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### The Cult of True Womanhood

A Protestant revival movement, the Second Great Awakening (SGA), began in the 1790s in this country and lasted until approximately 1850. Consequences of this movement that its millions of adherents could not imagine are evident today and will continue to shape gender relations.

Most historians consider the SGA a reaction against the prevailing Enlightenment values of rationalism, skepticism, and secularism that were paramount in the aftermath of the First Great Awakening that occurred between 1731 and 1755.

The SGA swept the country and was especially strong in the "Burned-over-district" ("burn" meaning to convert) of Western New York. Membership in almost all Christian denominations increased dramatically (most notably in Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches). The SGA also gave birth to new religions including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons) and the Seventh-Day Adventists. The overriding message of the SGA was that Americans should dedicate their lives to God and live according to His teachings.

The SGA served as a Christian values background for the creation of what historian Barbara Welter dubbed the "Cult of True Womanhood" (CTW). The four most prominent virtues of this cult were piety, purity, submission, and domesticity. The values of CTW were disseminated via magazines, books, annuals, and religious literature. Welter notes that if anyone, "male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues that made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as the enemy of God, of civilization, and of the Republic." The following is a brief overview of these new, predominantly middle-class, female virtues.

*Piety* or religion was considered the core of a woman's virtue and young men were encouraged to consider this attribute first when searching for a mate. A writer in "The Ladies Repository" stated "Religion is just what a woman needs, for it gives her dignity that suits her dependence." Another contributor noted that without religion a woman "is ever restless and unhappy..." Women were warned not to let literary or academic pursuits take them away from God. Author Sarah Josepha Hale believed "the greater the intellectual force, the greater and more fatal the errors into which women fall who wander from...Christ the Savior..."

Welter finds that *purity* was considered just as important as piety for without this attribute a woman was no woman at all, but a member of some lower order, a "fallen angel" who would be unworthy of the heavenly company of her sex. Women's magazines stated the loss of purity was a crime that would ultimately lead to madness or death. In a story published in "The Ladies' Wreath," a young woman tells her professor that she would like to wear bloomers (long, loose trousers that would become a symbol for women's rights) as they are healthful, give freedom of motion, and are attractive. The professor responds that bloomers are "only one of the many manifestations of that wild spirit of socialism and agrarian radicalism which is at present so rife in our land."

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*Submission* was the most feminine virtue expected of girls and women. Welter states that if women questioned male dominance and female submission they were rejecting the natural order of the universe. One writer in a women's magazine of the era stated that "a really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of her inferiority, and therefore grateful for support..." Another writer noted that "true feminine genius...is ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood..." Yet another author suggested that women "should become as little children" and avoid "a controversial spirit..."

*Domesticity* was among the most prized virtues put forth by women's magazines, and some aspects of redefining women's duties from that period are still with us. While men worked outside the home and provided for their families financially, women were charged with running the household. Historian Jean Baker states the most important domestic task was child rearing. "Conscious motherhood unknown to previous generations," Baker notes, "emerged as the central occupation for American women, and this shift from a male-dominated patriarchal family to a nurturing Christian home where mothers taught moral values was one of the greatest changes in American history."

Raising children became the responsibility of women as the words "father" and "parent" disappeared from domestic advice manuals. Baker states that child care became an anxiety producing, guilt-ridden vocation as a bad child was indicative of a bad mother. Being a good wife and mother was the epitome of womanhood. No matter how great her achievements outside of the home, if a woman failed to meet her obligations as spouse and mother, all was lost. As one author of the period stated: "A woman is nobody. A wife is everything...and a mother is, next to God, all powerful."

Although CTW was rooted in conservative Christian values, abortion was not a moral or legal issue. The likely explanation, according to historian Mark Stoler, was the prevailing belief that life did not begin until the fetus first moved or "quickened," typically between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy.

Historian Jeanne Boydston reminds us that in poor families where a husband's income could not maintain a stay-at-home wife and mother, the CTW did not, indeed could not, take hold. Urban women from the poorest families labored outside the household scavenging for food, fuel, and clothing. Poor and working-class women labored as tavern keepers, domestic servants, garment workers, and prostitutes among other occupations. According to Boydston, the CTW "did not protect millions of African-American women from the back-breaking labor that built the cotton economy of the South..."

Barbara Welter notes the CTW could not endure as the stay-at-home, submissive, redefinition of the female role carried the seeds of its own destruction. If perfect women were "very little less than the angels," they should most certainly take an active part in running the world that has been so badly mismanaged by men.

As the Second Great Awakening came to a close, the first major women's rights convention in the United States was held in Seneca Falls, New

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York (1848), to discuss the social, economic, and political conditions of females. Under the leadership of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott among others, this movement would work for gender equality in all spheres of American life including the right to vote. Welter states that through a gradual process of “challenge and acceptance, of change and continuity, the True Woman evolved into the New Woman – a transformation as startling as the abolition of slavery and the coming of the machine age.”

### Sources

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