CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES
ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN

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From ancient times and in almost every culture the role of women has been questioned, debated, and regulated. At present in the evangelical Christian church, much of the debate centers on theology as it defines the role of women in ministry. Actually, different biblical passages and different interpretations of the same passages give rise to quite different theologies. On the one hand, when the focus is on a few selected verses in the Bible that seem to restrict the ministry of women, a restrictive theology of ministry is the result. On the other hand, when the seemingly restrictive verses are put in their cultural and historical context and when the whole of Scripture is taken into account, a theology is revealed that supports women’s mutuality with men in all forms of Christian ministry according to the gifts of the Spirit.

Scripture, rightly understood of course, must always be the final court of appeal for Christians. But perhaps there are outside influences involved that have been overlooked by persons exploring the role of women. Some of these influences are explored here as having been significant factors in limiting women’s roles.

We Americans are poorer because of our neglect of history, and Christians are no exception. But often it is by looking back that we begin to understand the worldly forces that have had a part in shaping us and our understanding of Scripture.1

By looking backward it is also possible to challenge the idea that the Judeo-Christian tradition at all times and places has supported the current “traditionalist” or “complementarian” position on the role of women. Traditionalists claim that support for their view comes from Scripture and church tradition, and charge that the current biblical feminist movement is motivated by secular feminism.

However, although there is some truth in the idea that the push for liberating women today is coming from the world outside the church, the current American feminist movement is, in part, historically rooted in the great missionary and revival movements of the last century.2

THE INFLUENCE OF SECULAR CULTURE

Rather than the traditionalist view originating in the church, there is good evidence that traditionalist limitations on the role of women have come from secular cultural sources that have often been allowed to control the position of the church. Rebecca Groothuis’ research demonstrates that for nearly two millennia the Christian church has usually ratified the role of women already present in the mainstream secular culture, decreeing this role to be the “biblical” role for women. Historically, therefore, when and if the role of women changed in secular society, that role would change in the church as well.

A good example of how the church has followed culture can be seen by looking back to the early twentieth century when evangelical feminism rooted in nineteenth-century evangelical revivals enjoyed acceptance in many evangelical churches and institutions. Moody Bible Institute, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and the Evangelical Free Church all supported women preachers. But as secular culture reverted to Victorian-era gender roles in the late 1940s and 1950s, evangelicalism developed amnesia as to its own history and followed the post-World War II cultural trends. The age of revivalism was gone, and the old prejudices against women surfaced. The “ideal woman” in Moody Monthly was no longer the graduate who used all her gifts for the kingdom, but instead became what culture dictated—the submissive, domesticated woman who “knew her place.” It is this worldly stereotype to which Christian “traditionalists” are holding almost 50 years later. Groothuis concludes that culture and pragmatism rather than theology often determine whether women are given equality with men in the church. Ironically, the church’s determination to
be “separate from the world” often means separation from contemporary culture while giving unquestioned acceptance to an earlier era’s cultural values.¹

Very early in the apostolic church, it was recognized that Scripture could be twisted to distort its true meaning (2 Peter 3:16). The Apostle Peter blames this activity on Satan. Thus Paul R. Smith, a Southern Baptist pastor, places the responsibility for misusing Scripture directly on Satan as the one leading the war against women. He writes:

The war on women is not a war of men against women. We naively assume that this war has been declared by and caused by men. That’s the big lie! This war is being fought against both sexes, against all of us. Men are not the author of this war, Satan is... (Satan) uses the fallen powers and principalities of this world to keep us in oppressive traditions and structures.

Everyone loses in Satan’s war on our sexuality because the war on women is a war on humanity...women have lost the feeling of power, and men have lost the power of feeling... Men have won the illusion of control. Women have won the illusion of security.⁴

Thus Groothuis also notes that after the Christian revivalist liberation of women in the last century, Satan used secular culture very successfully in two different ways to reinstate the silent subjection in which women had been held for millennia. The first was the twentieth-century anti-feminist uprising in American secular culture that occurred largely as a product of another evil, namely, back-to-back wars. When it appeared that women were about to revolt against this renewed oppression, Satan’s second strategy was to encourage a new feminism that veered off from the biblically-based nineteenth-century women’s movement into a radical and reactionary departure from virtually every moral and family value traditionally held by Western society. So, Groothuis concludes, in this area, as in every dimension that affects and afflicts the church, spiritual forces are at work behind the scenes. “The conflict is, at root, spiritual—not merely cultural, psychological, or theological.”⁵

**CULTURAL INFLUENCES AT THE TIME OF JESUS AND PAUL**

Ecclesiasticus, a book written in Hebrew about 190 BC, contains the collected teachings of a Jewish teacher from Jerusalem named Jesus ben Siræ. He wrote, “Woman is the origin of sin,” and “Better a man’s wickedness than a woman’s goodness; it is woman who brings shame and disgrace.”⁶ Ben Siræ also complains about the affliction of having a daughter.

By the time of Christ, such a low view of women was found in Judaism as well as in the surrounding cultures. Many scholars note that this departed from much ancient Israelite practice reflected in the Old Testament. Shemaryahu Talmon writes that the presence of heroines in Old Testament stories such as Esther, Rachel, Michal, Naomi, and the wise woman of Tekoa distinguishes Old Testament writings from other Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. The latter features only men in the main roles. “It is only in biblical literature that women are deemed fit not merely to serve as objects in wisdom teaching, but are also credited with subject activities in this domain.”⁷

Rabbis in Jesus’ time, however, commonly taught that it was better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman. A Jewish Rabbi would not deign to speak even to his own wife in public. Jewish men recited a prayer in which they thanked God that they were not women. The First Century Jewish historian Josephus wrote that the Law says women are inferior in all things.⁸

In contrast, Jesus, the founder of the Christian church, and Paul, its first major theologian, must be considered no less than liberators of women. This truth is increasingly recognized by numerous biblical scholars who are taking a fresh look at the entire New Testament instead of only the so-called “restrictive” passages.⁹ Many of these scholars combine their biblical knowledge with thorough research into the life and language of the Greco-Roman world at the time of Jesus and the early church. With that method, it has become increasingly clear that, in contrast to the pagan world around them, Jesus and his first followers, including the Apostle Paul, believed in the restoration of women to full dignity and equality with men both in this life and the next.¹⁰

**PAGAN INFLUENCE IN THE PATRISTIC PERIOD**

With regard to the place of women, pagan influence crept into the church soon after the time of Christ and the Apostles, and from then on various cultural influences have diverted the church from God’s original intention of full equality between women and men. It is these extra-biblical influences, rather than Scripture, that have promoted the idea that men are superior to women.

John Temple Bristol points out that pagan Greek philosophers had a strong influence on the Church Fathers because of their Greek culture and education.¹¹ The Fathers accepted a definition of women that came down from Socrates through Plato to Aristotle. Socrates believed that women were halfway between animals and men; Aristotle taught that women were deformed or unfinished males.

It is important to remember that the Church Fathers’ theology had a strong apologetic purpose. They wanted to make the Gospel understandable and attractive to their culture. They worked hard to systematize and harmonize Christian beliefs with Greek philosophy. Today that process is called “contextualization,” that is, putting the concepts of the Gospel into linguistic and cultural thought-forms so the people of that culture can understand and accept it. Sadly, however, if care is not taken to preserve the core of the Gospel, contextualization can allow the culture to dictate the shape of the message itself and so slip into syncretism.
Then contextualization becomes accommodation to the culture and the challenge of the Gospel is lost.

A classics scholar, Catherine Kroeger, provides an example of Greek misogyny from the arts that echoes the Greek philosophers. A Greek drama from the genre called New Comedy contains the line: “He who teaches letters to his wife is giving additional poison to a snake.”

Seen against that backdrop, the Apostle Paul’s attitude toward women is radically liberating. He takes just the opposite view from the Rabbis and Greek philosophers. He instructs Timothy that not only are women permitted to learn, but they should learn, and therefore they must be taught. He accepts women evangelists as his co-workers.

In all of this, Paul is following the example of Jesus who related to women as openly as he did to men, taught them and traveled with them in his evangelistic ministry.

Medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas is credited with being the most skillful at interpreting Scripture from the Greek perspective, but sadly, he also perpetuated the Greeks’ low view of women. Aquinas interpreted the Pauline writings through the mind of Aristotle so that “Greek deprecation of women became solidly infused within Christian theology.” Bristow believes that this is just the opposite of what the Apostle Paul wanted to achieve.

Interestingly, today’s “traditionalists” hardly ever refer to Jesus. They mostly claim that their views and restrictions on women come from the Apostle Paul. But if the historical context is carefully considered, it becomes clear that such “traditionalist” views are not from Paul, much less from Jesus. These views actually derive from Greco-Roman traditions and are firmly rooted in the Patristic and Thomist effort to contextualize the Gospel into contemporary culture.

Seen in this light, it is clearly not egalitarian biblical scholars of today who are bringing revisionist readings to the Pauline material. The revision happened long ago when pagan presuppositions about women were intertwined with biblical interpretation and contextualization slipped into syncretism.

LATER SOCIO-POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES

In the middle of the fourth century, when the Roman emperor Constantine declared Christianity the state religion, Christianity was further wedded to culture. In order to curry favor with the Emperor, many Christians became less interested in how Christianity should transform culture and instead became more and more transformed by their culture. The church began to accept ideas and practices that would make Christianity more acceptable to the Constantinian court so that the church might flourish instead of being persecuted. These ideas included a greater acceptance of pagan views on the nature and role of women.

Yet another repression of women occurred centuries later due to the cultural influence of nineteenth-century Romanticism. According to the Romantic ideal, women are gentle souls, attuned to spiritual things and the nurture of children. Women are intuitive and operate mostly on emotions, but they have limited analytical or logical abilities. This view makes women intellectually inferior to men and therefore helpless in intellectual and practical matters. Women are also considered physically weak and incapable of surviving the rough and tumble of the public sphere, so they must be protected by being confined to private life.

That the private sphere sometimes was turned into a pedestal made it no less confining.

So, at this point in history when scientific rationalist-positivism was on the rise, religious and spiritual aptitude were of diminishing importance. Enlightenment thinking was making man (“male”) into god. Writing in 1978, Karl fried Durkheim observes that “Western culture has given priority to men, and women’s potentialities have been unrecognized, if not repressed.”

Industrialization also served to segregate women from the public sphere by removing productivity from home and family. Women were left without the status and power that comes from being active partners in a family enterprise or in a gainful occupation of their own, as they had been in the Middle Ages. Industrialization further served to diminish spiritual values by elevating the god Mammon to a place of highest priority.

The effects of both Romanticism and Industrialization on women are hardly mandated by Scripture. Proverbs 31 does not describe a Romantic ideal woman who is without intellectual and business acumen. This passage does not praise her for staying at home to keep herself unspoiled by interaction with the public sphere so that she remains completely helpless and at the disposal of the man who owns her. On the contrary, the biblical ideal described in Proverbs 31 is a woman of intelligence, capable in both domestic and business affairs, and devout.

A MOVEMENT TOWARD CHRISTIAN EQUALITY

The church has often enough been deluded by cultural influences. But there is an infinitely Greater Light guiding the church who faithfully causes it to make needed course corrections. The same Spirit that seized the Hebrew prophet, Joel, and the macho fisherman, Peter, and caused them to proclaim equality for all people, has continued to trouble the waters in church and society. When that happens, some hardy souls pluck up their courage under the inspiration of the Spirit and picket the establishment with Galatians 3:28 lettered on their signs. And after a while, the walls come tumbling down.

So it was in the last half of the 19th century, the Great Century of Christian Missions, when Christianity became established as a world religion. Women left the confines of Romantic home-prisons in large numbers to answer with their Christian brothers a millenarian trumpet call to spread the Gospel around the world. That story, recorded by R.
Pierce Beaver, Ruth Tucker and others, is a ringing affirmation that God’s purposes may be deflected but never can be defeated.\textsuperscript{20}

At the same time in this country, revival fires were burning and ignited a passion for women’s inclusion in ministry and women’s suffrage as a way to Christianize the culture. Evangelical and Fundamentalist leaders were in the forefront of this movement.\textsuperscript{21}

Dispensationalist theology predicted the immanent return of Christ. This further opened the door for women evangelists, preachers and teachers. Because the time was short, the Gospel must be proclaimed by all who believe.

A STEP BACKWARD: THE 1920s

But after great progress for women in the last part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries, another wave of repression broke over women in all sectors of the church, both Catholic and Protestant, as well as in society at large. A Catholic scholar has called this the “Great Repression” of the 1920s.\textsuperscript{22}

Why and how did this happen? Scholars have identified several possible reasons, and as with most social phenomena, a number of factors were at work simultaneously—mostly as the result of influences from secular culture.\textsuperscript{23}

One possible reason has to do with the feminization of religion in the Romantic period, when spirituality was seen as a womanly attribute, inferior to male qualities of logic and abstract thought. In reaction, Christian men now needed to show that Christianity was a “muscular” religion and began to elbow women in ministry aside.

Another factor may have been the demise of women’s missionary boards and societies. As noted above, women had shaken off their velvet and lace bondage to enter missionary service abroad, and evangelistic and social improvement work at home. Women went not only as missionaries; they also established mission boards and societies composed entirely of women. These women’s boards recruited and supported missionaries and mission projects without the involvement of men, except when some men were sent out as missionaries. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were 48 such women’s boards in North America.\textsuperscript{24}

These women’s mission agencies met with astonishing success. From the beginning some male mission executives appreciated their accomplishments, but many more were never reconciled to the right of women’s boards to exist. By various methods, from “courtship” to acts of “rank piracy,” the male-directed agencies tried to subordinate and absorb the women’s boards and societies.\textsuperscript{25} Whatever their methods, they were successful. By the end of the 1920s, most of the women’s boards had disappeared. The reaction to the supposed feminization of religion noted above also may have been one of the factors in this repression of women’s mission activities.

Other trends, such as the “sexual revolution,” may have played a part in the Great Repression. Martin Marty, Lutheran scholar and religious commentator, and Judy and Jack Balswick, Professors at Fuller Seminary, traced the history of the sexual revolution at a meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Chicago, March, 1991. According to them, this movement began in the 1920s.

It is not hard to see how the sexual revolution was linked in the minds of many with the new freedom for women and therefore caused the church to react. The fact that Christian women were not behaving immorally was very probably overlooked by those who believed in the slippery-slope theory. They also may have overlooked the way in which their own secret frustration over changes in the balance of power between men and women influenced their perceptions.

There are other speculations about what caused the Great Repression. It happened during a time of turmoil in the society at large after a costly war had been fought. In the church it was a time of transition when younger leaders tried to seize power from older, established authorities, and the latter, intending to preserve the purity of the church, fought back with a swing toward conservatism.\textsuperscript{26}

At about this same time, the Mennonite Church enforced a restrictive dress code on its women, who could hardly have been described as Flappers or even Suffragettes. This code was drawn up by a committee of five men on behalf of the denomination. Ministers who refused to enforce the dress code for women were removed from office by their bishops.\textsuperscript{27} Although this dress code was ostensibly an effort to demonstrate the new conservatism, there is ample reason to suspect the effect of an ideology that is not necessarily Christian. In many other sects and religions, such as Islam, women are made to demonstrate by their appearance what men need only profess verbally.

From the Catholic side, Mary Ewens, OP, gives another possible reason for the repression of Catholic women in the 1920s. She notes that in 1917, the Catholic Church’s canon law was codified for the first time in 600 years, and American and Roman approaches to application of the law were quite different. The result was that the American “scientific” approach interpreted the rules even more stringently than intended by Rome. Heads of women’s religious communities were required to submit a detailed questionnaire every five years to Rome to show their compliance with canon law. Religious women were pushed back behind their cloister walls instead of serving out in society as they had been doing.\textsuperscript{28} The final irony of all this restriction was that the work of caring for babies, the nursing of maternity cases and the staffing of coeducational schools was considered unsuitable for religious women.\textsuperscript{29}

THE INFLUENCE OF EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES

There is another possible ideological factor in the Great Repression that so far may have been overlooked. It just so happens that the Great Repression coincides with the rise
of the Darwinian theory of Evolution in America. No other ideology has been more persuasive or pervasive in modern times. In Under God, Religion and American Politics, Gary Wills analyzes the events that led to the acceptance of evolutionary theory into the American plausibility structure.

Ironically, according to Wills, the tide that eventually turned in favor of evolution started with the 1925 law passed by the State of Tennessee that forbade state schools to teach evolution. The American Civil Liberties Union decided to challenge this law and the rest, of course, is the history of the infamous "Scopes Monkey Trial."

Wills describes the trial in a way that rehabilitates the image of William Jennings Bryan, whom he calls the most important evangelical politician of this century. For thirty years, writes Wills, Bryan was the most important figure in the reform politics of America, three times a presidential candidate, and secretary of state under Woodrow Wilson. Yet during the Scopes trial he was maneuvered by those who wanted to discredit fundamentalism into a position whereby his name was dishonored. On stage and screen, he has been portrayed as a "fuddled biblicist" who looked "like a beached whale." Wills challenges the false representations of this trial portrayed by the 1950s play and movie called "Inherit the Wind."

It is not the purpose here to review the details of this complicated trial which Wills describes as a "comedy of errors in which nothing was exactly what it appeared to be." The point here is that Bryan, the evangelical churchman who opposed evolution, was one of the strongest voices for women's suffrage from the very beginning of that particular battle for equality. Bryan had long been troubled not so much by the scientific implications of evolution as he was by its social ethics. Social Darwinism was completely antithetical to his populism with its roots in the Christian ethic of moral support for the weaker members of society.

The other leading figure in the Scopes trial, and Bryan's vitriolic critic, was the journalist-pundit H.L. Mencken. Mencken, a self-avowed atheist and Darwinian literalist, supported teaching evolution in the schools. Based on his views of evolutionary theory, he was also an outspoken denigrator of women. The Social Darwinism he espoused taught that the law of natural selection ruled human society just as it does the animal world. "Human society is an arena of struggle in which the strongest prevail, the fittest survive, and poor 'misfits' must be neglected in the name of progress through betterment of the race." With an ethnic pride in what Nietzsche had taught Germany, Mencken derided Christianity and brotherhood as fit only for "shopkeepers, cows, women, and Englishmen."

Mencken's views surely must be astonishing even to present-day readers who accept evolution in the physical realm. It must be noted that Social Darwinism even in its heyday was not acceptable to all evolutionists; today, most scholars would rather forget that it ever existed. But it should never be forgotten that this theory was the foundation for the Superman ideology of Nazi Germany. Here is a sample, according to Wills, of Mencken's unflinching application of Darwinism to his social and political doctrine:

The superiorities already won—of men over women, of whites over blacks, of gentiles over Jews, of the elite over the mob—must be retained in the name of progress. Since men are stronger than women, women "cultivate cunning" in order to circumvent men, becoming "shrewd, resourceful, and acute; but the very fact that they are always concerned with imminent problems (because of their physical weakness) and that, in consequence they are unaccustomed to dealing with the larger riddles of life, makes their mental attitude essentially petty...The net result is that feminine morality is a morality of opportunism and imminent expediency, and that the normal woman has no respect for, and scarcely any conception of, abstract truth."

Evolutionary theory fits neatly into the Greek hierarchical worldview. Breaking all of human life into categories (taxonomies) is foundational to Greek philosophy. Once categories are established, it is but a small step to ranking them, and this is exactly what the Greeks did with their notion of a "Great Chain of Being." Darwinian evolutionary theory does exactly the same thing. All material things are ranked from the simple to the most complex, with the most complex being highest. The Social Darwinists drew separate categories for human beings as well, and white males definitely ranked higher than all women, Jews, and people of color.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Two observations may be made from the record of the Bryan-Mencken confrontation. The first is that again it was a representative of the "world," in this case the atheistic, Darwinian evolutionist Mencken, who was promoting the inequality of women. The Christian evangelical, William Jennings Bryan, who debated against evolution and upheld creation theology, was a supporter of the equality of women and men.

The second observation is that the rise of evolutionary theory, especially Social Darwinism, coincided with the "Great Repression" of women in American society. Much more research is necessary to show a correlation. It is, however, a most interesting coincidence!

Will there be more repression? Ideologies will come and go, and the church will doubtless be influenced by them. In the liberation of women that will also liberate all humanity, as well as in every advance of God's kingdom in the world, two steps forward may be followed by one step back. But in the end, Christians may be sure that the Spirit of God will finally lead them to understand what God intends for the relationship between women and men.
It is well recognized that no one reads any text without preconceptions or presuppositions that influence their interpretation of it. If this dynamic and the historical, cultural context is ignored, personal bias and contemporary assumptions may color the meaning quite differently from what the biblical author intended.


3 Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, Women Caught in the Conflict (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 59-64.


5 Groothuis, 172, 173.


8 It is interesting to see the close parallel between these perceptions of women and what is found in the Panchatantra (translated by Arthur W. Ryder [Bombay: Jaco Publishing House, 1949]) which is a collection of the ancient wisdom writings of Hinduism. Consider the following excerpts:

Give a woman food and dresses
(Chiefly when she trouble presses);
Give her gems and all things nice
But do not ask for her advice.

Women seek for selfish treasures,
Think of nothing but their pleasures,
Even children by them reckoned
To their selfish comfort second. (387)

At her birth she steals away her mother’s heart,
Loving friends, when she is older fail apart;
Even married, she is apt to bring a stain;
Having daughters is a business full of pain. (83)

Therefore, with patient effort
Avoid the very name
Of every earthly woman
If comfort be your aim.

For what she feels, she does not say;
She speaks and looks a different way;
Far from her looks her actions veer;
Oh, woman, woman! You are queer.

Though girls are tasteless, hard and selfish,
Boys think them sweet and soft and elfish. (354)

9 Cullen Murphy, “Women and the Bible,” The Atlantic, August 1993, 39, 64. This article is interesting for showing that even liberal critical scholarship is finding, albeit somewhat grudgingly, that the Bible is not totally misogynist as some have earlier judged it to be.

10 The definition of equality used here rejects any idea of equality of status but subordination of roles. That idea is not only a euphemism for inequality but a contradiction in terms.


12 Mander Fragment 702.

13 Romans 16, Philippians 4:2.

14 Bristow, 29.

15 Bristow, 113.

16 John Jakes, the American novelist, writes of his novel, Homeland, that his depiction of the state of women’s health and health care is not exaggerated. Women were expected to be repeatedly afflicted by the popular “neuroasthenia.” Men placed themselves in charge of women’s bodies with little more than their egos to guide them. Ignorance and inadvertence were epidemic, treatments bizarre, inappropriate, or altogether absent. In the novel, one of Jakes’ teenage girl characters says, “Mama suffers from a recurring condition called neuroasthenia. Extreme prostration of the nerves and brain. Her spirits sink very low. Sometimes she won’t even speak for days. It upsets me awfully, but Dr. Woodrow says it’s perfectly normal for a woman.” (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 782, 219.

17 Gary Wills writes that by 1831 when Alexis de Tocqueville came to America, “matters of sex, morality, and the family were entrusted primarily to women, and to pastors who had themselves withdrawn from the making of public policy... There we can see, taking shape, the later nineteenth-century division of life into a feminine sphere (culture, morality, the family) and a masculine one (business, public affairs, government).... [De Tocqueville noted that] when men go outside the home, they retain their formal deference to the women’s ‘superior’ values wherever the two domains touch. It does not matter that this deference is often feigned, since it is socially useful... “ - Gary Wills, Under God, Religion and American Politics, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 275.


25 Ibid., 108, 106.

26 Ibid., 229.


28 In the Catholic tradition, “religious women” refers to women such as Nuns who belong to established Orders.


31 Ibid., 97-99.

32 Ibid., 98.

33 Ibid., 101.

34 Ibid., 102.

35 Ibid., 102 (emphasis added).

36 It is impossible not to see some similarity between a well-known Christian doctrine called “The Chain of Command” and the Greek and Darwinian philosophies. The question remains, however, whether the Chain of Command owes more to them than it does to Scripture.