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Author(s): Valerie Saiving Goldstein

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THE HUMAN SITUATION: A FEMININE VIEW

VALERIE SAIVING GOLDSTEIN*

I AM a student of theology; I am also a woman. Perhaps it strikes you as curious that I put these two assertions beside each other, as if to imply that one's sexual identity has some bearing on his theological views. I myself would have rejected such an idea when I first began my theological studies. But now, thirteen years later, I am no longer as certain as I once was that, when theologians speak of "man," they are using the word in its generic sense. It is, after all, a well-known fact that theology has been written almost exclusively by men. This alone should put us on guard, especially since contemporary theologians constantly remind us that one of man's strongest temptations is to identify his own limited perspective with universal truth.

I purpose to criticize, from the viewpoint of feminine experience, the estimate of the human situation made by certain contemporary theologians. Although the views I shall outline receive their most uncompromising expression in the writings of Anders Nygren and Reinhold Niebuhr, I believe that they represent a widespread tendency in contemporary theology to describe man's predicament as rising from his separateness and the anxiety occasioned by it and to identify sin with self-assertion and love with selflessness.

The human condition, according to

* Valerie Saiving Goldstein is instructor in religion, Hobart and William Smith colleges, Geneva, New York. She received her education at Bates College, the University of Chicago, and the Union Theological Seminary.

many contemporary theologians, is universally characterized by anxiety, for, while man is a creature, subject to the limitations of all finite existence, he is different from other creatures because he is free. Although his freedom is qualified by his participation in the natural order, he is not simply bound by inherited instinct to a repetitious living-out of the life-pattern common to all members of the species. Instead, he can stand apart from the world and survey it, envision multiple possibilities and make choices, elaborate his own private ends and imagine larger harmonies, destroy given natural structures and create new ones in their place. This freedom of man, which is the source of his historical and cultural creativity, is also the source of his temptation to sin. For man's freedom, which from another point of view can be called his individuality and his essential loneliness, brings with it a pervasive fear for the survival of the self and its values. Sin is the self's attempt to overcome that anxiety by magnifying its own power, righteousness, or knowledge. Man knows that he is merely a part of the whole, but he tries to convince himself and others that he is the whole. He tries, in fact, to become the whole. Sin is the unjustified concern of the self for its own power and prestige; it is the imperialistic drive to close the gap between the individual, separate self and others by reducing those others to the status of mere objects which can then be treated as appendages of the self and manipulated accordingly. Sin is not an occasional, isolated act but pervades

everything man does, even those acts which he performs for the most pure and "unselfish" motives. For the human creature has a marvelous capacity for blinding himself to the fact that, no matter how altruistic his goals may be, he always inserts his own limited individual goals into his attempts to achieve them.

Love is the precise opposite of sin. It is the true norm of human existence and the one real solution to the fundamental predicament in which man stands. Love, according to these theologians, is completely self-giving, taking no thought for its own interests but seeking only the good of the other. Love makes no value judgments concerning the other's worth; it demands neither merit in the other nor recompense for itself but gives itself freely, fully, and without calculation. Love is unconditional forgiveness; concerning the one to whom it is given, it beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love is personal; it is the concrete relatedness of an *I* to a *Thou*, in which the *I* casts aside all its particularities, all its self-affirmations, everything which separates it from the *Thou*, and becomes wholly receptive to the other.

It is important, I think, to emphasize that the foregoing analysis of the human situation and the definitions of love and sin which accompany it are mutually dependent concepts. The kind of love described is normative and redemptive precisely insofar as it answers to man's deepest need. If human nature and the human situation are not as described by the theologians in question, then the assertion that self-giving love is the law of man's being is irrelevant and may even be untrue. To the extent that contemporary theology has, in whole or in part, described the human condition inaccur-

rately, to that same extent is its doctrine of love in question.

It is my contention that there are significant differences between masculine and feminine experience and that feminine experience reveals in a more emphatic fashion certain aspects of the human situation which are present but less obvious in the experience of men. Contemporary theological doctrines of love have, I believe, been constructed primarily upon the basis of masculine experience and thus view the human condition from the male standpoint. Consequently, these doctrines do not provide an adequate interpretation of the situation of women—nor, for that matter, of men, especially in view of certain fundamental changes now taking place in our own society.

But can we speak meaningfully about feminine experience as something fundamentally different from masculine experience? Is there such a thing as an underlying feminine character structure which always and everywhere differs from the basic character structure of the male? Are not all distinctions between the sexes, except the purely biological ones, relative to a given culture? Are we not all, men and women alike, members of a single species?

Of course it would be ridiculous to deny that there is a structure of experience common to both men and women, so that we may legitimately speak of the "human situation" without reference to sexual identity. The only question is whether we have described the human situation correctly by taking account of the experiences of both sexes. We know, too, that we can no longer make any hard-and-fast distinctions between the *potentialities* of men and women as such. The twentieth century has witnessed the shattering of too many of our traditional

conceptions of sexual differences for us any longer to ignore the tremendous plasticity of human nature. But perhaps the most telling evidence of all that every distinction between the sexes above the physiological level is purely arbitrary comes from the descriptions given by cultural anthropologists of many primitive societies whose ideas about the behavior appropriate to each sex are widely different from, and in many instances contradictory to, those held in our own tradition.

And yet, curiously enough, it is the anthropologists themselves who have begun in recent years to question the assumption that the characters of men and women are essentially alike in all respects. It is even more startling to note that among them are two women of unquestioned professional competence.

It was Ruth Benedict—who in *Patterns of Culture* stressed the relativity of the character ideals held by various societies and the inability of science to account for their diversity on a biological basis—who also wrote these words: “To me it seems a very terrible thing to be a woman.” And again: “Nature lays a compelling and very distressing hand upon woman, and she struggles in vain who tries to deny it or escape it—life loves the little irony of proving it upon the very woman who has denied it; she can only hope for success by working according to Nature’s conception of her make-up—not against them.”¹

Margaret Mead’s concern with the problem of sex differentiation has been expressed in much of her research and writing. In 1935 she published *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*,² in which she came to the conclusion that there are no natural—that is to say, innate—differences between the character traits of men and women.

Rather, the way any particular society defines masculinity and femininity is by a purely arbitrary assignment to one or the other sex of qualities to which members of either sex could be trained with equal ease.

Fourteen years later Margaret Mead published *Male and Female*, in which she returned to the problem, but this time from a slightly different perspective:

In every known society, mankind has elaborated the biological division of labour into forms often very remotely related to the original biological differences that provided the original clues. . . . Sometimes one quality has been assigned to one sex, sometimes to the other. . . . Whether we deal with small matters or with large, with the frivolities of ornament and cosmetics or the sanctities of man’s place in the universe, we find this great variety of ways, often flatly contradictory one to the other, in which the roles of the two sexes have been patterned.

But we always find the patterning. We know of no culture that has said, articulately, that there is no difference between men and women except in the way they contribute to the creation of the next generation; that otherwise in all respects they are simply human beings with varying gifts, no one of which can be exclusively assigned to either sex. . . .

So . . . we are faced with a most bewildering and confusing array of apparently contradictory evidence about sex differences. We may well ask: Are they important? Do real differences exist, in addition to the obvious anatomical and physical ones—but just as biologically based—that may be masked by the learnings appropriate to any given society, but which will nevertheless be there? Will such differences run through all of men’s and all of women’s behaviour?³

Miss Mead answers this question in the affirmative, not because she has found new evidence which contradicts the evidence presented in her earlier book, but because she has put the question in a different way. Instead of asking the question most of us ask: “Are char-

acter differences between the sexes the result of heredity or environment, of biology or culture?" she asks, rather, whether there may not be certain basic similarities in the ways in which men and women in every culture have experienced what it means to be a man or to be a woman. Cultures may and do superimpose upon the fundamental meanings of sex membership other ideas which are irrelevant or contradictory to the basic structure of sexuality. Nevertheless, if such regularities do exist, then we may find that, underneath the specific additions which each culture has imposed, there remains a substratum or core of masculine and feminine orientations which, if too drastically contradicted by the superstructure, may threaten the very existence of the society and its members.

In my description of a few of these biocultural differences between masculine and feminine experience, I shall draw heavily upon Margaret Mead's analysis because I personally find it most illuminating. Nevertheless, I wish to make it clear that I am not attempting to summarize her thought, which is far too complex to present fully here, nor (since even anthropologists are not in agreement in these matters) do I present her as an authority. Primarily, what I shall say is based upon my own experience and observation as it has been clarified and substantiated by Miss Mead and by a number of other writers, including Helene Deutsch,⁴ Erich Fromm,⁵ and Theodor Reik⁶ (Psychoanalysts), Talcott Parsons⁷ (sociologist), and Ashley Montagu⁸ (anthropologist).

What, then, are the distinctions between the experiences of men and the experiences of women as they occur in any human society, and in what way do these

contribute to the formation of differences between the masculine and the feminine character and orientation?

We must begin with the central fact about sexual differences: that in every society it is women—and only women—who bear children. Further, in every society the person closest to the infant and young child is a woman. This fact, based on the physiology of lactation, remains true even in our own culture, in which the formula has so largely replaced the mother's breast.

The close relationship between mother and infant plays the first and perhaps the most important role in the formation of masculine and feminine character, for it means that the person with whom the child originally identifies himself is a woman. Both male and female children must learn to overcome this initial identification by differentiating themselves from the mother. But the kind and degree of differentiation required of the boy are strikingly different from what is required of the girl. The little girl learns that, although she must grow up (become a separate person), she will grow up to be a woman, like her mother, and have babies of her own; she will, in a broad sense, merely take her mother's place. She learns, too, that she will attain womanhood quite naturally—merely by the maturation of her body. In fact, she already is a woman, if in miniature, and must therefore be protected against the premature exploitation of her femininity. And so the emphasis for the girl is upon the fact that she *is* a female and that all she needs to do to realize her full femininity is to wait.

The boy's process of differentiation from his mother is much more complex and difficult. He learns not only that he must grow up but that he must grow up to be a man; that men are different from

women, since they do not have babies; and that he must therefore become quite a different sort of creature from his mother. Instead of imitating her, he must relinquish completely his original identification with her. He also finds that, while he is not and never will be a woman, neither is he yet a man. It will be many years before he can perform sexually as a man, and therefore he does not need to be guarded, like his sister, against sexual activity before he is ready for it. He is thus permitted far greater freedom than the girl. But this freedom has its drawbacks for him, since along with it goes a certain set of standards which he must meet before he will be judged to have achieved manhood. He must learn this or that skill, acquire this or that trait or ability, and pass this or that test of endurance, courage, strength, or accomplishment. He must *prove* himself to be a man. True, he has certain advantages over the girl, particularly in the fact that he has visible organs which demonstrate his sex. But, on the whole, the process of self-differentiation plays a stronger and more anxiety-provoking role in the boy's maturation than is normally the case for the girl. Growing up is not merely a natural process of bodily maturation; it is, instead, a challenge which he must meet, a proof he must furnish by means of performance, achievement, and activity directed toward the external world. And even so his reward for achieving manhood is not easily grasped in imagination. It is quite obvious to a child what motherhood is; it is not nearly so obvious what it means to be a father.

This early divergence between masculine and feminine sexual development is repeated, reinforced, and elaborated in later stages of the individual's life. For instance, the girl's history as a female

is punctuated and authenticated by a series of definite, natural, and irreversible bodily occurrences: first menstruation, defloration, childbirth, menopause. Each of these events, to be sure, occasions anxiety for the girl and thus might seem to be the female equivalent of the constant anxiety regarding his maleness which besets the boy. Yet these physiological events which mark the woman's life have a reassuring aspect, too, for each of them is concrete, unmistakable proof of her femaleness. The boy's history will provide no such dramatic, once-for-all physical signals of his masculinity.

Even more significant are the differences between male and female roles in the various aspects of adult sexuality. The processes of impregnation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation have a certain passivity about them; they are things which *happen* to a woman more than things that she *does*. The sexual act itself, for example, has for her this basically passive quality. The woman, of course, *may* take an active role, but it is not necessary for her to do so, either to satisfy the man or to fulfil her reproductive function. In fact, she may be quite without desire or may even have strong feelings of revulsion, and yet she may, for any number of reasons, submit to the man—sometimes with sufficient grace so that he is completely unaware of her feelings. In the extreme case—rape—the passive structure of female sexuality unquestionably appears. The case is quite otherwise for the male, whose *active* desire and *active* performance in the sexual act is absolutely required for its completion. And here again the demand for performance is coupled with an inevitable anxiety; in order to prove his maleness, he *must* succeed in

what he has undertaken—and it is possible for him to fail.

Considered in terms of its reproductive consequences, the sexual act has greatly different meanings for men and women. The male's part in the creation of a child seems indirect and is completed very quickly, while a woman's participation is direct, immediate, and prolonged. It is true that we now know as scientific fact what some primitive peoples have only suspected and others denied: that the man's role in reproduction is essential and that his genetic contribution is equal to the woman's. Yet the birth of a child is never an absolute guaranty to a man of his maleness, as it is to a woman of her femaleness. For, while there can be no doubt as to who is the mother of the child, "paternity remains, with all our modern biological knowledge, as inferential as it ever was, and considerably less ascertainable than it has seemed to be in some periods of history."⁹ There is a sense, too, in which woman's biological creativity appears to present a challenge to a man; he perhaps feels his inability to bear children as a deficiency for which he must compensate by other kinds of creativity.

The man's sense of his own masculinity, then, is throughout characterized by uncertainty, challenge, and the feeling that he must again and again prove himself a man. It also calls for a kind of objective achievement and a greater degree of self-differentiation and self-development than are required of the woman *as woman*. In a sense, masculinity is an endless process of *becoming*, while in femininity the emphasis is on *being*. Another way of putting the distinction is that woman is more closely bound to nature than is man. This has advantages and disadvantages for her as a human being. The advantages lie in

her greater degree of natural security and the lesser degree of anxiety to which she is subject, both of which make it easier, all other things being equal, for her to enter into loving relationships in which self-concern is at a minimum. Yet if it is true, as Niebuhr says, that man stands at the juncture of nature and spirit, then woman's closeness to nature is a measure of the distance she must travel to reach spirit. That she, too, is a free human being is proved by the fact that she can reject the feminine role; but, having chosen it, she has chosen a kind of bondage which is not involved in a man's acceptance of his sexual identity.

For masculinity can with good reason be defined as the distance between spirit and nature. Because of his less direct and immediate role in the reproductive process, including nurture during the long period of human infancy, man is, in his greater freedom, necessarily subject to a kind of anxiety—and, consequently, to a kind of creative drive—which is experienced more rarely and less intensely by most women.

I have drawn the distinctions between masculine and feminine experience in the sharpest possible terms in order to clarify the divergence between them. But it is important to remind ourselves of the countless changes which have been rung on these basic themes in human societies. Every culture, we have said, superimposes upon the necessities of sexual roles a whole structure of masculine and feminine character traits. Many of these addenda are only tenuously related to the foundation on which they rest, and they may even be completely contradictory to that foundation. When this phenomenon is carried to its extreme, so that women, for example, are educated by their society to despise the functions of childbearing and nurture,

then the society is in grave danger of bringing about its own destruction. Similarly, where procreation is valued so highly that men attempt to participate directly in the processes of pregnancy, birth, and the rearing of children to the exclusion of other kinds of creative activity, the social fabric again becomes dangerously weak. Both types of society have been discovered among preliterate peoples,¹⁰ and, as we shall see, our own society has not escaped the tendency to overvalue the traits characteristic to one or the other sex.

The truth is, of course, that there is no impassable gulf between the ways in which men and women may look at themselves and at their world. Just as sexuality is not the whole of human existence, so the individual's sense of his own identity is not derived solely from his sexual role. Human beings of both sexes have certain basic experiences in common from earliest infancy—hunger and satiety, constriction and freedom, defenselessness and power, resentment and love. Men and women can and do learn from each other, too; women can be aggressive and ambitious, and men can be fatherly. Neither sex is exempt from anxiety, and both experience the temptations of passivity. Yet the individual's sense of being male or female, which plays such an important part in the young child's struggle for self-definition, can never be finally separated from his total orientation to life; in those cases—which are the majority—in which adult men and women accept and are able to actualize their respective sexual roles, the characterological tendencies based on sex membership are reinforced and strengthened. This is surely the reason why, although there have been women philosophers, musicians, and murderers, there have been no fe-

male Platos, Bachs, or Hitlers. It is also the reason why even those men who enjoy being fathers most fully can scarcely be imagined as finding complete self-fulfilment in fatherhood. "A woman, as Madame de Staël remarked, either has children or writes books."¹¹ As for men, Margaret Mead has observed:

In every known human society the male's need for achievement can be recognized. Men may cook, or weave or dress dolls or hunt hummingbirds, but if such activities are appropriate occupations of men, then the whole society, men and women alike, votes them as important. When the same occupations are performed by women, they are regarded as less important. In a great number of human societies men's sureness of their sex role is tied up with their right, or ability, to practise some activity that women are not allowed to practise. Their maleness, in fact, has to be underwritten by preventing women from entering some field or performing some feat. Here may be found the relationship between maleness and pride; that is, a need for prestige that will outstrip the prestige which is accorded to any woman. There seems no evidence that it is necessary for men to surpass women in any specific way, but rather that men do need to find reassurance in achievement, and because of this connection, cultures frequently phrase achievement as something that women do not or cannot do, rather than directly as something which men do well.

The recurrent problem of civilization is to define the male role satisfactorily enough—whether it be to build gardens or raise cattle, kill game or kill enemies, build bridges or handle bank-shares—so that the male may in the course of his life reach a solid sense of irreversible achievement, of which his childhood knowledge of the satisfactions of childbearing have given him a glimpse. In the case of women, it is only necessary that they be permitted by the given social arrangements to fulfil their biological role, to attain this sense of irreversible achievement. If women are to be restless and questing, even in the face of childbearing, they must be made so through education. If men are ever to be at peace, ever certain that their lives have been lived as they were meant to be, they must have, in addition to paternity, culturally elaborated forms of expression that are lasting and sure. Each culture—in its own way—has developed

forms that will make men satisfied in their constructive activities without distorting their sure sense of their masculinity. Fewer cultures have yet found ways in which to give women a divine discontent that will demand other satisfactions than those of childbearing.¹²

It seems to me that a more realistic appraisal of contemporary theological doctrines of sin and love is possible against this general background, for the prevalent theologies today were created by men who lived amid the tensions of a hypermasculine culture. What is usually called the "modern era" in Western civilization, stretching roughly from the Renaissance and Reformation up to very recent times and reaching the peak of its expression in the rise of capitalism, the industrial revolution, imperialism, the triumphs of science and technology, and other well-known phenomena of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries—this modern era can be called the "masculine age par excellence," in the sense that it emphasized, encouraged, and set free precisely those aspects of human nature which are peculiarly significant to men. It placed the highest value on external achievement, on the creation of structures of matter and meaning, on self-differentiation and the separation of man from nature. By its emphasis on *laissez faire* competition and economic uncertainty, on scientific and geographic explorations, on the widening of the gulf between family relationships, on the one hand, and the public life of business and politics, on the other—by these and many more innovations, the modern era presented a heightened challenge to men; and, by the same token, it increased their natural sense of insecurity and anxiety. It was a masculine era, too, in the degree to which it devalued the functions of women and children and the whole reproduc-

tive process. It thereby provoked a new restlessness in women, too.¹³

It is clear that many of the characteristic emphases of contemporary theology—its definition of the human situation in terms of anxiety, estrangement, and the conflict between necessity and freedom; its identification of sin with pride, will-to-power, exploitation, self-assertiveness, and the treatment of others as objects rather than persons; its conception of redemption as restoring to man what he fundamentally lacks (namely, sacrificial love, the I-Thou relationship, the primacy of the personal, and, ultimately, peace)—it is clear that such an analysis of man's dilemma was profoundly responsive and relevant to the concrete facts of modern man's existence. Insofar as modern woman, too, increasingly accepted the prevailing values of the age and took on the challenges and opportunities, risks and insecurities of participation in the masculine world, this theology spoke directly to her condition also. And, since the most striking features of modern culture were but heightened expressions of one aspect of the universal human situation, the adequacy of this theology as a description of man's fundamental predicament seemed assured.

As a matter of fact, however, this theology is not adequate to the universal human situation; its inadequacy is clearer to no one than to certain contemporary women. These women have been enabled, through personal experience and education, to transcend the boundaries of a purely feminine identity. They now stand closer to the juncture of nature and spirit than was possible for most women in the past. They believe in the values of self-differentiation, challenge, and adventure and are not strangers to that "divine discontent" which has always driv-

en men. Yet these same women value their femininity also; they do not wish to discard their sexual identity but rather to gather it up into a higher unity. They want, in other words, to be both women *and* full human beings.

Many of these women, who were brought up to believe in the fundamental equality of the sexes and who were given the same kind of education and the same encouragement to self-realization as their male contemporaries, do not really discover until they marry and bear children—or, perhaps, have been forced to admit to themselves that they never will marry—that there are real differences between the masculine and feminine situations which cannot be blamed upon a cultural lag in the definitions of femininity or upon the “selfishness” and “stupidity” of men. It is only at this point, when the ultimate actualization of their specific sexuality must be either accepted or given up for good, that they become aware of the deep need of almost every woman, regardless of her personal history and achievements or her belief in her own individual value, to surrender her self-identity and be included in another’s “power of being.” And, if she is fortunate enough to bear a child, she very soon discovers that the one essential, indispensable relationship of a mother to her child is the I-Thou relationship. In infancy the very existence of the child depends upon the mother’s ability to transcend her own patterns of thought, feeling, and physical need. As Margaret Mead puts it, “The mother who must learn that the infant who was but an hour ago a part of her own body is now a different individual, with its own hungers and its own needs, and that if she listens to her own body to interpret the child, the child will die, is schooled in an irreplaceable school.”¹⁴ At a later

stage in the child’s life, too, the essential relationship continues to be one of love. To take just one example—the least sentimental one, perhaps—the child, when he has learned to talk, is almost constantly absorbed in trying to understand the world around him. It is so full of strange and wonderful and lovely and terrifying things. He is full of questions, and upon his learning the true and adequate answers to them depends the whole process of acculturation upon which the uniqueness of human societies rests. But, in order to answer a child’s eager questions, the mother must be able to transcend her own habitual patterns of thought; she must meet the child where *he* is at that moment. It is absolutely impossible to communicate with a young child without in some way abandoning one’s own perspective and looking at the world through *his* eyes.

A mother who rejoices in her maternal role—and most mothers do most of the time—knows the profound experience of self-transcending love. But she knows, too, that it is not the whole meaning of life. For she learns not only that it is impossible to sustain a perpetual I-Thou relationship but that the attempt to do so can be deadly. The moments, hours, and days of self-giving must be balanced by moments, hours, and days of withdrawal into, and enrichment of, her individual selfhood if she is to remain a whole person. She learns, too, that a woman can give too much of herself, so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness; she can become merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her fellow men, or, perhaps, even to God.

For the temptations of woman *as woman* are not the same as the temptations of man *as man*, and the specifically feminine forms of sin—“feminine” not because they are confined to women or

because women are incapable of sinning in other ways but because they are outgrowths of the basic feminine character structure—have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as “pride” and “will-to-power.” They are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one’s own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason—in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.

This list of specifically feminine sins could be extended. All of them, however, are to be understood as merely one side of the feminine coin. For just as man’s distance from nature is the precondition of his creativity, on the one hand, and his self-concern, on the other, so does woman’s closeness to nature have dipolar potentialities. Her sureness of her own femininity and thus of her secure place in the scheme of things may, if she accepts the feminine role with joy, enable her to be a source of strength and refreshment to her husband, her children, and the wider community. If she has been brought up to devalue her femininity, on the other hand, this same sense that for her “anatomy is destiny” may create an attitude of stolid and sterile resignation, a feeling that there is no use in trying. Again, the fact that her whole growth toward womanhood has the character of an inevitable process of bodily maturation rather than that of a challenge and a task may lead her to dissipate herself in activities which are merely trivial. Yet it is the same lack of creative drive which may make it possible for her to perform cheerfully the thousand-and-one routine tasks—the wom-

an’s work which is never done—which someone must do if life is to go on. Her capacity for surrendering her individual concerns in order to serve the immediate needs of others—a quality which is so essential to the maternal role—can, on the other hand, induce a kind of diffuseness of purpose, a tendency toward being easily distracted, a failure to discriminate between the more and the less important, and an inability to focus in a sustained manner on the pursuit of any single goal.¹⁵ Her receptivity to the moods and feelings of others and her tendency to merge her selfhood in the joys, sorrows, hopes, and problems of those around her are the positive expressions of an aspect of the feminine character which may also take the negative forms of gossipy sociability, dependence on others (such as husband or children) for the definition of her values, or a refusal to respect another’s right to privacy. And her capacity for forgiving love, for cherishing all her children equally without regard to beauty, merit, or intelligence, can also express itself in a kind of indiscriminate tolerance which suspects or rejects all objective criteria of excellence.

All this is not meant to constitute an indictment of the feminine character as such. I have no wish, certainly, to add to the burden of guilt which has been heaped upon women—by themselves as well as by men—for centuries. My purpose, indeed, as far as it concerns women in particular, is quite the opposite. It is to awaken theologians to the fact that the situation of woman, however similar it may appear on the surface of our contemporary world to the situation of man and however much it may be echoed in the life of individual men, is, at bottom, quite different—that the specifically feminine dilemma is, in fact, precisely the opposite of the masculine. Today, when

for the first time in human history it really seems possible that those endless housewifely tasks—which, along with the bearing and rearing of children, have always been enough to fill the whole of each day for the average woman—may virtually be eliminated; today, when at last women might seem to be in a position to begin to be both feminine and fully developed, creative human beings; today, these same women are being subjected to pressures from many sides to return to the traditional feminine niche and to devote themselves wholly to the tasks of nurture, support, and service of their families. One might expect of theologians that they at least not add to these pressures. One might even expect them to support and encourage the woman who desires to be both a woman and an individual in her own right, a separate person some part of whose mind and feelings are inviolable, some part of whose time belongs strictly to herself, in whose house there is, to use Virginia Woolf's marvelous image, "a room of one's own." Yet theology, to the extent that it has defined the human condition on the basis of masculine experience, continues to speak of such desires as sin or temptation to sin. If such a woman believes the theologians, she will try to strangle those impulses in herself. She will believe that, having chosen marriage and children and thus being face to face with the needs of her family for love, refreshment, and forgiveness, she has no right to ask anything for herself but must submit without qualification to the strictly feminine role.

Perhaps, after all, the contemporary woman who wants to participate in the creative tasks of the world outside her home—those tasks upon which mankind has built all that is distinctively human,

that is, history and culture—and yet remain a woman is attempting an impossible task. Perhaps the goal we should set ourselves is to rear our daughters in the older way, without too much formal education and without encouraging them to be independent, differentiated, free human beings of whom some contribution is expected other than the production of the next generation. If we could do this, our daughters might be able to find secure fulfilment in a simple femininity. After all, the division of labor between the sexes worked fairly well for thousands of years, and we may be only asking for trouble by trying to modify that structure.

And yet I do not think we can turn back this particular clock. Nor do I think that the feminine dilemma is of concern only to women. To understand it is important for men, too, not only because it is a loss to every man when a woman fails to realize her full self-identity, but because there is, it seems to me, a growing trend in contemporary life toward the feminizing of society itself, including men as well as women.

To document and explore this trend would require a lengthy exposition beyond the scope of the present paper. I can only refer here briefly to two recent analyses of contemporary Western culture which have impressed me greatly in this connection. Neither of these books—David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*¹⁶ and Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*¹⁷—deals with the masculine-feminine theme as such. Yet both of them see a quite recent shift in the fundamental orientation of our present society, one which presages an era as different from what we call the "modern age" as the modern age differs from the medieval. And the analysis of each presents,

in its own way, the picture of a society in which the character traits inherent in femininity are being increasingly emphasized, encouraged, and absolutized, just as the modern era raised the essentially masculine character traits to their highest possible power. Lionel Trilling has noted the same trend in our contemporary life and has characterized both its virtues and its dangers with great clarity:

Our culture is in process of revision, and of revision in a very good and right direction, in the direction of greater openness, greater socialization, greater cooperativeness, greater reasonableness. There are, to be sure, tendencies to be observed which go counter to this one, but they are not, I believe, so momentous as the development of the tendency toward social peace. It must always seem ill-natured to raise any question at all about this tendency. It goes against the grain to do so. . . . The American educated middle class is firm in its admiration of non-conformity and dissent. The right to be non-conformist, the right to dissent, is part of our conception of community. Everybody says so: in the weekly, monthly, quarterly magazines and in *The New York Times*, at the cocktail party, at the conference of psychiatrists, at the conference of teachers. How good this is, and how right! And yet, when we examine the content of our idea of non-conformity, we must be dismayed at the smallness of the concrete actuality this very large idea contains. The rhetoric is as sincere as it is capacious, yet we must sometimes wonder whether what is being praised and defended is anything more than the right to have had some sympathetic connection with Communism ten or twenty years ago. . . . We cannot really imagine non-conformity at all, not in art, not in moral or social theory, certainly not in the personal life—it is probably true that there never was a culture which required so entire an eradication of personal differentiation, so bland a uniformity of manner. Admiring non-conformity and loving community, we have decided that we are all non-conformists together. We assert the right of our egos to court adventure without danger and of our super-egos to be conscientious without undue strain.

We make, I think, what is in many ways a very attractive culture, but we really cannot imagine what it means to take an intellectual chance, or to make an intellectual mistake, or to have a real intellectual difference. You have but to read our novels to understand that we have a growing sense of the cooperative virtues and a diminishing sense of the self that cooperates.¹⁸

It is true that the kind of “selflessness” and “community” described here is hardly what the theologians who identify love with selflessness and community mean when they speak of the redemptive power of love. Yet there is no mistaking the fact that there is a strong similarity between theology’s view that salvation lies in selfless love and contemporary man’s growing tendency to avoid any strong assertion of the self as over against others and to merge his individual identity in the identities of others. In truth, the only element that is lacking in the latter picture is the theological presupposition of man’s inherent sinfulness, the stubborn refusal of the individual human being to give up his individuality and separateness and to unite in harmonious love. But, if this refusal to become selfless is wholly sinful, then it would seem that we are obliged to try to overcome it; and, when it is overcome, to whatever extent this may be possible, we are left with a chameleon-like creature who responds to others but has no personal identity of his own.

If it is true that our society is moving from a masculine to a feminine orientation, then theology ought to reconsider its estimate of the human condition and redefine its categories of sin and redemption. For a feminine society will have its own special potentialities for good and evil, to which a theology based solely on masculine experience may well be irrelevant.

NOTES

1. Quoted by Clyde Kluckhohn in a review of Margaret Mead, *An Anthropologist at Work: Writings of Ruth Benedict* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959), *New York Times Book Review*, May 31, 1959.
2. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1935.
3. Margaret Mead, *Male and Female* (New York: New American Library, 1959, by arrangement with William Morrow & Co. [originally published in 1949]), pp. 16-17.
4. Helene Deutsch, *Psychology of Women* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1944), Vols. I and II.
5. Erich Fromm, "Sex and Character," in Ruth Nanda Anshen (ed.), *The Family: Its Function and Destiny* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1949), chap. xix.
6. Theodor Reik, *Of Love and Lust* (New York: Grove Press, 1957, by arrangement with Farrar, Straus & Cudahy [originally published in 1949]).
7. Talcott Parsons, "The Social Structure of the Family," in Anshen (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 186-88.
8. Ashley Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1953).
9. Mead, *Male and Female*, p. 125.
10. See, among others, Mead, *ibid., passim*.
11. Robert Briffault, *The Mothers* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), II, 443.
12. Mead, *Male and Female* pp. 125-26.
13. This point is discussed at some length by Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham, M.D., *Modern Woman, the Lost Sex* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1959, by arrangement with Harper & Bros. [originally published in 1947]).
14. Mead, *Male and Female*, p. 284.
15. "The tendency to identification sometimes assumes very valuable forms. Thus, many women put their qualities, which may be excellent, at the disposal of their object of identification. . . . They prefer to love and enjoy their own qualities in others. . . . There are women endowed with rich natural gifts that cannot, however, develop beyond certain limits. Such women are exposed to outside influences and changing identifications to such an extent that they never succeed in consolidating their achievements. Instead of making a reasonable choice among numerous opportunities at their disposal, they constantly get involved in confusion that exerts a destructive influence on their own lives and the lives of those around them" (Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-33).
16. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1950, by arrangement with Yale University Press (originally published in 1950).
17. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
18. Lionel Trilling, *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 50-53.