

*Comment*

## Between Science and Spiritualism: Frances Swiney's Vision of a Sexless Future

*George Robb*

Frances Swiney, a prominent British suffragist and social purity activist, wrote a number of influential feminist works in the early 20th century. Combining scientific/eugenic ideas and spiritualism, Swiney argued that women represented a higher stage of evolutionary development than men and that the human species was in the process of moving beyond differentiated sex into an androgynous, though essentially feminine, being. Traditionally, eugenics had defined women almost exclusively in terms of their reproductive capacities, arguing that anything which interfered with motherhood, like higher education or careers, was a threat to civilization. Swiney sought to circumvent the biological imperative by redefining eugenics as a moral and spiritual enterprise in which women could modify evolution through force of will. In particular, she drew upon Theosophical spiritualism to argue that human evolution would reach its highest phase in a future, sexless society.

Born in 1847 and mother of six children, Swiney was a well-known suffragist whose writings on sexuality exerted great influence on Edwardian feminism. When she was in her 50s, she began a successful literary career, publishing numerous books and pamphlets on a variety of feminist themes. In addition to her busy career as a writer, Swiney was president of the Cheltenham branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and a founding member of the Eugenics Society in 1907.

Beginning in 1899 with *The Awakening of Women*, Swiney argued for the biological superiority of women – one of her favorite themes. In her characteristically florid style, Swiney proclaimed that 'science has . . . abundantly proved that in the mysterious evolution of sex, the male element was first non-existent; and on its first initial appearance was primarily an excrescence, a superfluity, a waste product of Nature, discarded or expelled by the female or mother organism, and, unless reunited to the parent, perished'.

Copyright © ICPHS 2005

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192105059487

Although Swiney's writings were highly original and bore the impress of her own strong personality, they were also firmly grounded in the most advanced scientific literature of the day.

In 1912, Swiney cited the physician Ludwig Buchner that, given women's smaller body size, they actually had larger brains than men. She quoted Havelock Ellis that women's more delicate and hairless bodies represented a higher evolution than the more simian male and were 'higher in the line of evolution than men'. The researches of anatomists suggested that the male pelvis was more apelike than the female and Swiney argued from this that women walked upright before men, characteristically leading the way to higher development. 'It will not surprise the student', Swiney maintained, 'that woman, allegorically represented as the last living creature that emerged from the Creator's hands, should be proved, by scientific research, to exhibit physically in her bodily frame a much higher organism than man.'

In a striking subversion of Aristotelian biology, Swiney proclaimed that 'the female is the natural standard of each species'. She bolstered this claim with contemporary medical statistics that found that under unfavorable conditions more men than women are born. 'In the human race, male births are in the ascendant during times of war, famine, and pestilence. Nature puts forth her best efforts to produce a female.' In general Swiney emphasized that men retained more animal-like characteristics, while women possessed 'superhuman' or psychic powers and were the best subjects for hypnotism, for example. Once more women were leading the race, this time in the development of a sixth sense.

Unfortunately, women's spiritual ascent was threatened by men's carnality. Swiney, like many British feminists, was part of a wider 'social purity' movement, which sought to regenerate society through moral reform. Social purity activists campaigned tirelessly for temperance, for raising the age of sexual consent, and against prostitution. According to Swiney, 'from the time that woman lost her power of selection, and man exercised upon her the abuse of sexual excesses, the race began to degenerate'. The further evolution of the race thus depended on the emancipation of women. As Swiney argued in *The Awakener*, 'upon her selection of a mate depends the future of the race – physically, mentally and spiritually, as she is potentially, the creatrix of forms, the transmitter of hereditary traits, the primal impressionist on the embryonic brain, and the impartor of psychic gifts'.

Frances Swiney was instrumental in devising a feminist eugenic discourse that sought to empower women by making them the arbiters of sexual reproduction. In her view, men's uncontrolled sensual natures led to venereal disease, eugenically unsound marriages and excessive, debilitating pregnancies. To arrest this pattern of degeneration, men must submit to women's more finely developed sense of racial fitness. In Swiney's view, women must 'redeem men, in spite of themselves, from the bondage of their vices; to bring to bear on polluted humanity the health-giving, life-inspiring ozone of moral thought and conduct by the means of hereditary transmission'. Chasteness before marriage was to be the rule for men as well as women, and men with 'pasts' would become social pariahs along with 'fallen' women. Within marriage women would exercise restraint over their husbands' sexuality, which would return to the natural function of species reproduction – 'an episode, not a habit', in the words of Swiney. Fewer but better children was a popular eugenic

slogan. Swiney argued that no woman should have more than three or four children and that 'by natural law a woman, as the most highly evolved organism, should not produce a child under intervals of four to six years between each birth'. Significantly, Swiney herself had six children, born in rather swift succession. Since artificial means of birth control would only encourage masculine vice, marital restraint was favored by many women within the social purity movement, including Swiney.

In a startling transvaluation of values, Swiney was contesting her society's definition of 'natural'. Sexual desire, even for men, was not natural. In particular, the male dominance of society was unnatural. After all, the male was 'an afterthought of Nature', or, in Swiney's words, 'the male, the immature organism, is produced by the female, of the female, from the female, for the female alone'. The natural superiority of women had been recognized by the earliest, matriarchal, societies. According to Swiney, primitive man 'regarded the male with the greatest suspicion. Here, he argued, is a being unlike the Mother, smaller, weaker, unformed, unfinished, incapable of reproduction, less intelligent, more brutal and animal than the woman, essentially, "the hairy one".' Unfortunately, the worship of the Divine Mother was overthrown by men, who replaced the natural law of sexual self-control with the cult of the phallus and sexual excess.

'Motherhood', Swiney rhapsodized, 'is the basic principle of creation. From that source all flows.' Yet in emphasizing motherhood and eugenics, or better breeding, Swiney and like-minded feminists created a dilemma for themselves. Motherhood became the defining characteristic of womanhood. Women without children were not only seen as less feminine, they had also let down the race. As Jane Lewis has pointed out, feminists sometimes re-inscribe 'traditional sexual divisions' while trying to challenge the sexual status quo. By embracing eugenics and attempting to elevate feminism to scientific status, women implicated themselves in the conservative, pro-natalist rhetoric which saw anything that interfered with motherhood as a threat to civilization.

Attempts to escape the seeming biological imperative, such as the birth-control movement, often served to further elevate motherhood as an almost divine calling that was not to be undertaken lightly, but that had to be carefully 'controlled'. Births were to be spaced at greater intervals, but complete freedom from childbirth was unthinkable. Even so sanguine an advocate of birth-control as Marie Stopes emphasized that the avoidance of motherhood altogether was unnatural, in *Radiant Motherhood* (1920). Two years later, in an article in *The English Review*, Stopes predicted that in the future all women would have children and that 'exceptional' women would have six or more. Given this rhetoric of motherhood, both by feminists and their opponents, is it any wonder that some women hoped to transcend the physical?

The growing popularity of spiritualism and what today would be called 'new age' philosophies among middle- and upper-class English women at the turn of the century was in part a response to the 'biology is destiny' arguments of science. Recent scholarship demonstrates that occultism attracted many feminists because it emphasized that women were more spiritual than men and that women were destined to lead men upwards, away from the physical and the sexual. Theosophy, which combined contacts with the spirit world, eastern religions and the language of evolutionary biology, was probably the most famous such synthesis.

The Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875 to investigate occult phenomena, was the brainchild of American journalist Henry Olcott and Helena Blavatsky, a self-proclaimed medium. For Theosophists, Isis, the divine mother, symbolized nature and the occult mysteries which had been lost to mankind but were now being recovered with help from the spirit world. During the 1880s the Theosophical Society shifted its center of operations from America to India and Great Britain and began a long association with English feminism. Theosophy appealed to feminists through its emphasis on the equality of the sexes, the motherhood of God, and an evolutionary pattern that promised to transcend differentiated sexuality. Indeed, as Joy Dixon has pointed out, Theosophy stressed the impermanence and evanescence of one's sexual identity since the soul went through numerous incarnations in both male and female bodies until ultimately it achieved status as a 'divine hermaphrodite'.

Theosophy provided Swiney with a solution to the dilemma of eugenics. Women would still be empowered through motherhood and race regeneration, but they would not remain long constrained by the bonds of differentiated sexuality and the burdens of physical childbirth. A moral or spiritual eugenics was the new ideal. Theosophists saw human evolution as a grand cosmic procession in which the Darwinian ascent of man from ape was but a tiny segment. Blavatsky explained that humanity would pass through seven 'races', or stages of development, on the road to perfection. The first two races had 'astral bodies' and were asexual. The third race began the descent to the physical, though it was originally androgynous or hermaphroditic. This race later developed differentiated sex and perished with the lost continent of Lemuria. The fourth race, of Atlantis, was the last to possess significant psychic powers before the fifth and present race which is purely physical. Theosophists were rediscovering the occult mysteries lost after the submersion of Atlantis and humanity was now on the brink of spiritual re-birth 'out of the bonds of matter, and even of flesh'. The coming sixth and seventh races would once again be astral and asexual.

Many 19th-century utopians believed that the sexual subordination of women would only disappear if society were somehow rendered 'sexless'. In the 1830s, Auguste Comte had envisioned a 'new process' of procreation that would not rely on sex. In 1884 the spiritualist Laurence Oliphant published *Sympneumata*, a book widely read, in which he foresaw a future androgynous society where children would be created non-sexually. Theosophists in particular anticipated the creation of a higher being that would free humanity from sex altogether. Writing in *The Theosophist* in 1914, Susan Gay held that the future race would reproduce parthenogenically. As another Theosophist put the matter in the feminist journal *Shafts* in 1895, future motherhood would be through 'a spiritual mode not, so far, understood by us'. Francis Swiney, characteristically, was not so reticent in her predictions.

Swiney argued that an androgynous world was near at hand. She prophesied the complete disappearance of men, who were in the very process of evolving back into women: 'The man shall become of the substance of the woman; the male shall be re-absorbed into the feminine nature by a gradual and persistent transmutation of the many to the one; an integrating synthetic determination of mankind to one ideal standard of perfectibility.' Swiney had always argued, based on contemporary bio-

logical authority, that males were only a temporary expedient of nature for attaining greater variation within species. Now, having served that purpose, they could be dispensed with.

Following the observations of some biologists that more males were produced under adverse conditions and females under favorable, Swiney concluded that 'as the economic conditions of the majority of women improve, the sum total of male births will be less, and those males that are produced will more and more be after the likeness of the woman'. Nor she maintained was medical evidence lacking to support this view: 'The cases of men developing active mammary glands are now on the increase, and other signs are not wanting that show how the male physique is changing fundamentally . . . the increasing tendency of rudimentary organs in the male to develop and become active, and at the same time for the distinctive male organs to change and decrease. It is well known in the medical profession that this transformation is now rapidly taking place.' In a final allusion to Darwin, Swiney concluded that 'men have cheerfully recognized their descent from the ape: will they view with equal equanimity their ascent to their mother?'

Although she believed that feminization was proceeding apace, Frances Swiney was not one to wait patiently for the coming millennium. In 1907 she founded the League of Isis to promote sexual continence and pave the way for the future world of women. (Isis symbolized divine motherhood and the secret wisdom of the ancients as Helena Blavatsky had proclaimed in her Theosophical primer *Isis Unveiled*.) The titles of League publications give some indication of its mission: 'The Mother of the Race', 'Sublime Feminism', 'The Responsibilities of Motherhood', 'Racial Curse', 'Continence in Marriage'. In 1907 Swiney published *The Bar of Isis* in which she gave the fullest account of the League's philosophy. On the book's cover is a device Swiney modeled after ancient Egyptian symbols: an oval crossed by three bars. This so-called 'bar of Isis' was said to represent 'the gravid womb (the sign of fertility), the abode of life, kept inviolate and sacred from all intrusion during the nine months of gestation'. For, according to Swiney, sex during pregnancy was a chief cause of racial degeneration, introducing into the womb a poisonous 'ferment' which corrupted the fetus. Continence during pregnancy was but the first step in greater sexual self-control that would eventually return marital sex to its 'natural' function of species reproduction. This idea was consistent with Theosophical teaching since sexual desire needed to be controlled before people could develop their occult powers.

Arguing from nature, Swiney maintained that 'the sexual act for the male is not a life-preserving act, but, on the contrary, a life-sacrificing act. The male either dies in the process or succumbs immediately afterwards, drained of his vitality.' She cited zoologists that, among many animal species, most males never exercise their reproductive organs. Among insects, only one male in a thousand was said to have sex, among birds 60 percent, and among mammals 40 percent. Swiney then wondered 'is man . . . less capable of continence than a bee or a butterfly, an elk or a whale?' The long periods of latent sexuality among animals allowed the pent-up creative energy to produce the beautiful plumage, coloring, etc., that distinguishes male birds and fishes from the drab females. Human males, however, squandered this precious energy through excessive sex, having 'lost the instinct of continence transmitted to

them by their subhuman forefathers, whereby sex-emotions are exalted and transmuted into higher planes of self-development'. Men's sex obsession was thus holding back racial progress, including the feminization of humanity.

Swiney and like-minded feminists had not abandoned eugenics as their occult activities might lead one to believe. They had in fact reformulated eugenics as a moral and spiritual enterprise as opposed to an essentially physical science. Physical eugenics emphasized an active manipulation of the population: birth control for the unfit, stricter immigration laws, more careful choice of marriage partners. At its most extreme it even favored 'man breeding', that is the imposition of stockyard techniques on human relationships to create a stronger race. Swiney and her ilk were contemptuous of such methods which they associated with masculine viciousness and immorality. Mainstream, academic science's emphasis on the physical was in Swiney's view too intellectually narrow and too confining for women who were reduced to the status of brood mares. Women should be empowered by motherhood, not enslaved by it, and this could best be done by constructing a 'moral eugenics' which emphasized sexual restraint and women's ability to modify evolution through spiritual force of will.

Frances Swiney's grand synthesis of science, spiritualism and feminism was a heady mixture that sought to chart a path for women in opposition to the low road offered by Victorian biology and traditional Christianity. Her writings were much admired by contemporary women, though posterity has not been so kind. Swiney's cosmology seems very much at odds with the modern, secular outlook which probably accounts for her neglect by feminist historians. The history of feminism has focused most of its attentions on those women and movements which have been part of an Enlightenment, Liberal tradition centered on legal equality, education and political rights. How much easier to identify with those women fighting for the vote, university degrees and admission to the professions than someone who 'channeled' the Spirit of the Maternal Element of the Universe. Only recently have scholars begun focussing on varieties of feminism that do not fit so readily into the rationalist mold: anti-vivisection, vegetarianism, spiritualism. The women involved in such activities were mocked and ridiculed by Victorian science as eccentrics and faddists, and our own secular, academic culture has not been too receptive either. Swiney is therefore crucial to the historiographical debate on Victorian feminism, helping to expand and enrich our understanding of the early women's movement.

Frances Swiney was also one of the few feminists who used scientific methods to attack science's sexist construction of women. Her attempt to subvert traditional science by arguing for the biological superiority of women raised important questions about sex differentiation that still puzzle scientists. As a recent article in the *New York Times* affirmed, 'one of the most persistent and frustrating problems in evolutionary biology is the male'. In *Adam's Curse: A Future Without Men* (2004), Bryan Sykes also pointed out just how anomalous differentiated male/female sex is in our planet's overall biology, where asexual and hermaphroditic reproduction are more common. Swiney remains part of an important feminist paradigm that seeks to define women (and men) in terms other than sexual.

George Robb  
William Paterson University, New Jersey