

Church and Family III: Religion and the Making of the Victorian Family

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The model of the bourgeois or Victorian family that received its idealized expression in the 19th century has its roots in complex processes of socio-economic and cultural changes going back to the late medieval period. It was a long time before this type of family really became standard or normative for most people in Western societies, and it has remained more an ideal than an actuality for many people. For well into the 18th century, and even later in rural and frontier areas, other types of family patterns still predominated. For peasant and farming families in Europe and America, the home continued to be a workshop where a variety of goods used by the family were produced. The family members had little private space, for most of the house was taken up by the workshop where goods were created. Farm animals might live in sheds under the rooms where the family lived, a practice that still continues in peasant families today. Grandparents, unmarried aunts and uncles, apprentices and other dependents quite often swelled the ranks of persons living in a household.

Aristocratic families also did not correspond to the modern nuclear family type. In 18th century palaces a large court of retainers dwelt in attendance. Still sometimes legitimate and illegitimate children of a great noble, as well as the children of servants, lived together. Servants often slept in the same rooms as their masters or outside in the halls. Functions that we think of as intimate and private, such as a great magnate's eating or going to bed, were public events. He and his lady rose and retired to bed assisted by a host of servants and courtiers. Social and sexual relations in Europe's courts were laden with intrigue and had heavy political implications.

In this earlier world of pre-industrial society, children grew up early. By six or seven a child was pressed into service, to work at the family industry for peasant and artisan families, or to become an attendant upon adults in the aristocratic household. Girls often married shortly after puberty and boys went into apprenticeship in other households or went to the university at an age we think of as still childhood, 12—14 years. Children slept in the same beds as adults, parents or servants, and witnessed sexual relations from the earliest age. Infants were frequently killed by being rolled upon by adults. There was little idealization of childhood. Children, in the prevailing Christian theology, were born in

original sin and needed harsh treatment to curb their sinful propensities. The notion that children are sexual innocents who might be traumatized by the accidental viewing of adults in sexual coitus belongs to the Victorian household and would have made little sense in this earlier type of family.

It was the mercantile families of the urban bourgeois that shaped what was to be the new type of family of the 19th century. This bourgeois family was characterized by a privatization of the home and the consolidation of the family around its nuclear core of mother-father and children. This means that other persons—bastards, servants and their children, grandparents and maiden aunts—were gradually expelled from the shrinking household. The animals and the workshop also disappeared, removed to separate dwellings and then to separate economic institutions outside the family and no longer owned by it. The household was reshaped into the home, an intimate private realm where the bedrooms were clearly set off as private space for the family members, not to be invaded by outsiders. The parlor became the formal space into which a few chosen friends might be admitted between this private world of intimate family functions and the outside world. The whole psychology of the household thus shifts from being a busy thoroughfare in the midst of the economic and social activities of society to being an *inner sanctum* set over against the public world.

These processes were already under way among mercantile families of the 17th century, but they were greatly accelerated by the processes of industrialization that began in the 18th century and which have increasingly alienated the nuclear family from the outside world of work up to our own times. Industrialization has radically altered what women in the household actually do; i.e., their economic functions in the family, as well as the social ideology about what women are or should be in Western culture.

The home, which was once the center of economic production, more and more lost any direct involvement in creating or even refining the goods consumed by the family. Productive labor became collectivized in an economic system outside of and no longer owned or controlled by the family. It becomes hard for us even to remember that the word *oikos*, from which the word economy comes, means the household, since we have come to assume that the “economy” is something that takes place someplace else than where the families live. As productive work is collectivized outside the home, it comes to be thought of as part of the male public world, rather than the female domestic world. What women do in the home is no longer thought of as “work”, i.e., productive labor. In order to “work”, men or women have to leave home.

This creates great changes in the functions and relations of all members of the family. It means that males who work leave the home and are absent from it for most of the daylight hours. The father, who in

the Puritan world was thought of as the prime parent, now becomes marginal to parenting. Mothers become the primary parent. It also means that women lose their integration with male work. Women in the home no longer aid their husbands in the economic functions that feed the family. The skills they exercise in the home are no longer marketable. The Puritan wife co-managed a farm or workshop with her husband. If widowed, she could carry on as his substitute.

The modern wife often has little knowledge even of what her husband does for a living, much less of the skills to do it herself. She is totally dependant on economic structures outside of her knowledge and control. If widowed, her domestic skills as childraiser, cook or housekeeper would hardly keep her in anything but the most impoverished condition. In fact, she is seen as uncredentialed even in these roles. Cleaning house, cooking or doing laundry for 30 years does not qualify her to cook in a restaurant, be a professional char or run a laundry. She could not get a job as a nursery school teacher, even if she has raised several children, because she has no professional qualifications.

Childhood also changes with industrialization. Children no longer are a part of family production. They too, like women, do not "work". They get odd jobs to serve their own luxuries, not to contribute to family maintainance or learn a skill that will support them in adulthood. Childhood dependency becomes increasingly prolonged as the credentials for middle-class professional life require longer and longer education. High school and even college graduates are still unequipped to make a living. The higher the status to which a child's family aspires for the child, the longer the economic dependency of the child on the family.

This means that women as mothers are also redefined both as a primary parent and the intensive nurturers of a childhood that stretches on into the twenties. Victorian ideology thinks of children as sweet and good, to be kept innocent as long as possible. Women, too, then come to be seen as innocents, the permanent servants of this sphere of purity and goodness over against the "real world". A new religious ideology of the home emerges in which the home is the magic circle of innocent and pure womanhood and childhood, that is set, like the unfallen garden of Eden, over against the outside "sinful" world. As women lose the productive functions that had once made them skilled economic workers and managers, they take on new intensified functions as the managers of household consumption, as the nurturers of prolonged childhood, and as the healers of the bruised egos of the males who journey back and forth between the World and the Home.

A new ideology of masculinity and femininity emerges in Victorian thought, shaped around these bifurcated spheres of home and work, and bifurcated roles of women as nurturer and man as worker. Far more than

ever before, woman is seen as (sexually) pure, physically delicate, emotional, dependent and loving, over against the male as sexually virile, physically tough, aggressive, rational (in the sense of instrumental rationality), and dominant. Men and women are socialized to shape themselves after these opposite patterns and accept them as their true “natures”. Thus the anthropological dogma of complementarity, or the polar opposites of masculinity and femininity, has its social base in the bifurcated roles demanded of men in the work world and women in the privatized, auxiliary realm of the home.

The ideology of womanhood in Victorian society played a compensatory role over against the new male world of secular industrial society. Although the doctrine of chaste, altruistic femininity was built on earlier medieval and aristocratic traditions of Mariology and courtly love, it was popularized in the 19th century as part of a middle-class reaction against and compensation for the emerging secular industrial social order. Home and womanhood were to be everything that the external industrial world was not. In the home, patriarchy and the natural aristocracy of birth still held sway in male-female relations, although in the public political world democratic values were challenging and discrediting this concept. In the home, a religious world of fixed certainties was to be maintained, over against a secular public order of unbelief. In the home, emotionality and intimacy held sway, against a world dominated outside by unfeeling technological rationality. In the home, sublimated spirituality compensated for an outward capitulation to the fierce materialism of industrial competition. The home was to be an Eden of beauty and peace in pleasant suburbs set apart from the ugly work world of factories. The home was to be a place of nostalgic sentimentality, cultivated by women, to which men could repair in their off-hours to rest and recuperate from the harsh outside world of conflict.

This 19th-century ideology of womanhood reflected not only the feminization or domestication of women, but also the feminization or domestication of religion. The liberal democratic states that displaced the feudal order of Christendom disestablished the Churches. The state, including all the functions of the male public order—politics, economics, war and even education—were to be secularized. Religion, in turn, was privatized. It was now seen as a purely voluntary and private relationship to God, which no longer had implications for one’s civil identity. Citizens of the same nation could belong, in theory, to any religion or no religion. Religion took up its place in the private self apart from society. Morality was to apply only to one’s private relationships, not to one’s public social relationships. The Church and its ministry was now the auxiliary to the Home and its privatized piety and morality, and no longer the critic or the buttress of the public order of magistrate, warrior and judge, as it was in the classical patriarchal order.

Christianity comes to be described in terms parallel to the Victorian

description of womanhood. Christian virtue comes to be seen characteristically as the feminine virtue. Like the feminized woman, feminized Christianity is thought of essentially as nurturing, altruistic, loving, affective and passive. Anger, conflict, and even too much rationality and critical thinking, are thought of as unchristian, as well as unfeminine. The image of Christ takes on these characteristics of feminine virtue. The favourite pictures of Jesus in Victorian families pictured him with limpid eyes, delicate features and soft, blond curls, surrounded by children. No more is he the Pantocrator of the Byzantine world, where Christ was imaged with dark features and fierce eyes, as world ruler, warrior, judge and king.

Not surprisingly, it is said in Victorian culture that woman is more naturally religious than man. Christlikeness and womanliness are seen as similar. This doctrine of woman's more naturally religious or Christlike nature created certain paradoxes for a Church which still rigidly excluded woman from the ordained ministry. It would seem that if Christlikeness and ministry corresponded more closely with the female role, then women would be the more apt ministers and representatives of Christ. Women reformers were to take up this aspect of Victorian culture and seek to use it to their advantage. Victorian religion went to extremes to rationalize the exclusion of women from public office, while still idealizing women as the natural bearers of Christian virtue.

In 1869, Horace Bushnell published a treatise attacking women's rights, entitled, "Women's Suffrage: The Reform Against Nature". Here Bushnell, a leading Congregationalist theologian of the mid-19th century, argued that the relationship of Old and New Testaments, of Law and Grace, corresponded to the dualism between masculinity and femininity. Male nature represents Law, whereas female nature represents Grace or the Gospel. The Gospel is the revelation of forgiveness and altruistic love, which transcends the Law. Women have a natural affinity for these spiritual qualities of the Gospel. But these Gospel virtues are not suitable to the real world of sin and conflict of the public order. Here it is the male, as representative of Law, who must rule, both in the Church and in the political order. Womanliness, like Christlikeness, is literally "out of this world". So woman, although spiritually the superior of the male, is also unfitted for public office. On these grounds, presumably Jesus himself would have been unsuitable, not only for political office, but for ordained ministry as well, but Bushnell does not choose to pursue the contradictions of his argument.

Victorian womanhood was thought of, not only as more naturally religious, but also as more naturally "pure" or unsexual than men. The Victorian cult of domesticity was built on sexual repression. Good women, suitable to be wives and mothers, should remain lifelong sexual innocents. Although the mother of many children, the chaste wife was to remain ignorant of her own biology and incapable of feeling sexual

pleasure. Sex was something women endured for the sake of maternity, not something that she could or should enjoy. Indeed, one might say that the fact that children were produced by sexual intercourse between one's mother and one's father became the well-concealed scandal of the Victorian household. Freud was to postulate that the accidental observance of this "primal scene" would be so traumatizing to a child that the repression of its memory was the primary source of neurosis in adults.

One effect of this repression was the socialization of middle-class women into a culture of illness. Women were assumed to be too delicate to bear the rigors of physical labor. Any mention of bodily functions was presumed to be shocking to their psyches. A conspiracy of silence surrounded these functions, and they were alluded to only in hushed and veiled terms. This atmosphere of sexual repression is reflected in the reigning medical ideologies and practices of the day. Eminent schools of medicine taught that women had limited physical energy and what little they had was absorbed in the tasks of maternity. Any effort to divert this limited store of female energy to activity outside the home, including higher education, would reduce this feeble creature to invalidism. Higher education for women was widely opposed on these grounds. In 1830, a clergyman educator confidently declared:

As for the training of young ladies through a long intellectual course, as we do young men, it can never be done. They will die in the process...In forcing the intellect of woman beyond what her physical organization can bear...in these years the poor thing has her brain crowded with history and grammar, arithmetic, geography, natural history, chemistry, physiology, physics, astronomy, rhetoric, natural and moral philosophy, metaphysics, French, often German, Latin, perhaps Greek, reading, spelling, committing poetry, writing compositions, drawing, painting, etc. etc. *ad infinitum*. Then, out of school hours from three to six hours of severe toil at the piano. She must be on the strain all the school hours, study in the evening till her eyes ache, her brain whirls, her spine yields and gives way, and she comes through the process of education enervated, feeble, without courage or vigor. Alas, must we crowd education upon our daughters and, for the sake of having them "intellectual", make them puny, nervous, their whole earthly existence a struggle between life and death?

By 1900 these views were no longer defensible. Better diet, more sensible clothes, the ability of women in, for example, the elite women's colleges of America's East Coast to emulate classical university education with equal success, would appear to have refuted these dire warnings. Nevertheless, a prominent educator in 1903 could still snap waspishly:

The first danger of a woman is over brain-work. It affects that

part of her organism which is sacred to heredity.

Educators such as Sidney Hall, president of Clark University (the man responsible for bringing Freud to America), warned that the education and emancipation of women threatened the physical end of the human race. It was in this atmosphere that Protestant reformers in the U.S. passed severe laws prohibiting the distribution of birth-control information. To combat the tide of dangerous new opinions, a holiday celebrating traditional motherhood or "Mother's Day" was sponsored by Protestant Churches in the early 20th century and was soon established as a national holiday.

The Victorian cult of true womanhood was clearly a class ideal. In its image of the delicate woman who belonged in the home it studiously ignored the fact that large numbers of poor women were working inhuman hours in factories for pitiable wages. Its sublimated leisure culture for the affluent bourgeois lady was built on a world of repression, both sexual repression that found its outlet in a proliferation of houses of prostitution, and the repression of the working class, whose exploited labor was the underpinning of middle-class society. This lower class was viewed as a world of bestial appetites and irrational mob instincts. All the sentimental efforts to restore traditional ruling class values ultimately aimed at keeping this lower world in its place. These two forms of repression intermingled because the poor woman who could scarcely survive on the wages of the factory often turned to prostitution. Because the cult of true womanhood made the leisured bourgeois woman normative, the plight of working women could be viewed only as a downfall from the sanctity of the home. Its true character as the underside of Victorian repression and exploitation went unnoticed.

Male Victorian reformers recognized the inhuman conditions under which working-class women lived, the long hours, up to twelve or fourteen hours a day, six days a week, for pitiable wages far below even the wages of male factory workers. They also saw that women and children labored under inhumane conditions, crowded in unsanitary sweatshops without proper ventilation. The Triangle fire in New York City, in 1911, which took the lives of 146 female shirtwaist operatives who died as they tried to jump from the eighth, ninth and tenth floors of the loft building where they worked because the stairway exits had been barred to prevent the girls from taking breaks in the open air, focused the outrage of feminists, as well as labor reformers, on the plight of working women.

But male reformers of the social-gospel tradition generally sought a solution to the problem of working women, as well as children, through the elimination of child and female labor. The working man's or "family" wage would enable all working men to aspire to the middle-class ideal of non-working children and wives. Laws passed to protect

women had the effect of eliminating women from the better paid jobs. Male union organizers saw female labor as a threat to male wages, and also sought either to eliminate women from the work-force or else segregate them in special sectors of the workforce reserved for women, rather than attempt to organize women and to fight for equal wages and good working conditions for all workers, male or female. Thus, although women increasingly entered the paid labor force throughout the 19th century, female labor was being shaped into a special female job ghetto characterized by low wages and poor job security.

Female reformers of the 19th century took two different approaches to the experience of shrinking opportunities and personality options for middle-class women. One approach characterized the feminist movement that emerged in America from the abolitionist struggle in the 1830s. Led by figures such as Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, these women sought to break down the restrictions that confined women to the private domestic sphere and made them legal dependents on fathers and husbands. Feminism was a civil rights movement, a movement to claim for women the legal rights of citizenship as persons in their own right. This meant not only the vote, but property rights, the right to make contracts and represent themselves in their own name. It meant the right to enter institutions of higher learning and professional schools barred to women and to exercise the professions for which this education prepared them. It was a struggle to dismantle the legal codes that made women permanent dependents. The charter of this American female civil rights struggle was laid down in the Declaration of Women's Rights at Seneca Falls in 1848. It took over 80 years to win the right to vote which finally confirmed women as full citizens of the United States—longer even than in Britain, where women gained equal voting rights in 1921. In 1984, 136 years later, Americans still refuse to pass the Equal Rights Amendment which would provide the legal base for challenging the sex discriminatory laws.

A second approach is represented in America by a figure such as Catherine Beecher. Instead of seeking the rights and roles of the public sphere, Beecher sought rather to elaborate the separate and distinct roles of women in the family. For her the ideology of womanhood and the Home became a base for woman's moral and religious superiority. Woman will become the savior of the Republic by cultivating her separate sphere and virtues and thereby converting and uplifting the male. Woman is to become mistress rather than victim of the domestic realm. Domestic science, medicine, health, domestic economy, will transform woman's special realm into a place of knowledge and power where she will exercise her gifts to transform the world through transforming the private lives of those under her charge. Woman as teacher of the nation, particularly moral teacher, was always at the heart of Beecher's efforts.

Ironically though, this more conservative vision moved increasingly, in Beecher's thought, toward female separatism; from women as altruistic, self-sacrificing servants of men in the family, to single professional women bonding together in households where they would teach other women. Teaching, for Beecher, included not only intellectual but moral training; not only spiritual, but economic skills, knowledge of their bodies and their health. She envisioned a combined communal household, at once family, Church, school and health resort, for a gathered world of women. It is perhaps not accidental that Beecher's great niece was the feminist economist Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

This division in the ideology and strategy of female reformism reflects the schizophrenia of modern industrial society itself. It shows the difficulty of devising a coherent strategy to overcome the division between the ideology and roles of women in the home and the socio-economic marginalization of women from the public sphere. In late 19th-century America, Frances Willard, president of the WCTU, attempted a dramatic fusion of the two strategies. For her, the base of woman's power always remained the home and the moral superiority of woman in her role as Mother. But the protection of the home demanded that woman expand into the public world as a crusader, not only abolishing the evils of the tavern that afflicted the home, but also gaining education, political power, equal opportunities on the job, labor rights and, finally, an end to war, all this in the name of "Home Protection". Unlike Catherine Beecher, Willard was a militant supporter of woman's suffrage. How could woman protect the home from public evil if she couldn't vote? In effect, Willard took the rhetoric of feminine domestic ideology and made it a tool of women's civil rights.

Both types of Victorian female reformism ended (both in Britain and in the United States) in certain traps for women. The feminists who struggled for equal rights, based on women's possessions of the same nature as men, typically ignored women's extra jobs in the home. They argued for women's ability to enter the male world of education, work and politics on the same basis as men, without recognising the domestic handicaps that prevented most women from being able to take advantage of these "rights". The domestic reformers, on the other hand, who idealized women's separate maternal sphere and functions and sought to make this the basis of an ideology of social transformation, at the same time locked women into the Victorian ideology of separate ideologies and spheres for maleness and femaleness. Women, in this frame of reference, could only remain morally superior to men by remaining different and separate from men. Modern feminism, in the second half of the 20th century, still struggles with this dual heritage of Victorian feminism and the duality of home and work that underlies it.