

## **Your Words Betray and Portray You: The Role of Communication in Fostering Gender Discrimination As Illustrated In “The Book(S)” Of Dennis Rodman**

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### **Abstract**

Communication plays a significant and pervasive role in fostering gender discrimination and patriarchy. Our language influences how we view and treat people of different genders. This influence can be illustrated by examining the words used in “The Book(s)” of Dennis Rodman. In *Bad as I Wanna Be* and *Walk on the Wild Side*, Rodman metaphorically equates his life with the life of Christ—thus, claiming to be God. As God, he can be as bad as he wants to be to women. Many men, like Dennis, traditionally tend to view themselves as God and women as their servants. Telling heroic stories about Dennis is one way of enforcing the patriarchal meta-narratives of our culture. Thus, heroes may be chosen because they give people permission to live their lives in the way they want to live them—not because they inspire people to live better lives. When men see themselves as God, they place patriarchal constructions, including concepts of masculine hegemony, on God. Viewing God as man causes religion to be oppressive to women—glaringly exemplified by the rules that forbid women to speak in worship assemblies in many Christian denominations.

“He was a hero in Detroit, and as a hero, he wanted the public to see a certain image of him” (A. Rodman 1997, 113).

### **Introduction**

Communication plays a significant and pervasive role in fostering gender discrimination and patriarchy. Our language influences how we view and treat people of different genders. This influence can be illustrated by examining the words used in “The Book(s)” of Dennis Rodman.

Heroes personify the values of a culture (Harris & Moran 1987, 133). The heroes we choose and the stories that are told about them can be used to enforce the cultural meta-narratives of patriarchy. One such story involves the autobiographies of Dennis Rodman. McLennan (1994, 112) writes, “. . . contemporary autobiographies are important vehicles for transmission of . . . hero myths and, thus, serve as important vehicles for the creation of today’s heroic figures.”

The thesis of this essay is that, in *Bad as I Wanna Be* and *Walk on the Wild Side*, Rodman metaphorically equates his life with the life of Christ—thus, claiming to be God. As God, he can be as bad as he wants to be to women. Many men in the United States culture, like Dennis, traditionally tend to view themselves as God and women as their servants who are to worship them. Calling Dennis a hero and telling heroic stories about him is one way of enforcing the patriarchal

meta-narratives of our culture. Thus, heroes may be chosen because they give people permission to live their lives in the way they want to live them—not because they inspire people to live better lives. Additionally, when men see themselves as God, they tend to place patriarchal constructions, including concepts of masculine hegemony, on God. Viewing God as man causes the Christian religion to be oppressive to women—glaringly exemplified by the rules that forbid women to speak in worship assemblies in many Christian denominations.

### **Methodology: Feminist Criticism and Masculine Hegemony**

There are many and varied views of feminism and feminist criticism (Foss, Foss, & Griffin 1999, 2). This essay adopts the simple, two-step process of feminist criticism explained by Foss (2004): “Feminist criticism involves two basic steps: (1) analysis of the construction of gender . . . in the artifact studied; and (2) exploration of what the artifact suggests about how the ideology of domination is constructed and maintained or how it can be challenged and transformed” (158).

First, when analyzing the artifact’s construction of gender, the critic’s “. . . concern is with discovering what the artifact presents as standard, normal, desirable, and appropriate behavior for women and men” (Foss 2004, 158). The theory of masculine hegemony is used as an aid in analyzing the construction of gender in “The Book(s)” of Dennis Rodman.

According to Hanke (1990, 232), “Hegemonic masculinity . . . refers to the social ascendancy of a particular version or model of masculinity that, operating on the terrain of ‘common sense’ and conventional morality, defines ‘what it means to be a man.’” He continues, “It thereby secures the dominance of some men (and the subordination of women) within the sex/gender system.” Trujillo (1991, 291) delineates five distinguishing features of hegemonic masculinity: “(1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement, (3) familial patriarchy, (4) frontiersmanship, and (5)

heterosexuality.”

In hegemonic masculinity, masculine power “. . . is defined in terms of physical force and control” (Trujillo 1991, 291). Professional athletes would be the epitome of this concept—using their physical strength to dominate and defeat others in competition. Brookes (2002, 122) explains that: “Sports play a key role in legitimizing particular ideologies around masculinity and femininity that support the domination of women by men.”

In hegemonic masculinity, masculine power is confirmed by success in one’s career. Yet, the career must be one that is stereotypically masculine. According to Trujillo (1991, 291), “Work itself can be defined along gender lines.” Sports is the one field where male dominance “just seems to be taken for granted” (Brookes 2002, 291).

In hegemonic masculinity, masculine power is demonstrated by having patriarchal control over one’s family. A hegemonic man is in control of his wife and children. He is the unquestioned head of the home.

In hegemonic masculinity, masculine power is “. . . symbolized by the daring, romantic frontiersman of yesterday and of the present-day outdoorsman” (Trujillo 1991, 291). The hegemonic man is independent and self-sufficient. He does not need the assistance of women.

Finally, in hegemonic masculinity, masculine power is confirmed in the sexual conquest of women. A hegemonic man is certainly not homosexual or celibate. Baker (2001, 12-13) explains, “Men, when depicted through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, are sexually aggressive in the heterosexual arena.” In ancient Greece, “The Greeks conceptualized the sexual encounter in terms of an active partner who penetrates and a passive partner who is penetrated. To be active meant to dominate . . .; to be passive meant to be dominated . . . . The sexual relationship was thought to

mirror the social relationship between men and women” (Torjesen 1993, 185).

Communication studies of hegemonic masculinity and related concepts include analyses of *thirtysomething* (Hanke 1990 & Loeb 1990), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (Dow 1990), media portrayals of Nolan Ryan (Trujillo 1991), *Designing Women* (Dow 1992), discussions about reproductive technologies (Condit 1994), Oprah Winfrey’s biography (Cloud 1996), “feminine style” in political rhetoric (Parry-Giles & Parry Giles 1996), *Shame* (Shugart 1997), rape on prime-time television (Cuklanz 1998), *Friends* (Baker 2001), *Boys Don’t Cry* (Cooper 2002), and *Mr. Mom* (Vavrus 2002). These studies underscore the power and pervasiveness of masculine hegemony in the popular culture of the United States.

After the critic has discovered how gender is defined in the rhetorical artifact being analyzed, “. . . a critic makes a judgment about the conceptions of femininity and masculinity in it and whose interests the conceptions seem to serve: Does the conception affirm and support the ideology of domination, or does it model other ways of being” (Foss 2004, 159)?

The second step for the feminist critic, according to Foss (2004, 159), involves one of two options: “If [the] analysis of the artifact reveals that it depicts an ideology of domination, [the] next step is to use the analysis to discover how domination is constructed and maintained through rhetoric.” She continues, “If [the] analysis of the artifact reveals that it departs from the acceptance of an ideology of domination and challenges the status quo or creates a different ideology in which to operate, [the critic] will use the analysis to contribute to an understanding of how individuals can use rhetoric to claim agency and engage in acts of self-determination.”

### **“The Book(s)” of Dennis Rodman: Man as God**

How is the masculine gender portrayed in The Book(s) of Dennis Rodman? Put simply, the

masculine gender is portrayed as God. “The patriarchal symbol of the divine sculpts men into the role of God, fully in ‘his’ image and capable of representing ‘him’ . . .” (Johnson 2001, 37). In *Bad as I Wanna Be* (1996), Dennis Rodman presents a narrative that parallels the life of Christ, thus claiming to be God. In *Walk on the Wild Side* (1997), Dennis Rodman presents his followers with rules to live by. In other words, we are given the Gospel and the epistle of Dennis Rodman. This metaphor has not escaped popular culture—for example, in *Bad as I Wanna Dress: The Unauthorized Dennis Rodman Paper Doll Book*, Rodman’s *Bad as I Wanna Be* is labeled “The Unholy Bible.”

From the beginning, Rodman was predestined for greatness by “God” (Chuck Daly).<sup>1</sup> He was the “chosen one.”<sup>2</sup> In an interesting twist, the Madonna begs Rodman to be the father of her child.<sup>3</sup> Coming from nowhere<sup>4</sup>, Rodman is led by the Spirit (Pearl Jam)<sup>5</sup> to be baptized<sup>6</sup> and perform miracles (on and off the basketball court—he feeds the masses with basketball tickets).<sup>7</sup> He was a prophet<sup>8</sup> who was thought to be crazy by his family.<sup>9</sup> His people rejected him and he was a

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1 “Detroit was the perfect place for me then. . . . Chuck Daly was a teacher. I used to call him ‘God’ and mean it. . . . Chuck Daly liked me right off, and he always told me my time would come” (1996, 39-41). “And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put in effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment . . .” (Ephesians 1: 9-10).

2 “I was the prime chosen one” (1996, 230). “. . . rejected by (people) but chosen by God . . .” (1 Peter 2: 4).

3 “She (Madonna) wanted to have a child. She talked about that from the beginning. She called me the ‘prime physical specimen’ for her child” (1996, 230). “But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son . . .’” (Luke 1: 30-31).

4 “Nobody from Nowhere” (1996, 14). “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there” (John 1:46).

5 “Pearl Jam—you guys do it like nobody else. You’re music is a real inspiration” (1996, ix). “I was . . . listening to Pearl Jam, getting my mind right” (1996, 149). “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit . . .” (Matthew 4: 1).

6 “It was like I came out from under the water and took a deep breath” (1996, 12). “As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove” (Mark 1: 10).

7 “I give tickets to people on the street who might never see an NBA game because they’ve priced the . . . seats out of everybody’s range. I’ve given tickets to homeless families who are outside arenas begging for food” (1996, 126). “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matthew 11: 5).

8 “I felt like I knew exactly how every shot was going to come off the rim. I think I’ve always been able to predict things” (1996, 137). “‘Sir’ the woman said, ‘I can see you are a prophet . . .’” (John 4: 19).

9 “To them I’m just their crazy brother” (1996, 18). “When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind’” (Mark 3: 21).

“(person) of sorrows.”<sup>10</sup> The religious leaders (NBA officials) plotted to get rid of him.<sup>11</sup> In play (prayer), he sweat “drops of blood” over his fate.<sup>12</sup> He was stripped and spit upon.<sup>13</sup> He was crucified.<sup>14</sup> While contemplating suicide he decided to sacrifice the Dennis Rodman who listened to other people’s desires and placed him in a tomb.<sup>15</sup> (In another crucifixion scene, the back cover of *Bad As I Wanna Be* pictures Rodman “crucified” in an X with his hands and feet “nailed to the cross” with basketballs.) He was raised to new life when he learned he could be as *Bad as I Wanna Be*. Rodman is the risen Messiah.<sup>16</sup> He understands our weaknesses,<sup>17</sup> made himself a servant,<sup>18</sup> and saved “everybody’s ass.”<sup>19</sup> At the end of *Bad As I Wanna Be*, he is in heaven (Chicago) with the holy trinity of Jordan, Pippen, and Rodman.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Dennis Rodman

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10 “These were supposed to be ‘my people’ but they didn’t treat me like I was one of theirs” (1996, 178-179). “I tried to do . . . all the right things, and I got nothing but pain and suffering in return” (1996, 5). “He was despised and rejected by (people), a (person) of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53: 3).

11 “David Stern and the league would love it if I just went away. . . . They wouldn’t have to worry about what I might be doing to tarnish the sacred image of the NBA” (1996, 78). “From that time on Jesus began to explain . . . that he must . . . suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Matthew 16: 21).

12 “I wasn’t flashy like Isaih, but I gave them the blood, sweat, and tears they wanted” (1996, 43). “And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22: 44).

13 “If you’re going to spit at me, make sure you hit me in the face. Don’t be wasting my time” (1996, 52). “I want to play my last game in the NBA in the nude” (1996, 268). “They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and they wove a crown of thorns and set it on his head. . . . They spit on him . . .” (Matthew 27: 28-30).

14 “On an April night in 1993 I sat in the cab of my pickup truck with a rifle in my lap, deciding whether to kill myself” (1996, 1). “I sat in the pickup and had a duel with myself. I didn’t need the gun; it all took place in my mind. I walked one way and I walked the other way. At ten paces I turned and shot the imposter. I killed the Dennis Rodman that had tried to conform to what everyone wanted him to be” (1996, 11). “When they had crucified him . . .” (Matthew 27: 35).

15 “The place was like a . . . tomb” (1996, 4). “Joseph took the body . . . and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock” (Matthew 27: 59-60).

16 . “I was beaten and given up for dead, but I made it back to shock the whole world” (1996, 101). “He is not here. He has risen, just as he said” (Matthew 28: 6).

17 “The fact I was homeless at one time is part of why I can relate to people out there who are going through hard times” (1996, 19). “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are . . .” (Hebrews 4:15).

18 “I’m nothing more than a sports slave” (1996, 76). “. . . taking the very nature of a servant . . .” (Philippians 2: 7).

19 “I save everybody’s ass. I saved David Robinson’s ass, I save everybody’s ass. I take the heat so those guys can go out under the lights and do a job well” (1996, 96). “. . . I got a lesson . . . on what it’s like to be sold out and left hanging, alone, to take the blame for a whole team’s failures” (1996, 274). “They left me out there, hanging, just to save themselves” (1996, 276). “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood” (Romans 3: 25).

20 “We’re in a pretty cool position in Chicago, with three of the biggest attractions in basketball (Jordan, Pippen, and Rodman)” (1996, 307). “While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven” (Luke 24: 51).

illustrates that one can frame his or her language in such a way to claim to be God. In claiming to be God, he can be as *Bad as (He) Wanna Be*.

Once Rodman has become God, he is now in the position to provide rules or principles for his disciples to follow—so they can *Walk on the Wild Side* too. He says, “I just have some ideas on how to make this world a better place for all of us, and you can follow them if you’d like” (1997, p. 201). He even presents his followers with “The Ten Commandments” of sex, including “1. Thou shalt not fake an orgasm” and “10. Thou shalt worship at the Church of Love” (1997, p. 203).

He clarifies his relationship with his church. Rodman is the light,<sup>21</sup> bride,<sup>22</sup> and shepherd of his people.<sup>23</sup> Sacred places are casinos and heaven is Las Vegas.<sup>24</sup> Death is eternal joy by being an eternal orgasm.<sup>25</sup> The heroes of faith, his “cloud of witnesses,” are Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and Janis Joplin.<sup>26</sup> He closes his book with an invitation for his followers to become a God like him, “. . . it may be something as simple as opening up a door and stepping into a land you’ve been checking out all along. The wild side may be right there in front of you” (1997, 253-254).

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21 “. . . I am the lighthouse in the eye of the storm, a messenger amid the mayhem” (1997, 2). “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it” (John 1:5).

22 “I did it for the rush, and because it was a chance for me symbolically to marry my fans” (1997, 131). “They actually made me look like a pretty attractive chick” (1997, 131). “I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Revelation 21:2).

23 “. . . the more I walk toward my flock, I feel that vibe take over my body . . .” (1997, 132). “I am the Good shepherd” (John 10:11)

24 “. . . I felt a sudden need to escape and go to a sacred place that would soothe my soul. . . a riverboat casino in Joliet, Illinois . . .” (1997, 13). “Vegas is the capital of the world for sex, money, drugs, and crime. And fun. The name of the city should be F-U-N Vegas. It’s a place where there are no boundaries. Anything goes, all night long. It is one of the few places I can go and really express myself the way I want to . . .” (1997, 103). “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a savior from there, who . . . will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phillipians 3:20-21).

25 “Maybe death is like the eternal orgasm. Maybe it makes life look lame. Maybe people don’t come back from the dead because there’s no way in hell they’d ever want to” (1997, 193). “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all (people). But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:19-20).

26 “Everything about them reeked of sex and drugs and loud-ass rock’n roll and rebellion and passion. They all got so hard-core into their lifestyles that they paid with their lives. It’s almost like they had to die young, because of the era in which they were living (1997, 247). “But look how much Jimi, Janis, and Jim left us, and look at how much more accepted those things are in today’s world because of them” (1997, 247). “They were stoned, they were sawed in two, they were put to death by sword” (Hebrews 11:37). “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run

## Man as God and the Treatment of Women

The narrative Rodman weaves in order to become God also exemplifies the defining characteristics of masculine hegemony: (1) Rodman sweating drops of blood in athletic competition illustrates physical force and control, (2) his performing of miracles on the basketball court illustrates occupational achievement, (3) his marrying and leading the “church” (his fans) illustrates familial patriarchy, (4) his rejection and misunderstood nature illustrates frontiersmanship, and (5) his relationship with the Madonna illustrates heterosexuality. The message is clear—when man is God, man meets society’s hegemonic view of masculinity, thus, subordinating women. In this way, Rodman serves a heroic function by personifying patriarchy as God. This serves to maintain patriarchy because one does not challenge God.

When man is God, women are his subjects. In *The Book(s)* of Dennis Rodman, women were put on Earth to worship him and, for a hegemonic man, worship often takes the form of a lot of sexual intercourse. He writes, “Women love basketball players. They just adore basketball players. They want to fuck basketball players” (1996, 145). One gets a better look at where this patriarchal attitude can lead by reading *Worse than He Says He Is*—the autobiography of Anicka Rodman, Dennis Rodman’s former wife.

Her autobiography is a mixture of her search for independence from Dennis while, at the same time, admitting her dependency on him. The front and back covers of her autobiography reveal that she is a disciple of Dennis. The pictures of Anicka on the front and back covers imitate the poses of Dennis on his book covers, yet she has to remain more modest with (or ashamed of) her body. For example, Dennis is completely nude on the back cover of *Bad as I Wanna Be*. But, on the back cover of *Worse than He Says He Is*, Anicka is wearing one of Rodman’s jerseys and has one

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with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1).



hand lowered so that the basketball she is holding protects her modesty. Her pose mimics Rodman's crucifixion<sup>27</sup>, but it also is strangely reminiscent of a typical cheerleader pose if one imagines pom-poms instead of basketballs—she is cheering on (worshipping) her man (this interpretation was suggested by Sarah Del Collo in a personal communication, 23 October 2002).

One subtitle of Anicka's book is, *My Walk on the Wild Side With Dennis Rodman*. She writes, "I had the notion that I was addicted to him, as if he were a drug. I guess it's the only way I could justify staying with him after the way he . . . treated me" (1997, 2). The autobiography contains allegations of Anicka suffering physical abuse and marital unfaithfulness from Dennis. She writes, ". . . society treats men like gods when they sleep around, but when women do it they're sluts" (1977, 59). Later, she writes, ". . . he simply seems to hate women. He certainly doesn't show them any respect (1977, 105). She continues: "To Dennis, women are here for no reason than to serve him. They stand up on stages and take their clothes off and shake their firm titties for him. They seek him out after basketball games and offer to have sex with him and do whatever he wants" (1997, 105-106). Anicka's relationship with Dennis demonstrates that, when women see men as God, they become disciples, devoted worshippers, and long-suffering followers of men (this interpretation was suggested by Elizabeth Delfs in a personal communication, 6 February 2003).

The problem with man as God is that this God is not a loving God. This God uses his power to control and abuse women. ". . . (I)n these (exclusive) masculine images (of God), men find support for pride and control. They are tempted to think more highly of themselves than they ought and thus to control more than they should," suggests Clanton (1990, 81).

## God as Man

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27 "I have been crucified with Christ . . ." (Galatians 2:20).

## Forum on Public Policy

If man becomes God, as in *The Book(s)* of Dennis Rodman, then it is not hard for man to imagine the reverse—that God is man. The constant use of masculine pronouns to describe God aids in this visualization. Kenneth Burke argues that our words form terministic screens which reflect, select, and deflect our reality (1966, 45). Hyde (1984, 703) notes that, “‘His’ is not gender neutral in a psychological sense.” Hyde asked first, third, and fifth graders to write stories about the average student using the pronouns “he,” “he or she,” and “she.” When the pronoun in the instructions was “he,” only seven percent of the stories were about females. When the pronouns in the instructions were “he or she,” forty-two percent of the stories were about females. When the pronoun in the instructions was “she,” seventy-seven percent of the stories were about females.

Man’s religious beliefs about God assign God the characteristics of man. For some, suggesting that God is not man becomes religious heresy. Kidd (1996, 136) explains, “Indeed, the image, language, and metaphor of God as male has been used so exclusively, for so long (about five thousand years) that most people seem to believe God really is male.” Claiborne, writing in response to suggestions that the Bible be written in non-sexist language, says, “I wonder why Jesus Christ and his apostles never discovered the stifling effect of masculine language” (1996, 7). He writes that to use terms such as “Father-Mother” to refer to God is “. . . an all-out attack against New Testament Christianity, . . . altering the meaning of God’s eternal truth as revealed in the Bible” (1996, 10).

“Patriarchal God symbolism functions to legitimate and reinforce patriarchal social structures in family, society, and church,” writes Johnson (2001, 36). She continues, “Language about the father in heaven who rules over the world justifies and even necessitates an order whereby the male religious leader rules over his flock, the civil ruler has domination over his subjects, the husband

exercises headship over his wife” (36). In man’s interpretation of Scripture, God is assigned the characteristics of masculine hegemony: (1) physical force and control—God is the all powerful being who controls the universe, (2) occupational achievement—God created the Earth and everything in it, (3) familial patriarchy—God is the Father and His will must be done, (4) frontiersmanship—God needs nothing from us, and (5) heterosexuality—the story of the virgin birth. Spong (1988, 56) observes, “This distinctively male bias informs the Christian myth of the virgin birth of Jesus. For Jesus to be God’s son, only the man had to be removed from the reproduction process. It did not compromise the early Christian claim of a divine origin for Jesus if his mother was human, since the woman provided only the womb that received and nurtured the developing fetus.” Clanton (1990, 57) writes, “Concepts of God have been polluted by this prejudice, resulting in a god who is less than God. God has been created in the image of masculine human beings.”

### **God as Man and the Treatment of Women**

If God is man, then God, like man, has an interest in oppressing women. Kenneth Burke (1966, 6) argues that our words serve as motives and asks: “Do we simply use words, or do they not also use us?” The oppression of women can be seen in Christian churches, with God’s “sanction,” refusing to allow women leadership roles in the church. Holland (1991, 32) claims, “They (God’s faithful people) know that when women aspire to the God-ordained roles of men, they lose their femininity; and when men allow themselves to surrender their God-given role of leadership in the church, they thereby lose their manhood.” Torjesen (1993, 3-4) writes, “For many denominations the ordination of women clergy raises troubling questions about the gender of God. If women clergy represent God before their congregations, does the perception of God change? . . . (If) females were to represent God, then femaleness would be equated with power.” This oppression can also be seen in Christian views of divorce which make it difficult for a woman to get a divorce—forcing her, in

many cases, to remain married to an oppressive husband. Spong (1988, 63) notes, “It is fascinating to reflect on how the male-dominated church has historically regarded divorce. Divorce was the only failure, indiscretion, or sin that was incorporated into official canon law.” He further explains, “The church felt no need to have canons on murder, bank robbery, child molesting, or arson. Only the divorced and remarried person was punished by automatic excommunication” (63).

This oppression has consequences that extend beyond the realm of religion. Johnson (2001, 38) emphasizes that, “Speech about God in the exclusive and literal terms of the patriarch is a tool of subtle conditioning that operates to debilitate women’s sense of dignity, power, and self-esteem.” Clanton (1990, 75) adds, “From the time they are small, females suffer from exclusive masculine references to God. They internalize feelings of inferiority to men. By the time they reach adulthood, many women are not even conscious of the damage masculine references to God have done to their self-esteem.” O’Connor and Drury (1999, 6) compare this “subtle conditioning” to carbon monoxide poisoning: “Patriarchy, like carbon monoxide, is insidious because it is colorless, odorless, and invisible. The human body does not detect the presence of carbon monoxide: it interprets the gas as oxygen.” They explain further, “Likewise, women are not even aware they are absorbing patriarchy into their systems. As with the air they breathe, they take the patriarchal system for granted, rarely think of it at all—yet its effects are deadly” (6). For example, one six-year-old girl explained to her mom that God was a man. When her mom asked her why God was a man, the daughter replied, “I guess because God thought that was the best thing to be” (see Kidd 1996, 138).

### **Conclusion: Is this Heroic?**

Is Dennis Rodman a hero? If so, what does this say about heroes? Yes, I believe Dennis is a hero. He serves the heroic function of personifying the cultural values of masculine hegemony and

patriarchy. Drucker and Cathcart (1994, 1) explain that, “Heroes transcend ordinary human qualities embodying the divine, the ideal, the quest, the courageous, the virtuous, the superior.” While Rodman may not meet the “intent” of this definition by personifying the positive values many of us attach to feminism, he does meet the “letter” of the definition—he embodies the divine in his autobiographical narrative that parallels his life with the life of Christ and he represents the “ideal” of masculine hegemony and the “virtues” of patriarchy. He is a hero for a “particular audience” (McLennan 1994, 112). Rodman serves as an illustration of how heroes may be chosen because they give people permission to live their lives in the way they want to live them—not because they inspire people to live better lives. He is a reminder that, for modern heroes, “. . . the flaw is the thing, the trait to be discovered and, perhaps, to be celebrated” (Gumpert 1994, 54). Heroes can have a dark side. According to Mueller (1997), “It is not hard to see why so many have embraced Rodman as a hero and role-model worth celebrating—the turmoil living in the Worm is living in them too.”

O’Conner (1996, 84) argues, “there was a time when this word (hero) was reserved for people who were . . . well . . . heroic. People who performed great acts of bravery or valor, often facing danger, even death.” She continues. “But lately, *hero* is has started losing its luster. We hear it applied indiscriminately to professional athletes, lottery winners, and kids who clean up at spelling bees.” I imagine O’Conner, like many others, would object to Rodman being labeled a hero. But, O’Conner’s argument concerns who *should be* called a hero, not who *is* actually called and treated as a hero. On one web site, reasononline, he is listed as one of the thirty-five “Heroes of Freedom . . . who have made the world groovier and groovier since 1968” along with Nelson Mandela and Margaret Thatcher (“35 Heroes of Freedom,” 2003). And, while Rodman last played for the Chicago Bulls in 1998, he is still described as a “hero” by the press (“Dose of Reality” 2006). Since retiring

from the NBA, his popularity has allowed him to remain in the public eye with appearances on reality television shows such as “Celebrity Mole” (“Dennis Rodman,” 2006).

Rodman also serves to illustrate that heroes are a communication phenomenon. Strate (1994, 15) writes, “It is through communication that we come to know our heroes, and consequently, different kinds of communication will result in different kinds of heroes.” The form of communication in Rodman’s case is the autobiography. McLennan (1994, 114) explains that, “. . . the different forms of the hero myth employed by different autobiographies illustrates important truths about the culture in which it is used, and about the audience which legitimates the image transformation based on the myth.” Additionally, it should be noted that autobiography is a form of narrative and, according to Walker (2003, 240), narrative or storytelling performs “. . . a major contribution to (the) characteristics of African American communication . . . .” The narratives we choose to believe influence our thoughts, values, and actions in significant ways. Fisher (1987, 58) notes that narratives are “. . . inevitably moral inducements.” It is particularly important that Rodman chose the medium of a book or autobiographies to communicate his story. Religions are based on inspired texts. As God gave us the Bible (The Book), Rodman provided us with “The Book(s)” of Dennis Rodman.

While this essay has illustrated the ability of our language to foster gender discrimination and patriarchy by taking a look at The Book(s) of Dennis Rodman, I hope, at the same time, it has demonstrated that communication can be used to challenge patriarchy and point out new ways of seeing and acting. Ending discrimination will require ending sexist communication practices.

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