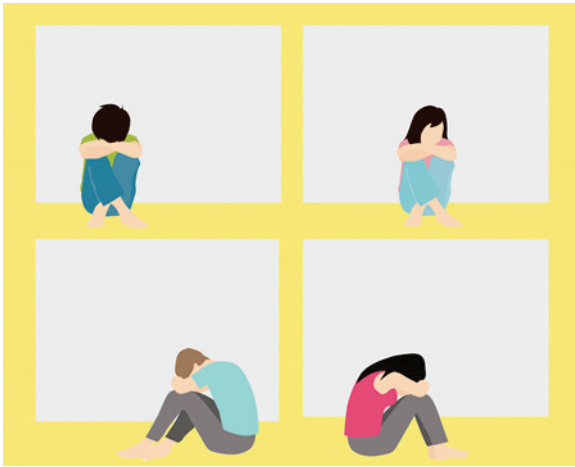


ATHEISM, GENDER AND SELF-HARM



John Benton

CONTENTS

	Page number
Introduction	3
1. Humanity according to Scripture	4
2. Male and female in conflict with each other	8
3. The individual against himself / herself	12

This material was first given at the 2018 conference of the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood UK at the Angel Church, Islington, London

© 2018 John Benton

Cover image: iStock

Introduction

In the Western world at the present time, many young males are committing suicide. Also young females are self-harming at an alarming rate.

This material started as an attempt to understand this 21st century tragedy from a Biblical point of view. It may not be possible to completely get a handle on it – but this booklet hopefully provides a worthwhile line of thought concerning what is going on.

On our shelves at home we have a copy of *The Dangerous Book for Boys*. It is a large hardback and consists of a collation of fact and fiction, prose and poetry, traditionally of interest to boys. These are things like Rudyard Kipling's poem 'If', the battles of Lord Nelson, the story of Scott of the Antarctic, how to navigate by the stars etc. It is about adventures and achievements in 'touch and go' situations. It is about fights and courage and chivalry.

Next to it we also have the equally large *Daring Book for Girls*. This is not quite the same – but again there is lots of adventure, risk taking and brave women. It includes the stories of people like Florence Nightingale and Amy Johnson, the first female pilot to fly alone from Britain to Australia, etc.

There is a part in us all that responds – especially for men, but for women also – to these things. There is something in us which relishes 'the good fight'. Humanity seems made for a life of contending, of conflict, of striving for something better, of taking on the opposition and winning through. It is as if we were made with a necessity to find our significance as people through a worthwhile battle story. And that story we are able tell ourselves about ourselves is very close to our deepest identity, our very self.

The story we see ourselves as living gives us meaning and purpose in life. If what we think of ourselves at the deepest level undergoes radical damage and disruption, our lives begin to fall apart.

1. Humanity according to Scripture

Where does that sense of fight and the need to achieve come from? Is it just a vestige of the battle for survival inherited from our (supposed) evolution and which needs to be discarded in the modern world? Or, changing worldviews, from a Christian standpoint is it something sinful? Is contending inherently wrong-headed as some would have us believe?

The story that we tell ourselves about ourselves invariably involves an element of battle. Our lives are about winning through in a difficult world. I want to argue that this has a proper place in a well-rounded humanity. But I also want to trace how it is subverted, misdirected by sin and so is ruining many lives. This ruination invades every area of our reality including our gender and our very humanity.

Contending

Secularism asks all the right questions, but comes up with all the wrong answers. To understand ourselves we need to go back to the Bible book of Genesis and our creation by God.

Let's see 7 things about who we are.

1. Human beings, male and female, are made in the image of God. 'Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them', Genesis 1.26,27. Men and women both have the astonishing privilege of God himself being the blueprint on which we are patterned. So there is a sense in which men and women are the same (don't be surprised that girls can be adventurous too). But of course, we are different as well. Just as there is equality, but unity and diversity within the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) – so we find the same in humanity at creation.
2. The work that God gave us is described in Genesis 1.28: 'God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature on the ground"'. This project, which God sets before Adam and Eve, involves not just multiplying, but conflict. They are to 'subdue' the earth – not to exploit it – but to bring it under their rule and

so to fruition. The original word here translated 'subdue' is the word often used in the Old Testament for victory in a battle. For example, Zechariah 9.15 speaks of overcoming (or subduing) with sling-stones. The word is used of Israel's conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua, Numbers 32.22, 29; Joshua 18.1. So this task which God set at the beginning for humanity involves taking on the wilderness ('wildness'). It was to be conquered – civilized. There is a contending for something better. This was to be, under God, our story.

3. Genesis 2 explains this in a more detail. Man himself is made out of the dust, Genesis 2.7 and then God puts him into the bit of the world which he has already subdued and made fruitful – the garden of Eden, Genesis 2.8. So the garden was a safe place, a place to meet with God (and therefore a temple), but also something of a first example. Adam is to subdue the earth and this is what it can look like. (We are reminded of the old *Blue Peter* TV children's programme where the presenters would often be showing viewers how to build something and say, 'Here's one I made earlier'). So right from the beginning, even without the Fall, it seems there was a proper sense in which God expected Adam to go outside the garden into the wild to 'fight' to extend Eden across the earth. This is the task, the adventure, the conflict for which we were made. It seems to parallel God's bringing order out of the earth's original darkness and formlessness, Genesis 1.2.
4. Eve is made to help Adam in the task. 'The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him"', Genesis 2.18. The designation 'helper' implies no denigration of the woman for it is a term used of God himself, e.g., Psalm 46.1. The woman is to be man's companion in the task. She is made from him, understanding him, socializing him, complementing him; not just helping him *per se*, but helping him in the context of the work they carry out for God. Adam first of all is in the garden alone so he becomes the pioneer / leader. Eve comes after, alongside him. So if his task involves a fight it is not unfeminine but part of true femininity for a woman to be capable of fighting. And you will soon see that rightly if you touch her children, or perhaps even the reputation of her man.
5. Though men and women are equally made in God's image, we need to sketch in the general differences. Based on Genesis 2 – without going into details – masculinity has relatively pronounced features of work,

leadership, strength to sacrifice. Femininity is relatively pronounced along the lines of help, people skills (harmonizing, team building) and sensitivity. I must emphasize the 'relativity' of this reality because we get into difficulties if we make things too black and white, for example, if we say men can't be sensitive or women can't be sacrificial etc. Of course we can because we are both human. But the way male and female are made means that we generally exhibit certain features more prominently.

6. Of course, all this was originally to take place under the loving Fatherhood of God and in a relationship of trust in him and working for his glory. The Lord God, in one sense, is the 'audience' watching over all that is done. It is before him that mankind's achievements take place. Made in his image and carrying out his will, imparts true significance to Adam and Eve's lives.

Hatred and selfishness comes in

I have highlighted the contending, 'made for a conflict', aspect of our original humanity. So immediately I want to say that, unlike the risk averse outlook, a Biblical understanding acknowledges that risk taking and a fight for the better, has a legitimate place in our humanity. It is there for both for men and women – though especially for men. Courage and contending are rightly part of us. Life is not all about health and safety.

7. But now it is essential to note the way that those aspects of who we are have been subverted and misdirected by the Fall. Lured by Satan's deception, 'you shall be as gods / God, determining for yourselves what is good and evil' Genesis 3.5 (paraphrase) Adam and Eve fall. They step way beyond the bounds set by God, and become rebels against their Creator. The Fall brings many terrible consequences because of God's judgment. But what changes in this area of contending? *First*, can I put it like this – whereas before they would have been contending for God – to see the world subdued for his glory – now that competitiveness becomes self-centred. Their choice to disobey God was self-centred – 'think of yourself – you shall be as God,' Genesis 3.5. Therefore, the whole of our psychology becomes self oriented. *Second*, our opponent changes from a wild world, to Satan and his seed. To Satan God says, 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers', Genesis 3.15. This then flows over into a prophecy of the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ, 'he will crush your head and you will strike his heel.'

Satan, this new opponent of mankind, who usurps power over the world, is far too powerful for us. Without the Saviour we must be losers. *Third*, following the Fall, excluding God from the picture, in our minds, the audience of our lives mostly changes to ourselves, and what other people think of us. (Perhaps here are the roots of celebrity culture).

So hatred, injustice and selfish ambition break upon the world. Amidst all this there is what the apostle Paul calls 'the good fight' – against evil. But in every area of life there is selfish conflict. The part of us which has 'fight' in it, has been subverted. But for the purposes of our subject, I want to just flag up how conflict has entered in the area of gender and who we are as human beings.

2. Male and female in conflict with each other

Made for harmony and unity in diversity, Genesis 2.24, since the Fall, the genders are now pitted against each other. This emerges first in the man's blaming of the woman (and hence God) for his disobedience, Genesis 3.11,12 and then in God's judgment on the woman, 'To the woman he said...Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you,' Genesis 3.16. The word 'desire' is the same as that used of sin's desire to control or enslave Cain, Genesis 4.7. And sadly, in response the man will seek to rule, or 'lord it' over the woman like a king. This gender conflict is not always of the same intensity and has historically gone through many sad and damaging stages. But at present it manifests itself in that the Western world has become, in a sense, anti-male.

Anti-male culture

I first became aware of this some years ago as my wife and I watched a TV police drama series about two women detectives. It was called *Scott & Bailey*. As I watched this over the weeks I realized that every male character in the show was either deviously nasty or an idiot. It occurred to me that if a TV series had portrayed women like that there would have been uproar. But, somehow, to do that to men was okay.

What are we to make of this? Where has it come from? Here are a few ideas. I'm using Jordan Petersen a little here. He is the Canadian Professor of Psychology who has become something of a YouTube phenomenon with his articulate and outspoken resistance to much of the prevailing political correctness. He has much to say about masculinity in his book *12 Rules for Life – an antidote to chaos* (1). He is not a Christian, but has much very insightful common sense.

He says, 'Boys are suffering in the modern world'. Let me paraphrase how he argues this. Boys have always tended to be more disobedient, more independent. He says, 'Boys tilt towards things; girls interests tilt towards people' (p 298). That's no surprise to us Biblically. These differences are evidently more pronounced in societies, like Sweden, where gender-equality is pushed hardest. The reason this is cited is because it is the opposite of what is expected by those who insist that gender is a social construct. It isn't. The facts say 'No'. The evidence of research is against it. Again Biblically we are not surprised. God made the two genders, Matthew 19.4.

With a heightened desire for a fight, boys like competition especially as they feel

the need in adolescence to strive for independence. They want to be their own person, be someone in their own right and escape the shadow of mum and dad – even if it is as a nerdy computer geek who can outstrip mum and dad at all things social media, digital and online. In a fallen world, this attitude of boys has often been a problem for society. They need to prove themselves.

The secular confusion

But now, as we have become more intentionally secular / atheist as a society it has led to a situation in which, it seems, boys can never win. That's how Jordan Petersen puts it.

Society's thinking has changed profoundly in recent decades. And the atheist / secular explanation of humanity brings with it an inherent contradiction which damns men.

In the area of being of course, everything is explained by godless, chance, evolution. But a hierarchy is innate to the concept of evolution. It works via survival of fittest. The fittest = stronger = better. Because men are naturally stronger than women this inevitably (on the logic of evolution alone) leads to a male dominance / patriarchal society. I'm not defending the misuse of male power – I'm just noting the fact of male power and the way it is explainable in secular evolutionary terms.

In the area of behaviour things are different. In strict chance evolution there is no morality. All that prevails is 'might is right'. So, for example, in his recent best-selling book *Sapiens* (2), which proposes a thorough atheistic explanation of life, Yuval Harari comments on the US Declaration of Independence. The Declaration famously speaks of holding equality and certain rights for individuals as self-evident. Harari dismisses it saying simply 'there are no such things as rights in biology' (p123).

But with our God-given humanity seeping through, generally, human beings can't stomach such hard-headedness. So the nearest thing to morality which might vaguely have some logic to it is equality. We are all human beings, we are all the same and so justice = equality. (Obviously this has some resonance with Marxism).

But step back a moment. There are these two explanations in the areas of being and behaviour. Here's the contradiction; equality doesn't fit with evolution,

which is innately hierarchical. Why would the strongest want to work for equality?

And further, evolution doesn't work with equality. It works by 'survival of the fittest' and fittest means 'not equal'. So our society has this inner contradiction. And with these two contradictory sets of logic in play, the male of the human species finds he is inevitably condemned.

From the equality mindset, to use power to advantage yourself over others is to be oppressive. Men are accused of misusing strength (which of course as sinners, Biblically speaking, many men sadly have done) to dominate women. And women claim victim status.

This means that many secular men feel they can never win or be the hero of their story.

- a) If men win in competition with women equality says they are being oppressive.
- b) If a man uses his strength to help women equality says he is being condescending and patronizing.
- c) If a man loses to a woman, evolution says he is a wimp.

Putting this all together takes us back to *Scott & Bailey* (and *Peppa Pig*). All men are either evil or idiots to be despised. And further

- d) If women are to gain equality men must be positively discriminated against because they are generally more powerful creatures.

Boys are in trouble

So much has this form of thinking prevailed that Jordan Petersen writes: 'There are whole disciplines in universities forthrightly hostile towards men. These are areas of study dominated by the post-modern / neo-Marxist claim that Western culture, in particular, is an oppressive structure, created by white men to dominate and exclude women (and other select groups); successful only because of that domination and exclusion'.

What we learn is this: If you move away from a Biblical world view of the complementarity of men and women, 'boys are in trouble.' Thus it happens that many a male's estimate of himself sags. He feels 'I'm a loser' whichever way I

turn. There will naturally be other factors involved once we start considering individual cases. These push in the same direction and influence the high rate of male suicides. Perhaps it is poverty or lack of opportunity. But it is clear that the underlying anti-male outlook will feed in to even those areas too for many men.

So we have young men who believe that they can never live a significant life (especially as, in a secular world, other people are the audience and give significance, not God). They feel condemned just for being male. This feeling of never being acceptable will be amplified by the particularities of a young man's own situation. For example, there might be an especially distressing break-up of a relationship or a brutal dismissal from the workplace. In the story of their life they can never win. They succumb to self-loathing and many to suicide.

The corollaries of this anti-male tendency should also be noted also.

- Female mentality becomes the norm. Masculinity is dominant, abnormal – problematic.
- Also it means that traditional femininity declines. Women must reach 'the top' which has previously been defined by male pursuits. Therefore, to be a successful woman is to do what men have done traditionally. So being a mother, not a wage earner, is to be a failure as a woman.

This is how the gender conflict works out. But the impossibility of winning goes deeper.

3. The individual against himself / herself

In 2 Timothy 3, Paul introduces us to the terrible times that can occur during ‘last days’ in godless society. Here are his words:

‘But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power.’ 2 Timothy 3.1-5

Notice his headline. People will be lovers of themselves. What we love is our god. Self becomes god. Self is worshipped. We sacrifice everything else for the self. Freedom is self-determination. It’s not difficult to see that that’s where we currently are in Western society.

Sacrificing all else to self

Sharon James has some very interesting lectures on the history of feminism (3). Look to her headings concerning what has been advocated in what she calls 2nd wave feminism. This concerns not the proper call that women’s voices be heard or votes for women which characterised the first wave. But this was set in terms of liberation for women. We are thinking here particularly of the years 1960-1990. The agenda was as follows:

- Women to be liberated from marriage, motherhood and housekeeping
- Women to be liberated from family life – abolish patriarchy
- Women to be liberated from reproductive function
- Women to be liberated from old fashioned morals
- Women to be liberated from ‘heteronormativity’ – that is male and female as the norm for relationships.
- Women to be liberated from patriarchal religion

It all tends in one direction – the ‘setting free’ of the ‘self’. Everything is sacrificed for ‘self’. Family, motherhood, even right and wrong must go. Then, and only then, would there be freedom for women.

And, of course, this wasn’t just the agenda for women but in many ways it was

the whole direction of society – and still is. Where did this whole direction come from?

A history of how we see the self

We need to look at ‘the self’ and how we view it. Will Storr’s 2017 book *Selfie: How the West became Self-obsessed* (4) gives his take on what has been unfolding, especially over the last century or so. It is worth considering. Let me try to give a summary of his thesis.

With the rejection of our Christian heritage, say in the mid-nineteenth century, and embracing of secularism our view of the self began to change. Storr calls the Christian view ‘the bad self’. Sadly he has a very limited view of what Christian faith teaches, but he has rightly picked up on the fact that we are sinners. Setting aside that human beings are gloriously made in God’s image, but now are fallen, deeply flawed and in need of redemption through the love of God in Christ, into the emerging secular world came Freud with his ideas of the subconscious based on Greek Myths. But he was still proposing that the heart of the self was dark and twisted.

I am skating over a great deal here, but to cut a long story short, Freud’s ideas proved too gloomy for modern people. It was replaced with a theory of ‘the good self’. That deep-down human beings are good. We are only messed up by our experiences. Popular psychology was born.

Then, during the mid-twentieth century this ‘good self’ began to be pushed a little further into what Storr titles, ‘the special self.’ Not only are we basically good, but if we would only understand how special we are, build our self-esteem, human beings would know true fulfilment.

It is interesting that around this time, 1980s-1990s, that the names of Western children begin to change. Peter and Susan, Janet and John fell out of fashion. Parents began to go for unusual names. They began to try to choose names which were unique to their child - Madison, Tuesday etc. We had a little boy coming to one of our children’s works at church named Zeus! Mothers and fathers wanted their children to have names which said, ‘You are special – stand out and be a star’.

California and self-esteem

Again I am condensing things hugely here, but Storr highlights what he sees as a particular turning point. Based somewhat on the ideas of the psychologist Carl Rogers, back in 1987, a man named John Vasconcellos, was given permission to form a state financed 'Self-Esteem Task Force' in California. He believed that by raising self-esteem you could solve a massive array of chronic social problems. Crime, violence, educational failure, teenaged pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse etc. would disappear if people only realized how special they are.

Support for this project was sought. A spokesman for a group of academics from the University of California aided Vasconcellos' cause. The word went from a press conference out along the lines of 'Research proves that this approach is right'. This news proved crucial. The experts had proved it. From there a gargantuan 'self-esteem' movement really took off and is now worldwide. The whole of political correctness followed in its wake – not damaging a minority's self-esteem must be a priority above all else. This now, more or less, rules the Western world.

But there is a problem. Storr's book is just one of many (5) which have now exposed the fact that the report of the academics' support was a not true. It was a blatant misrepresentation. The back story seems to be that, in fact, Vasconcellos held some of the purse strings of the University of California and there was financial pressure on the academics to be seen to support his ideas. What the expert report actually said was: 'the association between self-esteem and its expected consequences is mixed, insignificant or absent.' (p209). But despite this, self-esteem prevails and hugely influences legislation and the outlook of Western society. The lie was up and running and no-one has stopped it yet.

The destructive implication

People are told, 'You are special'. But, built on a lie, not only have social problems not been solved, or people made more fulfilled, but this idea implies a corollary which is enormously damaging.

It goes something like this: 'If I am really special, then all I need to be the person I want to be is within me'. (It's rather like Satan's lie in Genesis – you shall be as God). That might sound great but hold on. Since all I need is within me, because I'm special, therefore, it must follow that it is actually my own fault if I am not what I would like to be'. Here we are – competitive souls, made according to

Genesis, to achieve – and if we fail to be what we want to be, we alone are responsible. There is no one to blame but ourselves.

Step back a moment once more. In our media-soaked world, what are young people told they should to be? Who are the winners? It is those with the money, those with the success, those with the fame, those with the glamour (cf. 2 Timothy 3.1-5). The answer, of course, given the secular framework is celebrities. They are the really significant people because everybody (the worldwide audience) knows them. But if I don't make it – I'm a loser. My life is worthless. And it is my own fault.

Social media

But then there's more. In the early twenty-first century, into the world of 'the special self' explodes digital technology. On top of the 'special self' is added 'the digital self,' with the advent of personal laptops, iPads and iPhones. Soon things like Facebook and Instagram become commonplace. Everyone is in touch with everyone. People begin to put online the perfect picture of themselves (a bit like saying – I'm so special I ought to be a celebrity). 'Here are all the cool things I do. How great is my life? Here are the photo-shopped pictures of myself from all the right angles. And, yes, I'm a bit like the air-brushed pictures of those gorgeous models and culture-shaping celebrities. In fact, I'm pretty nigh perfect, aren't I?'

But the problem is that deep down I know I'm not. I want to be (I was told by the culture I wanted to be). And it's all my fault because I believed what was told when they said 'You're special' and if I just believed in myself and tried my hardest, I could be anything I want to be. But I'm not! My life is not going where I meant it to go. I'm not in control of my life. I'm a loser.

And hence, the girls in particular begin to turn on themselves. And again, enhanced by some particular sequence of hurtful events in their lives and backed up by instantly knowing what the audience thinks – how many 'likes' they or 'dislikes' they have – and maybe exacerbated by online bullying – the competitive self turns on itself. Not only are the boys in trouble, the girls are in trouble too.

There may follow something like anorexia to somehow get back that feeling of control. There arises self-harming because of self-loathing because in her own estimate she's a loser. Self-harming can be seen as a cry for help, and crushed by the way they have been taught to see themselves and the world, many girls are in pain.

Recent research among 14-year olds has indicated that 1 in 5 girls in Britain are self-harming. Self-harming among girls in the UK has risen 68% in three years. (6). And what is so interesting about this is that the iPhone was launched in 2007 just before research shows that happiness levels in girls started to decline. Made by God to compete, to achieve, this side of us has been subverted. For many, social media has become the forum for conflict and appears to be turning youngsters against themselves. This is in no way to blame the technology itself, but it's about the way the technology gets used in this current cultural climate of the self.

Atheism has produced an air-brushed celebrity / digital culture that leaves no way for many young people to be content with an ordinary life. 'There's just this life and I've blown it.' The teenaged years are years of vulnerability and self-doubt anyway as youngsters struggle to find their own identity and place in the world. But now has been added this new and very destructive way of thinking.

Back to the good news of Jesus

Of course, all this leads us back to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have a generation of young men and women who are hurting and lost. Unlikely as it may seem in the present spiritual climate, they need to find their way back to God who made them. They must return to the God of the Bible, the living God who made them and in whom alone they can find forgiveness for self-obsession and fulfilment in life.

In Christ, we can embrace the worst about ourselves, because in his mysterious grace, God has sent his Son as a Saviour for real sinners. We can find our true identity as our life story becomes part of and coalesces with God's great adventure, his extraordinary love story of grace. We can fight 'the good fight' and find significance by achieving things for his kingdom, which may go unnoticed by this world, but are of eternal value.

This is what our contemporary world needs to hear.

Notes:

- (1) 12 Rules for Life: an antidote to the chaos, by Jordan B Petersen, Allen Lane Publishing, 2018
- (2) Sapiens: a brief history of human kind, by Yuval Noah Haran, Harper-Collins, 2011
- (3) Personal communication
- (4) Selfie: how the West became self-obsessed, by Will Storr, Picador, 2017
- (5) See – Therapy Culture, by Frank Furedi, Routledge, 2004
- (6) The Week, 8 September, 2018