fresh air.

People who are interested in ideas welcomed me, and people who cling to a fixed belief system find me threatening. There's nothing more dangerous to a liberal democracy than fixed dogma. I don't like coteries. I have struggled to maintain my outside position, which is very rare in America.

**FI:** In *Vamps and Tramps*, you state that “the silencing of authentic debate among feminists helps the rise of the far right.”

**PAGLIA:** That's right, and the fruits of this are now being seen. I've warned about this for years—the suppression of debate by the liberal wing has moved the entire nation to the right. People who were surprised by the Republican sweep have simply not been listening to me. It happened not because of any right-wing conspiracy; it happened because of a spiritual vacuum on the left. The left became too removed from the people. Leftism began 150 years ago supposedly to speak for the silent majority, for the people. True sixties radicalism really was populist. I’m a Clinton supporter and I’ll vote for him again (God help me), but he has surrounded himself with these white, upper middle class elite professionals who speak about “the people” from a very great distance and, in a very paternalistic, condescending way, as “victims.” It is insulting—I’m remembering my background in an immigrant family when I say this—they are totally removed from the people they pretend to
and given nothing in its place. The effects done? It turned against organized religion, against organized religion, but put nature collapse and contraction. Destructive. There's a profound kind of sentimentalizes nature. It sees it as a wonderful goddess figure, and she's all good. I criticize that as being Rousseauist; and it's not true. The great fertility religions of the world are being fed. It is the Enlightenment turned away from the heart of our culture; but I disagree with the cure that the far right offers. What I'm saying to the left is, "Wake up! The far right sees something you are in denial about."

Everything is blighted for the young. They have reduced aspirations. They are in a dead end. Because of this total neglect of spiritual values we have the tremendous appeal of the right. There's two thousand years of developed thought behind Christianity. There's three thousand years behind Judaism. So, better Jehovah than Foucault. Jehovah at least brings along this incredible work, the Bible. What a great collection of poetry, magnificent, filled with things of spiritual use, whether you believe in God or not. The grandeur and intellectual development of Catholic theology is staggering. Foucault is a fraud; and that's the diet our best kids in the elite schools are being fed. It is appalling. The man knew nothing.

We have destroyed the young's natural instincts. We told them you cannot look at art without thinking of a prefab social agenda—rascism, sexism, homophobia. We have destroyed the natural, pleasurable response to art. We've turned them into dried-up cynics. True creativity means being willing to make a fool of yourself, letting it all go.

The left is to be blamed for the appeal of the right. The right offers stable, traditional religious values. And when people marry and have children, they are concerned about what kind of values to give them. That's why so many people are turning back to the old religions. Religion has tremendous cultural power.

What I have offered in my work is a compromise solution. There should be shared educational experiences in all nations. The history of any culture is its religion. I'm looking for a scholarly view of religion. Everyone in the world should have knowledge of Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Judeo-Christianity, African tribal religions, and so forth. What we would do in effect is say, "Here are all the possible ways of spiritually apprehending the universe."

Trying to produce an education that's completely clear of religion is stupid. It would be so easy for the left to say, "A moment of meditation in the schools is fine." What is the big deal? People who are religious can think religious thoughts. Let people just gather their thoughts.

I'm in the posture of attacking the left and saying to them "You have spawned Newt Gingrich." Rush Limbaugh is necessary. He's one of the few freethinkers in the whole culture. The people at Harvard, Princeton, Duke, and Stanford aren't freethinkers. They're just a bunch of lemmings compared to Rush Limbaugh, who's out there with his own independent point-of-view. He's a principled speaker and thinker, even though my politics are not his. The left can no longer claim to be the voice of the people.

FI: You also talk about a renewed interest in the pagan. Certainly organized religion had tried to eradicate pagan elements.

PAGLIA: The overall theme of my work is this: Judeo-Christianity never defeated paganism. Instead, paganism, after the fall of Rome, was driven underground, and it has erupted in Western culture at three key moments. The first was the Renaissance. Greco-Roman humanism came back—Botticelli did a painting of Venus rather than the Madonna. The second moment was Romanticism. And the most glamorous of my three eruptions is the twentieth century. I call it not Sartre's Age of Anxiety, but rather the Age of Hollywood. Modern popular culture is in fact an eruption of the buried pagan element in Western civilization—the very things the far right finds most unpalatable. Christianity has never been able to honestly deal with sex, because it belongs to the natural realm and Christianity imagines us as transcending our natural selves, becoming like God up in heaven who's sexless and bodiless. "Turn the other cheek" does not deal with the innateness of aggression. Many feminists believe one is taught to be violent by a violent society. Those things that people most deplore are precisely what the culture needs. It is the strange truncations, limitations, and repressions of Judeo-Christianity that have in fact produced the cult of the striving, heroic, turbulent individual artist, from Michelangelo to Baudelaire to Lord Byron down to Elvis Presley. This is part of the greatness of the West. It's based on
neurosis and repression.

FI: The artists are somewhat like oysters producing pearls from the irritants of their upbringing.

PAGLIA: Judeo-Christian theology is fascinating—very complex, very intellectually stimulating. In some ways, it's an overdevelopment of one part of the brain, and the body suffers. We need a long view. But we're in a period of postmodernism, where people have this stupid idea that there are no great narratives anymore. Everything is discontinuous.

FI: Postmodernism seems to lead back to premodernism: questioning all the presuppositions of modernism reawakens interest in ancient theologies.

PAGLIA: Postmodernism is a big fancy word for nothing. It is so passé. Let's get past Beckett's Waiting for Godot. The view of the world that there's nothing but a nihilistic landscape is completely outmoded. That's not our world. I feel that African-American music has entered very deeply into our psyche. The negativity and alienation in the African-American experience is our native sensibility, and it's revolutionized the world in terms of music and dance. I'm trying to assassinate postmodernism. I'm at war with the people in our universities and academic journals and everywhere where people are still preaching this line. It's the worst thing in the world to say to someone, "The world is empty, the world is meaningless, no ideals are possible."

FI: Related to postmodernism is the claim that rational thinking is "phallocentric."

PAGLIA: Oh! That kind of talk is so embarrassing. It comes out of Jacques Lacan. Even the word phallocentric is such a stupid neologism. What kind of idiots do we have pretending that that is supposed to be a big philosophical term? All of Lacan's work is a big pile of manure as far as I'm concerned, completely useless. Thank God, when I entered college in 1964, I was exposed to great literature, great art, great thought, everything from Plato and Aristotle down to Hegel, Kant, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. People who use the word phallocentric are desperate academic careerists who want to sound important.

FI: Female writers who make these claims and refer to Lacan and Foucault don't seem to catch the irony that these are male thinkers telling them about "phallocentrism."

PAGLIA: Precisely. Most of the women in academy who pretend to be feminists are not. They do not know the history of feminism. They never studied history, anthropology, psychology, biology. And that is why, for all their attacks on the canon and tradition, they created an instant canon of their own, all the more false. I speak as a feminist. My feminism predates the feminism of Gloria Steinem. I go way back. Most of these women in my view have drifted from their own cultural or ethnic or religious identities and they cling to feminism as a new religion. That's why they are absolutely irrational when you try to argue with them. They have accepted passively certain received truths, and they have not thought them through. They cling together in bands, and never listen to anyone outside their group. They had the idea that if they ignored someone like me, I'd go away. It was perfect for me, because it allowed me to ramble unchecked. They're stupefied now. I have had three best-sellers in five years.

FI: Speaking of your tactics, you write that football is your only religion, and that feminists should learn strategies from it.

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PAGLIA: Speaking of your tactics, you write that football is your only religion, and that feminists should learn strategies from it. Our editor Paul Kurtz published an article defending football in our Spring 1994 issue, and a lot of our readers got very upset, accusing him of advocating violence.

PAGLIA: Ugggh. Baseball is a sport that all intellectuals pretend to like. It's very passive. I've never liked it, even though I played softball in school. But I love football. It's controlled violence. There are rules to circumscribe uncontrolled violence. You're penalized. I think that football is absolutely magnificent. I watched it with my father in Syracuse, where I was young. The way the coaches and players strategize, plan, marshall the troops, anticipate, develop subterfuge—it's a wonderful combination of brain and brawn.

There's no doubt that I have modeled a lot of my tactics on football. When the academic feminists tried to stonewall me, I ran a misdirection play. My most notorious sentence is in the first chapter of Sexual Personae—"If civilization had been left in female hands, we would still be living in grass huts." I knew that this sentence would inflame these women, that they would not read my book, and I could stampede them to go in the wrong direction. They would assume that I was of the far right. They were absolutely convinced that they knew what my system was.

It worked brilliantly. I managed to evade early tackles. I had the field to myself for a long time. I often say, I modeled my hits—my one-line attack sound-bites—on those great crisp hits in the middle of the field that you can hear all the way in the back row. I love that kind of style, where a free safety appears out of nowhere. I'm doing quick, sharp hits, very violent but also with great bravura. If I were to be asked what position I'd play it would be either free safety or tight end—those big guys who run right over people to the goal line. Football is a great model for keeping your vision, concentrating energy, planning, and keeping in condition.

FI: It would be nice if you could coach the Buffalo Bills. They might actually win a Super Bowl with your attitude.

You have a very Nietzschean element in your writing style—you, too, "philosophize with a hammer." You make many statements that are deliberately provocative. Here's one from Vamps and Tramps: "It's not male hatred of women, but male fear of woman that is the great universal."

PAGLIA: I think that that is my best contribution to feminism. When I came on the scene, all these wonderful archetypes from the whole of world history—the femme fatale, the medusa, the gorgon—were considered to be hallucinatory projections by women-hating men. And what I did was to recover the stereotypes and show that they contain some terrible truth about sexual relations. Take a film like Basic Instinct, which feminist and gay activists picketed. I loved Basic Instinct. I thought Sharon Stone gave one of the great performances in the history of film. She showed, in the interrogation scene where all the men are turned to jelly when she uncrosses her legs, that the sexual woman dominates man. She is in such command there. Men don't hate women. There are some men who hate their mothers—usually they end up being serial murderers.
Mostly men are fascinated by and fear women. Woman represents the origin of man—every boy comes out of a woman's body. It's beyond personality. It has to do with this huge force that is nature itself. Some feminism tries to cut us off from nature and says “We're just the same”—well, we're not just the same. Woman's reproductive capabilities are very mysterious. Science still can hardly come up with terms to analyze it. I regard man as peripheral, marginal, to this huge reality.

I got this idea from studying literature and art and realizing that so much of world mythology has certain shared themes. When you find something so widespread through so many periods, then you must say there is something to female sexuality that gives rise to these nightmare visions. I have a larger vision as a scholar, with a huge view of history—most of my opponents are pathetic. They know nothing. They might know modern periods, they might know the renaissance, but they really do not have this broad overview.

Men do fear being sucked back into the womb again, shrunk down into infancy again. It's not clear how intimate men can be with women without masculinity being suffocated and terminated in women's greater power. This is a profound problem. A lot of behavior that looks like male domination, I began to realize, was part of the way that men keep themselves free. Masculinity is very very fragile. Men go directly from control by their mothers to control by their wives. They have one brief period when they're free, and that's when they run and rampage. We need to understand this. Warren Farrell, in his book The Myth of Male Power, says that “Female beauty is the world's most potent drug.” That is so true, and feminism does not understand the allure that women have, that men are awed by women and then become defensive because they don't want to be castrated or become slaves to women. There's a real tension, back and forth through history.

I have a peculiar way of looking at things, through male eyes. It's probably because of my bisexual experience. Many of the things I'm saying are obvious, but feminism is so stuck behind its own blinders. One of the worst of these is to constantly see misogyny everywhere. I'm called a misogynist! Does that make any sense? Someone who's an open lesbian, who's written on Madonna and Diana and Elizabeth Taylor and Jackie Kennedy Onassis? I'm constantly writing evocatively of women.

By the way, I hope you will identify me as a feminist. Some people just carelessly call me an anti-feminist. Gloria Steinem just did that again recently in the New York Times. That is so stupid. I am a dissident feminist who is a critic of the feminist establishment. I'm someone who's trying to reform feminism, as much as my great heroine, St. Teresa of Avila, who wasn't trying to get rid of Catholicism, but was trying to reform it. Which she did. She was great trouble to the archbishop and the Catholic hierarchy, but she completely, single-handedly reformed the Spanish Carmelites. And that's what I feel I'm doing to feminism, and to academe.

Toward a Partnership Society

Stuart Jordan

Traditional thinkers often say, “There is nothing new under the sun.” Arguing that human nature is a rock on which many utopian ideas have founded, they look with skepticism on the denial of a “fixed” human nature that has characterized much liberal thought since the Enlightenment. Some even describe the current movement toward equal rights and opportunities for men and women as one more example of an ill-considered reform.

Even if we grant the existence of a fixed human nature, this does not prove that people of either sex should dominate society. The partnership society, a term adopted from a contemporary book, is based on equal opportunity for all regarding ethnicity and race but especially gender. ¹ We argue below that our future survival may depend on this condition, which can lead to improvement in our personal lives as well.

Historical Observation

Regardless of their views on religious dogma, few scholars would deny that religion has had a profound influence on the development of civilization, or that the gender orientation of religion is important in how we view men and women today. We also know that mainstream traditional religion throughout the world has been overwhelmingly patriarchal since at least the Minoan culture of the second millennium B.C.E. ¹ It should not be surprising, then, that our societies remain largely patriarchal today, independent of what might be “built into our genes.” This observation is important for what follows.

Stuart Jordan is a past president and current board member of the Washington Area Secular Humanists. He is a Senior Staff Scientist at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration Goddard Space Flight Center.

"It is hard not to imagine almost continuous improvement in many people's personal lives if the rights and opportunities of both sexes were to converge."