

The Influence of Religion on Women.

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IN Eve, the mother of evil, and Mary, the mother of God, we have the two extremes of religious thought concerning woman. It is worthy of note that neither of these conceptions was peculiar to the Hebrew mind. In the sacred book of the Hindus we have a counterpart of Eve in the nymph Menaka, of whom the man complains, in the spirit of Adam: "Alas, what has become of my wisdom, my prudence, my firm resolution? Behold, all destroyed at once by a woman!"

In the sacred oracles of the Chinese we find these words: "All was subject to man in the beginning. The wise husband raised up a bulwark of walls, but the woman, by an ambitious desire of knowledge, demolished them. Our misery did not come from heaven; she lost the human race." In the religious annals of the Greeks also, we have Pandora, the author of all human ills. Everywhere in the religious history of mankind you will find some trace of the divine woman, mother of the incarnate Deity. On the walls of the most ancient temples in Egypt you may see the goddess mother and her child. The same picture is veiled behind Chinese altars, consecrated in Druid groves, glorified in Christian churches, and in all these the underlying thought is the same. Before entering upon an investigation of the relation of religion to woman, we must decide what we mean by religion.

One Kind of Religion.

If we mean any particular form of faith, body of laws, institutions, organization, whether Hindu, Greek, Hebrew or Christian, then we are forced to the conclusion that no one of these has given to woman an equal place with man as the full half of the unit of humanity; for every organized religion, every religion which has become a human institution, teaches the headship of man and that involves, in some measure and degree, the subjection of woman and her consequent inferiority.

The Vedas declare that a husband, however criminal or defective, is in the place of the supreme to his wife. Plato presents a state of society wholly disorganized when slaves are disobedient to their masters, and wives on an equality with their husbands. Aristotle characterized women as being of an inferior order, and Socrates asks the pathetic question: "Is there a human being with whom you talk less than with your wife?" Poor Socrates judged the sex, we may imagine, as the modern sage is apt to do, by that specimen with which he was most familiar. Tertullian, one of the most spiritual of the Christian fathers, said: "Submit your head to your husband and you will be sufficiently adorned."

Sentiments of
Leaders.

Luther, dear Father Luther, who builded better than he knew, said: "No gown worse becomes a woman than that she should be wise." A learned bishop of today said: "Man is the head of the family; the family is an organic unity, and cannot exist without subordination. Man is the head of the family because he is physically stronger, and because the family grows out of a warlike state, and to man was intrusted the duties of defense."

These are the sentiments of leaders of the great systems of religious doctrine and they reflect the spirit of organized religion from the beginning until now. If, however, by religion we mean that universal spirit of reverence, fear and worship of a spiritual being or beings, believed to be greater than man, yet in some respects like man; if we mean that almost universal conviction of the race, that there is that in man which transcends time and sense; if we believe that religion is that in man which looks through the things which are that he may be able to perceive the right and choose it; if, in a word, religion be the possibility of the fellowship of the spirit of man with the spirit of God, then its relation to woman, as to man, has been that of inspiring guide to a fuller light.

With this conception of religion we see that it is a matter of growth; the religious life of the race is a matter of growth and education. In seeking to discern what part religion thus conceived has played in the advancement of our race, we must go back of religion to man, because religion was made for man and by man, not man for or by religion; first that which is natural, afterward that which is spiritual. When you have scanned the earliest written records of mankind you have not yet arrived at the root of things. When you find what you believe are the conceptions of the primitive man concerning God and the supernatural world you have not arrived at the roots of things. For his gods, his beliefs, as to the mystery by which he is encompassed, were born of his effort to explain and account for that which is in his own condition and circumstance.

The religions of various peoples, we now see, were not superimposed upon them by God; they were the outgrowth of the actual life of the race. They were an attempt on man's part to explain himself and nature, to answer the question asked him by his own being and the universe without. Woman's religious position, therefore, in any

nation, is only the supernatural or religious sanction put upon her actual position in that nation. Among primitive peoples she is always a drudge, a chattel, a mere possession, her only actual value being that of the producer of man.

Antecedent
Causes.

This state of things, of course, had its antecedent causes, which we may trace in that seemingly blind struggle for existence which prevailed among the owners of animals below man, out of which one type after another emerged because of superior strength or more perfect adaptation to environment. Here we find the foundations of that physical and mental inferiority of the female which has been the reason of woman's position in human society in all times. A foremost scientist says: "The superiority of male mammals is a remarkable fact. It is due to causes little creditable to the male character in general. Not one particle of it is attributable to their noble efforts in protection and supporting the females and their own offspring. It is the result of a sexual selection growing out of the struggle between the males for the possession of the females." This simple scientific fact might well be commended to the theologian who argues the natural subjection of woman through what he is pleased to call the purposes of nature as seen in the lower orders of life.

You are familiar with the argument that the male bird sings louder and sweeter than the female; therefore, a woman cannot be a poet. In most mammals the male is larger, more beautiful, more sagacious than the female, and is exempt from most of the unpleasant labors connected with the rearing and defense of the young; therefore, a woman cannot understand politics. You can easily find instances, if you like, in natural history of what we might call nature's favoritism of the female. Why do you not speak of the ostrich, the male of which sits on the eggs, hatches out the young and takes principal care of them? Why do you not instance that fine, beautiful variety of spider of which the female invariably devours her consort when he is of no further use to her? What if that custom should become prevalent among women?

The fact is that these things prove nothing. If we have made any progress, it is away from nature. We are not spiders, nor lions, nor birds. We are man, male and female, and we want to be angels, or we used to when we went to Sunday-school. It is unworthy of us to go back to the conduct of life among the lower animals to bolster up any of the remaining abuses of human society. The point is just here. We cannot trace the degraded and subject position of woman in ancient times to the religious ideals of her nature and place in the creation, but the reverse is true in a large measure. We can trace her religious position to her actual position in primitive society, and this in its turn back to those beginnings of the human animal which science is just beginning to discover and which will probably always be matter of speculation.

We always find the position of woman improving, as warlike activities are replaced by industrial activities. When war and the chase were

the sole questions of human kind, the qualities required in these formed their chief measure of excellence. The position of woman in ancient Egypt, in her most brilliant period, was higher than in many a modern state. Egypt was an industrial state when we knew it first. Herbert Spencer says: "There are no people, however refined, among whom the relative position of the man and woman is more favorable than with the Laps. It is because the men are not warriors. They have no soldiers; they fight no battles, either with outside foreigners or between the various tribes and families. In spite of their wretched huts, dirty faces, primitive clothing, their ignorance of literature, art and science, they rank above us in the highest element of true civilization—the moral element—and all the military nations of the world may stand uncovered before them."

The Moral
Element.

The same writer points out the fact that woman's position is more tolerable when circumstances lead to likeness of occupation between the sexes. Among the Cheroops, who live upon fish and roots which the women get as readily as the men, the women have an influence very rare among Indians. Modern history also teaches us that when women become valuable in a commercial sense they are treated with a deference and respect which is as different from the sentimental adoration of the poet as from the haughty contempt of the philosopher.

Another important influence in the advancement of woman as of man is the influence of climate. It is a general rule, subject of course to some exceptions, that a tropical climate tends to degrade woman by relaxing her energy and exposing her purity. The relatively high regard in which woman was held by some of the tribes of the north of Europe, the strictures of the marriage bond in the case of the man as well as the woman, may be partially explained by climatic influences, though among these people, as among all barbarians, woman was under the absolute authority of husband or guardian, and could be bought, sold, beaten and killed. Yet she was the companion of his labors and dangers—his counselor. She had part of all his wars, encouraging men in battle and inspiring even dying soldiers with new zeal for victory.

Influence of
Climate.

Every religion is connected with some commanding personality and takes from him and his teachings its general trend and spirit, but in its onward course of blessing and conquest it soon incorporates other elements from the peoples who embrace it. Thus Buddhism is not the simple outgrowth of the teachings of Buddha. Organized Christianity is not the imitation of the life and teachings of Christ among His followers. Christianity is the teaching of Jesus, plus Judaism, plus the Roman spirit of law and justice and Grecian philosophy, plus the ideals of medieval art, plus the nature of the Germanic races, plus the scientific spirit of the modern age.

It would be interesting to balance the gains and losses of a religion in their various transitions, but it is aside from our purpose to get at the true genius of a religion. We must go back to the teaching of

its founders, and in every instance we find these teachings far in advance of the average life of the peoples among whom they arose.

Equal in
Spiritual
Things.

No one can study the words of Buddha, of Zoroaster, Confucius, Mohammed and Moses without seeing a divine life and spirit in them which is not a reflection from the state of society in which they lived. Charity is the very soul of Buddhist teaching. "Charity, courtesy, benevolence, unselfishness are to the world what the linch-pin is to the rolling chariot."

Buddha declared the equality of the male and female in spiritual things. The laws of Moses exalt woman. The Elohistic, or more strictly Jewish account of creation, puts male and female on a level. So God created man in His own image—in the image of God created He him—male and female created He them, and the Lord blessed them. Christ said: "Whosoever doth the will of God, the same is My brother and sister and mother." Did He not teach here that spiritual values are the only real and elementary ones, and that oneness of spirit and purpose was a stronger tie than that of blood? Is not this also the teaching when He says: "Call no man father; one is your father. No man master; one is your master."

In that declaration which we quoted before, "The Sabbath was made for man," is the magna charta of man's freedom and headship, male and female. The Sabbath was the chief institution of the Jews, their holy of holies, whose original significance was so overlaid with the priestly laws and prohibitions that it had become a hindrance to right. It was a machine in which the life was caught and torn and destroyed. Christ says: "Sabbath was made for man." So all institutions, all creeds, everything, was made, planned and devised for man. The life is the fruit, and if any institution, any right or form or deed is found to be hampering and hindering, the growing life or spirit of man wants to cast it off, even as Christ defied the man-made laws of His people when He healed the man with the withered hand.

In His declaration of the supremacy of love, when He foretold that He, the supreme lover of the soul, once lifted up should draw all men unto Himself, He sounded the death knell of the reign of force in the earth and destroyed, by cutting its roots, that headship of man which grows out of the warlike state of human society.

His Silence
Golden.

If Christ's speech was silver, His silence was golden. He simply ignores the distinctions of rank and class and race and sex among men. He has nothing to say about manly virtues and womanly virtues but, "Blessed are the meek," not meek women; "Blessed are the merciful," "the pure in heart." Paul commends the wife to submission to the master husband, which was the sentence of the world upon woman in his day. But in that Gospel which gave her Christ, her lot was unfolded with the germ of that independence and equality of woman with man, which is beginning to blossom and bear fruit in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Christ declared eternal principles. He did not invent them; they were always true. Men make systems good, serving a valuable pur-

pose, but they have their day and cease to be. If it be urged that the progress of Christianity since Christ's day has often seemed to be backward from His ideal, in reference to the man and the woman, there is but one answer, and that is, that Christianity, as He proclaimed it, soon became mingled with Jewish and Grecian philosophy and received the impress of the Romans and the different peoples that embraced it; yet all the time it was slowly molding the race to its own heavenly pattern, while today the principles of Jesus are finding new presentations and confirmations in the scientific spirit of this generation. They are not only in full accord with the revelations of science concerning man's beginning, but when science and religion seek to point out the lines on which the farther advance of the race must be found, they say at once: Love is the fulfilling of the law.

There are two ways of reading history. One way is to get the facts and draw your conclusions from them. The other is to make your case first and search the history of mankind for facts to support it. The latter is the more popular way. These two ways place themselves before me as I endeavor to trace the influence of Christianity on woman's development, or of religion on woman's development. If I could only make up my mind that religion had been her greatest boon, or her greatest curse, then the matter of proving either might be easier. When I began the research on this subject my mind was absolutely unprejudiced. I studied the history of the religious life of mankind as I would study any subject. I found religion to be one of the factors in the human problem, like war, or like climate. I found also that it was impossible to separate the influence of religion upon woman from its influence upon man. For neither is the man without the woman, nor the woman without the man. There is no man's cause that is not woman's, and no woman's cause that is not man's. If religion has been a beneficent influence to man, it has been to woman in like manner, though it could not raise her at once to his level, because it found her below him.

Two Ways of
Reading His-
tory.

The fact is that men and women must rise or sink together. It is true in this matter as in all. The letter killeth; the spirit maketh to live. The letter of religion as contained in bodies of doctrine, in ceremonial laws, in all those things pertaining to the religious life which come with observation, has in all ages been hampering and hindering man's progress, male and female. But the spirit of religion which recognizes religion as the spirit of man and binds it to the infinite spirit, which acknowledges the obligation of man to God and to his fellows, which brings man finally under spiritual attunement with Him who is neither man nor woman, the Christ of God—this is at once the most perfect flower of man's progress. Of the relation of woman to religion as the interpreter of its profoundest truths, there is no time to speak. Of the growing dependence of organized Christianity upon woman, there is no need to speak. Her works speak for her.

Must Rise or
Sink Together.