

Women and the Liberation of Men 300

by Tove Reventlow

There is a loud cry of complaint. Women have a sense of betrayal, of having been subjected to male purposes in a world where they are forced to play an inferior part. Now many of them feel that the time has come to rise up and conquer this world, man's world, and make it their own. Battle is joined, the revolution has commenced. But how can the war of the sexes ever be won? If it is a battle it is one without real victory, for man and woman can never be anything but related, opposite but related—as right and left, day and night, heaven and earth. Women can certainly become as rational as men, they can think their thoughts, do their jobs, wear their clothes . . . unisex even returns the compliment and polarity is dissolved. So women can become as men. They can become specialists, technicians, breaking down universality into the particular, the whole into the isolated part; specializing as men have done, have had to do, in order to produce such a successful society. Women feel underprivileged, they have been left behind. They are still amateurs—inefficient, for only specialization makes for real efficiency. Women improvise, they tend to make do with what is to hand. They often go about things in a devious way which drives men mad. They seem so content to act from within the contingent. They are like Levi-Strauss's 'bricoleurs', they do a variety of jobs with the limited means available. Many women do perform daily a balancing act quite illogical in its demands and immeasurable in its productivity. Of course there is the state, or the kibbutz, to release mothers for more serious business, the public rather than the private sector. There, like men, they can chart their advancement, calculate their progress and earn money. Women may have invented agriculture, cooking, pottery, weaving, in fact most of what makes life tolerable, but that was a long time ago. Now the mere job of living should take care of itself, women want more important work to do, they want to be anywhere but at home.

Well, is this going to be a liberation? Is it not perhaps a surrender? A surrender to a male world which is itself in desperate need of liberation?

Woman has seen man's independence, his autonomy of spirit, of consciousness, and she envies him. She envies him the expression of this male principle in great achievements, in science, art, speculative thought, in the building of a world, in a superiority both mental and moral. So why should she not be like man—claim her place, her share? But a place and a share of what? Of the aggressive greed, the ugly domination, the cultural sterility of our society? The very institutions that man's mighty spirit has engendered in the state and in the Church, and his technological and intellectual advances, all are in constant danger of becoming devouring idols. The vision of perfection solidifies into a rigid totalization, ideology, imposed

in the name of truth. Life is tidied up, made efficient, rationalized . . . and we face extinction.

Is an over-cerebral development what woman really wants? Does she not recognize the crisis which a Lucifer-like arrogance of spirit has brought about for the whole human race? The way in which it eventually devalues and impoverishes some vital centre of life?

Is it not in religious terms that we are enabled to explore more deeply? A religious framework is ultimately the only one in which an openness to meaning is really possible. The reduction of our world to purely secular considerations is depressingly claustrophobic. The erotic, particularly, is too explosive to be contained within a neat circle of rationalization. It remains one of the last few experiences, in our tamed world, with velocity enough to precipitate us into another dimension.

Woman is related to man as earth to heaven. What does this mean, and does what it means describe an abiding situation between male and female? Woman is assigned her place—the place of nature, of birth and death, of the earth. On the other hand man is spirit, soaring upwards to heaven, to consciousness and to immortality, to culture in its dialogue with nature. Psychology and anthropology would appear to confirm the universality of this interpretation of sexual polarity: we are dealing with a seemingly indestructible symbol. A symbol which by the very intensity of its dilation thrusts beyond itself into the divine sphere—into the sacred-profane dichotomy. Women stand in a curiously ambiguous relation to the divine. In countless myths they are the carriers of the sacred, yet they are always representatives of the profane. The mystery of religion, like that of art and poetry, would seem to be inseparable from the mystery of the feminine.

We are, of course, profoundly conditioned by our own tradition. It is from there that our reflection arises and there that we must look for some sort of illumination. Greece, Rome and Israel were all patriarchal societies: Israel uniquely so with its single male deity and a creation story in which the woman derives from the man. As Anna says in Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, 'It is impudence to say that Woman was made out of Man's body, when every man is born of woman. What impudence men have, what arrogance!'

In the Old Testament the female principle may be seen represented by Creation, by Wisdom, and by the chosen people themselves. But this is pretty abstract and only serves to strengthen the picture, however naïve, of a supremely male God. However, in Christianity an actual woman becomes the representative of mankind. The man, Joseph, is excluded—rendered useless, as Karl Barth says, though Barth rejects the suggestion that this is because woman is by nature closer to God.¹

¹K. Barth, *The Faith of the Church* (London, Fontana Books, 1960), pp. 71–73. Barth writes: 'In no case does it mean—as Schleiermacher supposed—that the woman in herself had been privileged. Schleiermacher even supposed that woman does not need conversion, that she by nature is closer to God than man is.'

The image of sexual union, that has been central in the prophets' descriptions of Yahweh's covenant with Israel, in St Paul becomes the prototype of Christ and his Church. The figure of Ecclesia and that of the Virgin Mary are gradually inextricably woven so that in early Christianity both are addressed as the New Eve, the New Creation, the Queen for whom heaven itself has been made. But it is Mary who, by the Middle Ages, emerges as the focus of devotion. In her the human, as well as the divine, is most completely experienced. And she is more than honoured. Despite theological definitions of her subordinate role, popularly Mary is often worshipped, almost as a goddess, certainly as Mother of God with all that must imply.

What is more, her cult coincides with a revolution—a revolution which was called Courtly Love. Whatever else it meant, its invention was a totally original act of revenge, imagining the destruction, at one blow, of man's pride and most of his values. There is a complete reversal of authority—man submits and woman reigns. The brilliant and heterodox society in which Courtly Love arose was wiped out with extraordinary savagery. But for eight hundred years the precocious theme of its poets has haunted European sensibility. Our attitudes to life and love have been irrevocably influenced by the literary development it initiated. It is even suggested that the growth of Marian worship in the twelfth century was encouraged by the Church as an orthodox answer to the preoccupation with passionate love. However humble women's actual social position may have been in the Middle Ages, the cult of Mary obviously did act as a vital balancing force, inspiring a whole culture by its potency.

But the Reformers threw the Virgin out. They could not tolerate a queen in heaven, and a perfect woman on earth was unthinkable. And perhaps they were right in thinking perfection belongs to man. Jung has suggested that men are more perfect than women, but that women are more complete. In the imperfection of their completeness something can still happen, whereas man's perfection by its very finality threatens to freeze into a magnificent immobility. So, the Reformers rid themselves of the last reminder of the feminine principle—of the earth mother, of the Throne of Grace. Now the concept of divinity could be absolutely pure, absolutely unrelated to the world in which it was experienced. The ultimate stage of monotheism sees the complete triumph of male consciousness, the final detachment from the place of origin. The union, in Schelling's words, 'between the monetheism of reason and the polytheism of imagination' has been truly severed.

Catholicism, of course, did not abandon the Virgin Mary. Recently, despite pressure, Pope Paul proclaimed her Mother of the Church, saddening the more progressive members of the Council.

But that is by the way. Even Mary immaculate, Mary assumed bodily into heaven, could not save woman from being despised here on earth. Reality is still vested in man, in the world he fashions in his image. Woman is fragmented—on the one hand an angel to be

adored, on the other little more than an animal, to serve and be sued. Sometimes she is even a witch. She is made a mirror of man's desires and unease, with only a reflective role to play, no authentic existence of her own. And this authentic existence is what she is now crying out for, what she is accusing man of having denied her—why she feels herself betrayed. Woman is no longer content to be experienced just by man, she wants to experience herself, as an individual, with an identity, with a life of her own.

This is surely where she must be careful and feel her way. She must find a mode of life which really is her own, an expression of her deepest inclinations. She can share man's world but not his domination—her approach should be different.

Women find themselves identified with the more passive, more immediate intuitive response, representing that very principle rejected by an abstracting male consciousness. Instead of trying to repudiate totally this identification (which they take to be an insult) women could perhaps accept it as a genuine orientation, a place from which to explore their potentiality. Their entry into man's world might then be truly a liberation—healing the split forced between man and nature, between intellect and feeling, between the ideal and the actuality.

In any case woman cannot sustain the proud illusion of autonomy as successfully as men have done. They cannot cut themselves off so completely from their roots. They carry within themselves a great mystery—that of bringing forth new life. Whether as individuals they find fulfilment in childbearing is not the point: the significance of the fact remains. All mothers are in some sense virgin—they are the vessel of the creating spirit, the witness of the miracle by which they are able to produce man out of themselves.

How much has women's development been conditioned by her biological role, how much by man's assumption that in almost everything else he is of superior strength and ability?¹ The question is obviously very complicated and open to endless debate. What I have tried to suggest here is that the male-female relationship does constitute an abiding reality; that, indeed, this binary experience may be at the very root of our capacity to create a symbolic structure; a structure which enables us to bestow order and meaning, to make us human in fact. It is from within a sensitivity to this dialectical movement that women may hope to find a new direction, both for themselves and the world of which they are part.

So a revolution is taking place, in individual women at least. They do feel the possibility of discovery, of looking towards heaven, towards the spirit. But they are called back—they must look in two directions. In some sense they belong to the law, to tradition. Their

¹*Thomas Aquinas, S.T. 1.92.2 sed contra.* Translation by Edmund Hill (London, Blackfriars, 1964). St Thomas says: 'Again, in Genesis, the woman is said to have been made as a help for the man. But it can only have been to help him in procreation by copulation. Since for any other work a man could be more effectively helped by a man than by a woman.'

nature is to conserve, to enclose, to make safe and secure. This is not a weakness, it is how mankind finds the strength to go forward. The call to freedom must always be in tension with the deep-felt human demand for the law, the old always in tension with the new. Women must look both ways. They must experience the irreducible contradiction as something to be lived, suffered. At last woman can stand beside man as an equal, his counterpart. She can at last become the right size—neither a huge, primitive, protecting and destroying goddess, nor a tiny, submissive figure overpowered by patriarchal majesty.

From Priesthood to Marriage

by Andrew Bebb

It seems strange to think in terms of 'conversion' when reflecting upon the experience of leaving the priesthood. The transformation of the priest into the husband and father has been called many things, A 'betrayal'—that was a bishop; a 'defection', an 'act of madness' a 'second adolescence of the late thirties', a 'good riddance', but hardly a 'conversion'. Yet, for me, that is exactly it.

I think it is worth the trouble to try to explain why. Not least because the witness, both theological and personal, of a growing number of stable, happy husbands and fathers who were once priests may be of positive value in the midst of the Church. We think so, anyway. Our families meet regularly. One resolution we all share: to love the Church and to meet the occasional rebuff without bitterness. Howsoever we may be regarded, and institutional rejection is surely understandable at the moment, there is no doubting that we do increasingly present a new phenomenon in the life of the Church. We are convinced that we have more than embarrassment to offer to the Church, but something creative and fruitful. Perhaps it may lie in the emergence of trained theologians who are also devoted and happily married men immersed in the secular society. Theology has surely limped long enough in the idealistic world of the professional celibate.

Let me offer my own reflections, anyway, as a first contribution. If one word could express the whole new orientation of my own world, it would be 'incarnational'. And this in an experiential context. My own saddest experience of priesthood was directly contrary. This may be a commentary on my own inadequacy, but yet I feel that it is the obvious defect of the Church ministry as a whole. To be on the fringe of human life, to inherit and to inhabit an illusory 'sacral' area of reality mediating an absent God; to