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WOMEN AND THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

BY
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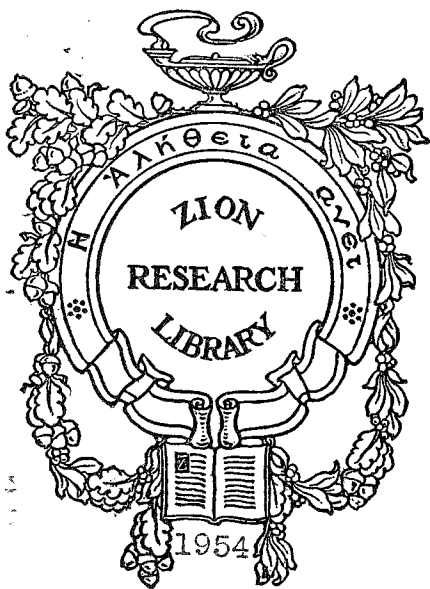


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The Church and Woman

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Women and the Church of England

His disciples . . . marvelled that He was speaking with a woman; yet no man said, What seekest Thou? or, Why speakest Thou with her?—JOHN iv. 27.

It is claimed by all the Christian Churches that Christianity has had a great influence in raising the position of women. No one who looks East and West can doubt the truth of the claim. Under the influence of the five or six great religions of the world the position of women varies, and varies not only as religion but as races and civilizations vary. It is difficult to estimate how far each factor controls the result, and it is easy, by a careful selection of examples, to show that women even under Islam are better off than we in the West might suppose. Nevertheless there is no doubt in the mind of most of us that it is in Christian countries that the subjection of women has been most frequently and most successfully challenged.

This is natural. The teaching of Christ is in nothing clearer or more insistent than in the sense it gives of the value of the individual soul. Not Our Lord's words only but His whole life—and His death—bring home to us the sacredness of personality. And such teaching, however far we fall below it, leaves no room for the outcast or the "untouchable." Whatever may be

the faults of Christians, no one can read the Gospels as a whole and base upon them a claim to cast out any, either because they belong to an unclean race, a despised class, or an inferior sex. In the religion of Christ there is no room for our mean contempts, our unworthy prides. We are all the children of Our Father in heaven, and having been called to so supreme an honour, we must not stop to measure our infinitesimal differences.

This quality in our religion, though it is a hard saying indeed to most of us, has perhaps influenced our thought and moulded our civilization more than any other part of the teaching of Christ. There are many things in which the East compares favourably, or not unfavourably, with the West; there are many in which we resemble one another. But on this point—democracy—how fundamental is the difference! We, at least with our lips, admit the equality of all souls before God; and that our admission is more than mere lip-service is proved when slavery goes, when class is found instead of caste, and there are no “untouchables”; when neither women nor children are *merely* chattels, when the deep prejudices of class and sex and race are cut across by the great admission that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor free.

And yet to-day there are insurgents in the Churches—and notably in the Church of England—who complain that “organized religion” has become profoundly undemocratic, and that this tendency is most strikingly shewn in that very matter of the position of women in which it has been claimed that Christianity leads the world.

In an inspired moment the Rev. William Temple asserted of the Labour Movement that the cause of unrest was not so much due to the desire of the working-man for shorter hours, higher pay, or any other administrative or legislative reform, as to his resentment against an attitude on the part of society which was “a perpetual insult to his personality.” Nothing could be more true, and it is as true of women as a sex as of the workers as a class. And here again it must be said that this insult is nowhere more perpetually or more intolerably felt than in the Church of England.

While in nearly all secular spheres of work the services of women are asked and given on terms nearer and nearer to equality with men, in the Church women are continually made to feel that they are not wanted. Everywhere there is an extreme anxiety to “get men,” coupled with expressions of contempt for those unfortunate clergy who are obliged to rely on the services of women. Everywhere it is assumed that responsible positions and important work belong by nature to men—even the least capable of them—and not to women, even the most efficient.

The councils of the Church—Convocation, the Representative Church Council, Diocesan and Ruridecanal Conferences, the governing bodies of Missions—all are filled, and *nearly* all exclusively filled, with men. Only the lowest and least of councils finds a place for women; and though they are now as electors to the Representative Council able to vote on an equality with men, they will not easily forget that in the first instance they might only vote if they were *ratepayers as well as communicants*. Before this astounding instance of male ecclesiastical statesmanship most of us

stood in silent awe. Only one¹ had breath enough left to point out that under its ingenious provisions the widow who thoughtlessly "cast in all that she had" would immediately have been deprived of her vote; while more prudent Sapphira, who kept back a portion of her goods, would have been welcomed on to the register.

As with the Church at home, so with the Church abroad. "That the bulk of the work of missions as done at home is in the hands of women goes without saying," writes a lady² whose devoted service to the Church is as well known as her lack of sympathy with the advanced wing of the Women's Movement. Yet her pamphlet, which is a plea for the greater share of women in the framing of policy and the administration of missions, is to the outsider, in spite of its studied moderation and courtesy, a damning indictment of the way in which they have been hitherto excluded. "In the Church's work, as exemplified by her missionary boards," writes Miss Gollock, the opportunity for women "to express the result of their knowledge and experience" is "except in rare instances denied." The decisions of the committees at headquarters "for the race are arrived at without recourse to one of its most important constituent elements." Yet it is not claimed—on the contrary, it is explicitly denied—that women take less interest in missionary work, give less time or money, do less work, or gather less experience. Only they are women, and so their help in positions of authority is not desired. The work suffers in con-

¹ Mrs. Paget.

² Miss M. C. Gollock, "Women in the Administration of Missions."

sequence, and the women of the last generations excused their rulers: "'They do not understand,' was the comment accepted by women for many years. . . . *Somehow this comment does not now satisfy.*"¹

As with the Councils, so with the offices of the Church. From top to bottom it is officered by men, and—incredible to relate—it is not even permitted to us to ask why! The mere question, "Why should not women be admitted to holy orders?" causes some Churchmen to cry out and cut themselves with knives, while others, more reasonable, assure us that there are indeed reasons, but of a character so "fundamental" as to prohibit their being put into words. With this it is expected that women—women of the twentieth century—will be content! But, alas! "*somehow this comment does not now satisfy.*" We desire reasons, and it seems to us nothing but a comedy to suggest that this desire is monstrous, and that no such question should be so much as discussed by the people whom it most intimately concerns. Where, then, have these gentlemen who deny us lived? In what little island of thought have they been segregated from the contagion and movements of modern life, that they honestly believe they can by loud shouting and abusive language silence the demand for reasons when any great monopoly is on its defence? It is possible that women have not the vocation for the priesthood; but it is not possible to persuade them that they commit a crime when they raise the question and ask for an answer. Nor will they consider their doing so as a "conspiracy."²

¹ "Women in the Administration of Missions," p. 8. The italics are mine.

² See the *Church Times*, July 28, 1916; Mr. Athelstan Riley.

The exclusion of women from all ranks of the priesthood is paralleled by their exclusion from nearly all other offices. Deacons, choristers, churchwardens, acolytes, servers, and thurifers, even the takers-up of the collection, are almost invariably men. If at any time not one male person can be found to collect, the priest does it himself, or, after a long and anxious pause, some woman, more unsexed than the rest, steps forward to perform this office. In one church, I am told, it was the custom for collectors to take the collection up to the sanctuary rails, till the war compelled women to take the place of men, when they were directed to wait at the chancel steps. In another it was proposed to elect a woman churchwarden, when the Vicar vehemently protested on the ground that this would be "a slur on the parish."¹ In another, the impossibility of getting any male youth to ring the sanctus-bell induced a lady to offer her services. After anxious thought the priest accepted her offer "because the rope hung down behind a curtain, so no one would see her." The propriety of women conducting the simplest of services or delivering an address from any part of the church excites in the mind of a section of the Church, not so much disapproval as hysterics. While everywhere women are gathering others together in halls, in drawing-rooms, in cottages, to join in intercession for their country, their Church, their friends, it is still in almost every diocese impossible for them to meet in the house of God. While every platform in the country is open to them, and every cause welcomes their service

¹ The lady who was, notwithstanding, elected is now popularly known among her friends and acquaintance as "the slur."

as speakers, in the churches only men must be heard. The pilgrims who go out on a pilgrimage of prayer, which should begin and end in the church of every parish visited, must give their messages in the school-room instead, where a grown-up congregation accommodates itself as well as it can to the uneasy desks and chairs of children. Conventions are held, but as they are held in cathedrals and churches, no woman, though she be an "Archbishop's messenger"—no woman, though she be indeed inspired by God—can take a part. If a reason is sought, it is conveyed in the answer, "The church is a consecrated place." The modern woman does not find in this statement a reason. She finds in it an insult, perhaps the most comprehensive that could be offered to a human being.

In the same spirit a correspondent in a recent correspondence in the *Guardian* quotes with approval the rule that, at Mass, women are "not allowed near the altar." Are there, then, "untouchables" in the religion of Christ after all? Were we wrong in supposing that in Him there is "neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor free"?

There were women standing near the Cross when Our Lord was crucified. Is the Cross less sacred than the altar? or the crucifixion less sacred than the mass? Or will our brothers in the Church of England give us some reason for this "perpetual insult to our personality" other than the assurance that we are unthinkably wicked to resent it, and that it rests on grounds too good to be put into words? We do resent it. We find it intolerable that while the veriest little ragamuffin of a boy may "serve" at the altar, women whom we

revere as leaders, reverence as saints, are excluded. We find it a scandal that the most ignorant of young men may get up and admonish us out of the depth of his inexperience and unwisdom in the pulpit, while women at whose feet the world is willing to sit are treated as though it were a thing impossible that they should have a message from God or know the inspiration of His Spirit. We know they have such a message, and, like the rest of the world, we go where we may hear it. Why are the churches empty? Is it because they have too great an abundance of inspired speakers?

Our contention cannot now be answered by a quotation from St. Paul; for we know that that great apostle, if in one place he directed the Corinthians not to allow women to speak, in another, with equal clearness, told them what the women were to wear when they did speak. We know also that the quoter himself sets aside the authority he invokes whenever it seems reasonable to do so. The women of his church come unveiled, in spite of St. Paul. They wear gold and silver and braid their hair, in spite of St. Peter. They sit teaching in the Sunday School, in spite of the author of the Epistle to St. Timothy. They form public opinion on public platforms—even on church platforms—while bishops take the chair for them and priests sit in the audience. Is it not, then, a little comic—or shall I say a little late—to demand that women should yield a literal obedience to an authority so lightly set aside by their critics?

Or is it seriously contended that the literalism which we are assured is a grave error when applied to the Sermon on the Mount, becomes a duty when the speaker

is one of incomparably less authority? Let us speak boldly. The great work of scholarship has set us all free from the bondage of the letter, and it seems to us an act of hypocrisy, conscious or unconscious, that men should seek to scare us, like children, with its ancient terrors. Do they suppose that women read no biblical criticism? Do they suppose that women, alone in an indifferent world, "abstain from things strangled and from blood," as directed not by one apostle but by all of them together, blind to the fact that their brothers have "scrapped" these regulations long ago? Do they dream that we can worship this god whom they set up for us—a god who witnesses with complacency the "prophesying" of women in halls and schoolrooms, but is provoked to wrath if they prophesy in a church? or who meticulously observes whether a chapel is "consecrated" (when a woman may say "There is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O God," but not "Give peace in our time, O Lord") or merely "licensed" (when she may say either or both without scandal)? or who is seriously concerned whether she enters the church with a hat or a veil or a bow or a wig or only her own hair on her head? This a god to worship? We cannot even respect him. We were not baptized into this religion of rules and of the letter, nor into Paul, nor Apollos, but into Christ. To this supreme Authority we appeal.

We find in the teaching of Jesus no suggestion of inequality between the sexes. On the only occasion on which He was challenged directly on this subject He is reported to have replied by demanding an equal standard from men and women. Elsewhere He appears to have ignored the traditional Jewish attitude towards women,

by treating them just as He treated men. It is not possible to isolate any words of His from their context and to decide from their character or their tone whether they were addressed to women or to men. There is no trace of intellectual condescension in His words to women. There is no hint that a woman's ideal must be different from a man's, or her work, or her sphere. The parable of the talents is unaccompanied by any warning that if a woman has a talent for public speech, or the gift of leadership, or a genius for teaching, she will do well to bury it in a napkin. "His disciples marvelled that He was speaking with a woman," but He talked to her of the deepest religious truths, as He might have spoken to St. John. He shrank from the touch of none, He received all who truly desired to follow Him, His eye fell without reproach on those who at the last stood by Him on the Cross. What a world of difference between all this and the close and stuffy intellectual atmosphere of our churches! between the Christ who appeared first to a woman on His rising from the tomb, and the Churchmen who forbid a woman to be "near the altar"!

And with this sense of difference in our minds, we women of the twentieth century appeal to the leaders of our Church to go forward. At first a leader in this as in other movements towards real democracy, the Church now has fallen behind and handed the torch to others. In public life, in the State and the municipality, in movements for social reform, in the Labour Movement as well as in their own movement, in non-Christian organizations often, women find a more generous recognition of their value, a greater readiness to work side by side with them, than they find in the Church. Is it

wonderful that they choose to give themselves where they can do so most freely, and work where their work is least hampered by petty restrictions and insulting prohibitions? There was a time when religious work was almost the only avenue for a woman's energies, but now the world is all before her where to choose. Are we wrong—we who are Churchwomen—in regretting *even more for the Church than for the women* their choice of other spheres of work than hers? "The ablest women of the day are not—with some notable exceptions—giving their lives in the direct service of the Church and, however valuable their service is to the nation, the loss of it to the Church is serious to contemplate."¹ Is that not true? And is it not disastrous? The churches are still filled (if filled at all) largely with women. But the leaders have gone or are going, and the young do not come. "The Church for her own sake, for her members' sake, and for the sake of those who through them might believe in God, should give every woman an opportunity of exercising all her gifts" (even if they be gifts of leadership—even if they be gifts of tongues). "No woman with her heart on fire to serve her generation according to the will of God should find her sphere more readily outside the Church than inside."² But women do find it so, and they go, not because they have ceased to love Christ, but because they do not find His Spirit in His Church, nor believe that in these petty restrictions, this grudging of opportunity, this insulting warning-off from holy places, there is anything in common with the spacious freedom of His teaching.

¹ "Women in the Administration of Missions," p. 6.

² Ibid.

If we are wrong, let our error be shown to us with reason and not with abuse; but let those who oppose our claims realize that we do sincerely base them on the conviction that it is we and not they who in this matter have the mind of Our Lord. We have not made our claims lightly or unadvisedly, and claims sincerely made in the name of Christ should be treated with respect, even if they be mistaken.

If, on the other hand, we are right, let the Church take action.

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