

# Church and Family IV: The Family in Late Industrial Society

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In the United States it was the year 1921 that marked the culmination of the era of Victorian feminism. Women finally won the right to vote that gave them the official status of public citizens in the American Republic, after an eighty-eight year struggle that began in the 1840s with the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. But this culmination of Victorian feminism also marked its rapid demise as well. The Victorian domestic culture of female moral superiority and sisterly bonding gave way to the more eroticized world of the 1920s. The daughters of the suffragettes became the flappers of the "Roaring Twenties", who were embarrassed by the moralistic culture of their mothers, with their large hats and long white dresses. Women, it seemed, had won access to the male promised land of education, politics and business, and even the male world of sexual pleasure, and now it was only a question of entering into and taking possession of it.

The relationship of family, work and religion in the twentieth century in advanced industrial societies such as the United States had been marked by many subtle shifts and changes which separate it from the Victorian family and culture, while at the same time many of the same presuppositions of that era still continue in new form. Victorian feminism, in its eighty-year struggle for women's rights, effected a dramatic change in women's public civil status that went back many thousands of years in patriarchal law. Women were now acknowledged as persons in their own right. They could vote, hold office and make legal contracts in their own name, even though remnants of the old laws and practices which made women legal dependents on fathers or husbands still survived in many local and state codes.

For thousands of years women had been barred from higher education and the valued male professions. Now university after university opened to women. By 1900 women college students equalled men in numbers in American colleges. The professions of law, medicine and ministry began slowly to open to women, although most mainstream Protestant churches were not to allow women ordained status until the 1950s to 1970s. In the early twentieth century

**170**

women began to enter higher education so rapidly that male educators became alarmed, fearful that education would become predominantly female. Quotas and separate female professions, such as home economics, were instituted, to reduce the numbers of female college students or to track women into separate female professions. Proportionately there were more female doctors, lawyers, ministers and professors in 1910 than at any time up to the present, although the numbers of persons in these professions were very small in that period compared to the present.

To that small elite of white, educated women who were ready to take their place alongside men in universities and professions, it seemed as though all barriers to women's advancement were rapidly giving way. However, this picture of sure advancement failed to reckon with the total profile of women's roles in those working classes whose lives remained invisible to this elite. In 1910 about 20 percent of adult females in America worked for wages outside the home. Most of these were black or immigrant women who worked as domestic laborers, agricultural workers or in the textile industries. New social and psychological schools in the 1920s to 1930s reinforced the prejudice against married middle-class women in the work force.

The educated woman who aspired to an elite profession was generally assumed to have to remain a spinster, leading a severely restricted life. Although such spinster professionals were actually few in number, the picture of educated elite women spurning marriage and childbearing for a career fueled the fear that education for women threatened the family and would soon cause the white middle classes to lose the "race war" against the fertile black and immigrant lower classes. Such fears were exacerbated by the decline in family size among the white middle classes from families of 8–10 in the 1850s (many of whom died) to families of 2–3 in the mid-twentieth century. The struggles over birth control in the 1920s reflected the fears generated by these poorly understood demographic trends. The struggle for legalised birth control, led by Margaret Sanger in the 1920s and 1930s, would continue to the Second World War. Catholic attitudes would not shift on this question until the latter half of the 1960s. Today the struggle against women's reproductive self-determination has shifted from the issue of birth control to that of abortion, although underlying the abortion debate often lies an anti-contraceptive doctrine as well.

The Depression saw a new backlash against the working woman, since it was believed that scarce jobs should be reserved for male heads of families. This was temporarily reversed by the Second World War years, which encouraged women to come into heavy industry to fill the needed industrial jobs vacated by men fighting in the armed services. Women were also encouraged to fill the seats in the universities and

engage in all sorts of professions needed to support the “war effort”. This official encouragement of women’s work in heavy industry, popularized as “Rozie the Riveter” by official government propaganda, reveals the expedient nature of the traditional cultural prejudice against women’s work. All the traditional media of communication which traditionally broadcast the message that women were unsuited or incapable of such work, that such work was a threat to the family, to masculinity and to femininity, could dramatically reverse themselves and celebrate the woman industrial worker when the society perceived her work to be needed.

But, as soon as the war was over, these same media of communication from government, church and social “experts”, could just as rapidly reverse themselves, declare that women were needed at home to make and raise babies, and should not take jobs from the men returning from the war. The post-war decade of the 1950s saw an overwhelming emphasis on the celebration of a suburban domestic culture, characterized by intense familialism and consumerism. The reigning child psychologists solemnly declared that a child’s psychological health and “normal” development demanded exclusive mother-child bonding for the first six years, if not for most of childhood. Oblivious to the fact that practically never in human history has there been such exclusive relationship between mother and dependent child, these pundits declared that any absence of the mother, even for a few hours a day, could traumatize the child and thus have severe consequences for “his” future development.

The isolated suburban household, with absent father and exclusive maternal parenting, created a new psychological dogma that scapegoated mothers for virtually any failures in child development. Any form of deviance, from delinquency to homosexuality and mental illness, was declared to be the fault of the mother, who had failed in some way to live up to her proper maternal function and to relate herself properly as submissive wife to dominant husband. Whether she mothered too much or mothered too little, it was always mother’s fault. Not surprisingly, women of this era became increasingly anxious about their own abilities to mother, endlessly reading the proscriptions of those “male experts” who would inform them of how to do these maternal functions which women alone should do, but apparently were so little capable of doing.

In spite of these prejudices against the working married woman and especially the working mother, the percentages of married women in the work force steadily increased in the twentieth century U.S., until today, when it stands at over 50 percent of the female population over sixteen, making up 40 percent of the work force. There has always been a steady growth in the number of married women who work, which increasingly includes mothers of small children. The type

of work that women do also has shifted. In 1900 half of working women worked as domestics. Today, half of working women work as clerical workers. Advanced industrial society has built a huge new job sector of paper work, most of which is done by skilled but low-paid women.

Although the new feminist movement of the 1970s has seen a new push for women's entrance into the male professions of doctor, lawyer, minister, professor, business executive, and politician, the percentage of women working in such professions remains low: less than 10 percent of working women. Even this small elite generally occupies the lower-paid ranks of these professions.

Most wage-earning women work in female segregated job sectors, either in the female professions of nurse, librarian, primary school teacher; in the clerical and technical vocations that support elite male work; or in the "pink collar" ghetto of selling, food service, and the like. These female job sectors are typically low-paid relative to their educational requirements and have poor job security. The analysis of any major institution will quickly reveal the job hierarchy characteristic of our economic life, with elite white males on the top in the executive roles; a few elite white females and black males but mostly white males in the managerial roles; the clerical sector occupied almost entirely by women, mostly white, and a few black; the skilled maintenance sector occupied by black and minority men; and at the bottom level, those who do food service and cleaning, by black and minority women. This is the same whether one looks at a business corporation, a university or a theological seminary. We have often been told that female wages average about 56% of male wages (down 8% from 1960). But even this figure does not tell the whole story, because it conceals the fact that most women work in female job sectors which have low pay scales as a whole.

This movement of women into the paid work force was accompanied in the twentieth century by the general loss of domestic labor. Today only a wealthy elite have a once-a-week domestic, and fewer still have live-in domestic servants, although this would have been typical of middle-income households at the turn of the century. This loss of domestic labor has been partially compensated for by the mechanization of housework. More and more sophisticated machinery assists the middle class woman in cooking, cleaning and washing. This also creates an ever increasing elaboration of consumer goods for the household. But the mechanization of housework has also been accompanied by rising expectations of cleanliness and household services.

The middle class woman today, despite all this mechanized help, still spends a substantial part of each day in work connected with housekeeping. For the paid working woman these high expectations of

domestic services, provided by women, create a constant sense of anxiety and conflict. She fills a job sector whose location and hours are based on the male work day. This male work day has been structured in industrial society around the presupposition of a non-working wife or mother who provides the domestic services that support this male work day. The working woman has to be both worker and wife who provides not only the domestic services that support her own work, but those of any males to whom she is related in the household.

Basically there are two mutually reinforcing social structures that keep women non-competitive with men in modern economic life. The first is the cultural ideology that regards women as suited to auxiliary support structures for male work, whether at home or on the job. Women can be nurse in relation to male doctor, stewardess in relation to male pilot, or secretary in relation to male executive, but only exceptionally and at great cost can women challenge men in leadership roles and high-paid professions. Secondly, and related to this cultural ideology of subordinate status, is the double work day for women. Our culture assigns housekeeping and childraising to women, while asking women to compete with men on the job who generally have women doing this work for them. This second work role remains invisible and unaccounted for either in the GNP or in reckoning women's abilities on the job.

Thus women are set up to fail partially at both tasks while endlessly struggling to find ways to fit the two together. This means that wage-earning women gravitate to jobs that do not demand overtime. This cuts them out of those kinds of jobs which demand extensive travel or extra time in meetings; in short, most elite male professions. The part-time sector of work is also filled mostly by women. This sector typically pays very poorly, although it uses women who have high qualifications, such as part-time college teaching, which often accounts for up to half of the teachers in community colleges.

American society remains deeply prejudiced against any use of public money for child care for pre-school children or for after-school hours, which might ameliorate this conflict between women's domestic and work role. The result is not that married women work less, for the reasons why they work are usually based on economic necessity. It means that they work under conditions of harassment and poverty and often have to settle for inadequate solutions to their responsibilities at home. Women feel themselves constantly faulted for these inadequate solutions which are always regarded as "her fault" because she is a working wife, rather than as systemic to the home-work, male-female, dichotomy of industrial society.

Another important change that has taken place in twentieth

century American culture is the eroticization of the middle class wife. The Victorian wife, as we have seen, was idealized, but also sexually repressed. With the sexual revolution of the 1920s, women were given the glad tidings that they were indeed sexual beings and were capable of sexual pleasure. This too quickly turned into a male-defined dogma. Women not only could but should enjoy sexuality, sexuality defined on male terms. They ought to have orgasms regularly and, if they did not, there was something wrong with them. And so another lucrative profession for experts sprang up to write books and provide clinics to “cure” women of frigidity and make them appropriately sexually responsive.

This eroticization of the middle class wife has been incorporated into the consumer psychology of advanced industrial society. The appetites of consumerism and sexuality are constantly integrated through the advertising media to use women’s sexual allure to sell products. Eroticization increased the multiple role expectations placed upon women. In earlier patriarchal cultures, elite men divided the women around them into many specialized roles. There was the wife who supervised the household and bore the legitimate children. There was the wet nurse and the nanny who cared for small children. There was the cook and the maid who did the cleaning, cooking and serving, the laundress who did the wash. there was a host of women who specialized in erotic arts to provide men with sexual play.

Although ruling class men today are still surrounded by a variety of women who play service roles in relation to them (secretaries who type their papers and answer their phones; cleaning women who clean the office, and often, erotic playmates on the side) the reigning cultural dogma is that each man should have only one woman, his wife, who should be able to provide all these traditional services for him. She should be able to be nanny, cook and maid, wife, mother and mistress. She should be able to transform herself smoothly from charwoman mopping the floor to devoted nurturer of children, to mysterious woman in a long black dress who can meet her husband at the door with a martini and lead him to the candlelit table, presumably with the kids tucked away in bed.

As a working woman, she should be able to do all this on her off hours, as she deftly changes from business suit to apron and then to slinky gown. Needless to say, no woman actually accomplishes these rapid role transformations in this way, but the cultural media bombard women with the message that they should be able to do this. Somewhere, somehow, there are women who are able to accomplish it with effortless ease and grace. If they cannot, it is their own fault, and they deserve it if their husbands walk out on them at forty, leaving them to do all the tasks of family life by themselves on a poverty income.

Another important shift in modern life between the First and Second World Wars was the loss of the Victorian female culture, with its links between femininity, morality, and religion as a public identity for women. The invasion of consumerism and eroticism into the domestic culture, as well as the further secularization of the public order, broke apart those assumptions of Victorian female reformers that woman's innate moral and spiritual superiority was also a public identity through which women could confront and challenge male secular culture.

Victorian women had assumed that they could enter the public male world, taking their female domestic culture with them. There they could use their newly developed power to uplift the corrupt and evil male world to the higher standards of female morality and religiosity. Women would close down taverns and brothels; end political corruption; ameliorate exploitative economic conditions, especially for poor women and children; improve sanitation, schools and prisons, and finally, end war. Woman would extend her "sphere" to become housekeeper, mother and peacemaker, not only of the home, but of the world. Such visions of the effects of female influence in the world still guided many American women's organizations in the twenties and thirties, such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, founded by Jane Addams, and led by the middle-aged feminist reformers who had led women through the final victory for suffrage.

But the cultural shifts of the post-war period made these women appear cultural throw-backs. The new generation who went to work in politics, business, and the universities soon got the message that they could leave their morality and religion at home if they wanted to be tolerated by men. For women to be accepted as colleagues with men on the job, they had to conform to male secular culture. They too had to assume the mentality of functional rationality and value-free science. They had to think about company profits, not human costs; about how to get the job done, rather than why this kind of job should be done. To compete with men, women had to prove themselves to be as analytical, competitive and amoral as men, although this functional rationality should be veiled in a cool feminine style that would avoid direct aggressiveness, while not being sexy. The female worker, especially the professional, thus walked a tightrope between male and female culture. She should shed all the actual contents of female culture, sexual, maternal, moral, or religious, while keeping about her a shell of femininity that concealed her adoption of the skills and mentality of the male public culture.

Morality, religion, and the vision of Christian altruism and justice, which Victorian women had used as a critical culture against the male public world, were driven further into the private world.



They went from the home into the closet, one might say. They might plague the private individual, but their demands had become not only domesticated but inaudible. The working woman, like the working man, was supposed to be able to manage a cultural schizophrenia, cultivating morality and religion, if at all, only in private relations, while being able to exhibit her dedication to hawkish amorality on the job. The successful female politicians of the twentieth century, such as Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir, and Margaret Thatcher, are those most skilled at accomplishing this bifurcation between feminine and maternal private identity and aggressive amoral public practice, without allowing any of the moral contents of women's domestic culture to enter into their public policy-making.

At the other end of the social and economic scale the schizophrenic relationship of public and private life was reducing more and more women, more and more female-headed households, to poverty. The multiple expectations of female service to men in the home, combined with poor economic opportunities and wages for women in the paid economy, has meant that more and more women find themselves abandoned by their husbands in mid-life, often with dependent children. Increasingly the sector of the American population living in poverty consists of women, both elderly women and female-headed households with dependent children. In the elderly population, two out of three persons living in poverty are female. While female-headed families are 15% of all American families, they are 48% of families living in poverty.

In 1982, of the three million people receiving the \$122 minimum monthly benefit which the present administration proposed to cut, 86% were women. Women make up 70% of the clients seeking help from the Legal Services Corporation, for problems relating to Social Security, divorce, food stamps and Aid for Dependent Children. The social welfare funds targeted for cuts by the present administration benefited mainly this population of poor women and children and poor elderly women. Minority young women with children or minority elderly women are particularly likely to be in poverty.

Female poverty is nothing new in patriarchal society, but has always been the lot of that sector of women who fell outside its structures of support and dependency. The widow, who has neither the support of her own family nor that of her husband, is the archetype of the poor person in the gospel narratives. Today poverty for women and dependent children has been exacerbated by the contradictions of two myths which operate simultaneously in our society. On the one hand, our economic policies reflect the assumption that all women should be supported by their husbands. They are not expected to be self-supporting, and their work is regarded as marginal to the economy. They are last hired and first



fired, and are seen as working only for a supplementary income to that of their husbands. On the other hand, it is assumed that women have now made it in the economic world. They have equal rights and so the ERA is superfluous. Alimony in divorce is granted less and less and women have difficulty collecting child support payments from former husbands.

The assumption is that women are perfectly capable of being self-supporting. Therefore, if the personal relationship no longer satisfies, men and women are justified in separating and seeking more satisfying partners. Although divorce weighs heavily on both partners economically, the wife is far more likely to end up in poverty after divorce than the husband. It is she who is assumed to be the primary parent responsible for the children and the family household. A culture and economic system that insists that women are equal, while at the same time structuring its economic and social life to make women economically dependent or marginal, as well as the primary parents, results in an increasingly large sector of impoverished women left without male support and without sufficient means to support themselves.

Since the 1930s there has been a growth of state-supported payments and services designed to aid the poverty sector of American society. For the elderly, pensions and social security were supposed to assure them a comfortable old age. But the assumption of most pensions and social security funds is that women would receive benefits from a husband's income. So women's benefits from their own jobs were often considerably less, and many jobs held by women carried no pensions. For mothers in poverty, Aid to Dependent Children, food stamps and other such services would allow them to stay at home to take care of their children, rather than go to work. The state, in effect, stepped in as the surrogate male parent in fatherless households.

But the state in American society is a parsimonious step-father at best. The definition of the poverty line and what people can live on in urban areas is typically out of step with economic realities. Rising heating costs have recently caught many poor families in a literal choice between freezing to death and going hungry. Moreover, the structure of welfare services operates more to keep the poor, especially women with children, in poverty, rather than offering them the sort of support, such as childcare, that would allow them to attain the job-training that would enable them to rise out of it. American culture retains a deeply ingrained hostility against the poor who live on welfare that is expressed in the myth of "welfare chiselers". These hostile myths of "welfare loafers" prevent the society from looking both realistically and compassionately at the conditions under which the poor live and accepting collective responsibility for changing these

conditions.

In the 1970s there have developed two movements which are responding in opposite ways to this conflict of women and the family. On the one hand, the feminist movement, beginning in the late 1960s, revived the efforts of their grandmothers to mobilize women themselves for their own emancipation. Rather than simply accepting the contradictory roles into which they had been cast in patriarchal and advanced industrial society, women began to analyse and name these conditions as oppressive. They began to study the history and ideology that had shaped this contradictory situation and to project alternatives to it.

On the other hand, following soon on the heels of contemporary feminism, was a conservative backlash that has gained increasing political momentum by attacking feminist concerns in the name of the family, often evoking the authority of the Bible and Christianity. This movement not only opposes Equal Rights and reproductive self-determination for women, but also seeks to cut much of that sector of welfare and social services that provided some minimal support for women and children in poverty. In the final paper in this series, *Feminism, Church and Family in the 1980s*, which will appear in the May issue, I will examine the conflict between feminism and that movement that regards itself as a defender of the family and how we might move beyond it to some alternatives for those who seek the true welfare of both women and families.

## On the Way to Damascus

Joan Armytage

He had no words to tell of Love,  
His phrases, like the nets  
Round which Leviathan swam,  
Caught only what was not,  
And all the warp, weft,  
Cast, spread, space of them  
Could not capture a mystery.  
He had no words to tell of Love,  
It was not like spring  
Or anything he ever knew.