

AN IDEA OF FEMALE SUPERIORITY

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American historiography abounds with analyses of the women reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These analyses, whether they be those written by proponents,¹ antagonists,² or more objective historians,³ commonly revolve around the thesis that the major motivating force behind this female reform activity was the belief that women possessed abilities equal to men and, therefore, should be given equal political, economic, and social rights. Almost always overlooked in such analyses is the more extreme idea that motivated one important group of female reformers. This was the idea of female superiority, which emphasized that women rather than, and not only together with, men were best able to solve certain problems in the political, economic, and/or social areas not previously open to female activity.

Although some early women reformers may have implied it as early as the 1840's,⁴ not until 1874 was the idea of female superiority expressed clearly and directly. On August 3, 1874, Mrs. Jane Fowler Willing, faculty member at Illinois Wesleyan University; Mrs. Emily Huntington Miller, juvenile fiction writer and trustee of Northwestern University; and Mrs. Martha McClellan Brown, a prominent temperance worker in Alliance, Ohio, met together aboard a steamer bound for the National Sunday School Assembly at Fairpoint, New York. In the ensuing discussion these three agreed that women should not be confined to an existence in the home. They expressed a common belief that their sex possessed the necessary outlook, the talent, and the "god-given" obligation to work generally for the "betterment of mankind."⁵ They decided that women could cure some of society's existing ills better than could men. The scattered successes of the previous year's women's crusades against the liquor traffic,⁶ for instance, illustrated to them that the so-called weaker sex had accomplished more in a few months of temperance reforming than men had been able to accomplish in many years.⁷ Mrs. Willing, Mrs. Miller, and Mrs. Brown decided to propose to the delegates attending the National Sunday School Assembly that a national organization be created to spearhead and to give direction to such female work.⁸ The delegates greeted the proposal with enthusiasm and issued the "call," an appeal for attendance at a national convention to be held in Cleveland in November, 1874.

On November 18, 135 delegates, representing 16 states, answered the "call" and appeared in the Second Presbyterian Church in Cleveland.¹⁰ These delegates established the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the first large-scale and unified women's organization to appear on the American scene. As their organization's name indicates, WCTU women chose the alcohol problem as their chief concern and the dual advocacy of total abstinence and the legal prohibition of the liquor traffic as their major reform plank. Yet, from the time of their first meeting, the majority of white-ribboners¹¹ dedicated themselves to a broad base of reform. They expressed concern over the problems of labor and clamored for higher wages, better working conditions, courts of arbitration and conciliation, and more educational opportunities for laborers.¹² They voiced their disapproval of polygamy and divorce, helped unwed mothers, and sought to reform prostitutes.¹³ They sought to Americanize immigrants¹⁴ and to break down prejudices against Indians and Negroes.¹⁵ They agitated for slum clearance¹⁶ and asked for better jury trials.¹⁷ They argued against war and stood for peace and arbitration.¹⁸ They fought for women's rights in general and for female suffrage in particular.¹⁹ As Frances Willard proudly announced, the white-ribbon stood for all aspects of reform: prohibition, purity, philanthropy, prosperity and peace.²⁰

The many reforms advocated by WCTU women stemmed from a concern with man's environment in this world. The white-ribboners indirectly advocated the possible perfectability of man, and they reasoned from this premise that people could be bettered proportionally as society was improved. They thus believed in the necessity and possibility of solving existing social problems. While this theory was not, of course, original, the companion idea of female superiority in reform activity was a unique contribution of WCTU ideology.

From the time that Mrs. Willing, Mrs. Miller, and Mrs. Brown conceived the creation of the WCTU, the idea of female superiority was important. In presenting this idea, WCTU women first argued that the few "sincere men" could not protect adequately society's well-being nor institute needed reforms.²² The women went even further and generalized that most men did not want a "moral society." To the white-ribboners the existing society of the 1870's and 1880's was a reflection of the immoral, man-made world. Frances Willard's stirring address, delivered at the 1885 national WCTU convention, highlighted this argument. Using the prevailing public attitude towards and the "unfair laws" regarding prostitution as her primary illustrations, Miss Willard proclaimed that the prostitute, like the "too often undefended and unavenged victim of seduction and violence," was the creation of man's "sex necessity."²³ WCTU spokesmen, other than Frances Willard, heralded the charge of man's immoral society. They argued that men waged war without understanding its impact upon wives and children.²⁴ They maintained that the husband-fathers who drank alcoholic bev-

erages failed to comprehend the financial, physical, and emotional burden inflicted upon the family by their inebriety.²⁵ These and many other specific examples were used to substantiate this WCTU viewpoint.

WCTU women supplemented their negative arguments with positive expressions of female superiority. Women, argued the white-ribboners, possessed the emotional sensitivity and understanding lacking in men and were thus better able to solve the problems of society.²⁶ Even though some men had proposed worthwhile programs, WCTU spokesmen insisted that the participation of women was necessary for the successful institution of specific reforms, such as increased benefits for laborers,²⁷ or more general reforms, such as Christian Socialism.²⁸ This belief in the superiority of women prompted the white-ribboners to advocate woman suffrage and full women's rights.

WCTU members put their idea of female superiority within a religious framework. At the first, organizing convention in 1874, Mrs. Willing, Mrs. Mary C. Johnson, Mrs. Donelson, and other early WCTU leaders proclaimed that God had given women their superior qualities, had brought them together to reform society, and would continue to direct them until sin, poverty and anguish no longer existed.²⁹ Frances Willard summed up this belief by asserting that the "Divine Ruler" had chosen women as the "apostles of reform" and had given them a sense of perception, a measure of hope and faith, and a respect for justice and right superior to those possessed by men.³⁰

After 1874, WCTU spokesmen continued to believe in the divine origins of female superiority. They maintained that God not only had given women superior qualities and had chosen them to spearhead the necessary reformation of society but that He, revealing himself through the Holy Spirit, had also told them what to do and how to do it.³¹ Inspired by this idea, the white-ribboners engaged in diversified reform activity. Unlike Carry Nation, who, under holy pretense, attacked saloons in Kansas with hatchet in hand,³² WCTU women generally engaged in peaceful activity. They petitioned Congress and state legislatures, put pressure upon other governmental and educational officials, printed and distributed pamphlets, magazines, and newsletters, held public meetings, and attempted to infiltrate and influence many organizations and institutions.³³

The emphasis put upon the divine origin of female superiority is understandable when the religious backgrounds of white-ribboners and the theological position of the organization are considered. Most WCTU women were active members of specific Protestant churches that were within the fundamentalist camp.³⁴ As an organization, the WCTU officially welcomed all--Jew and Gentile, Catholic and Protestant, believer or skeptic--into its fold, but in practice it espoused a type of Protestant fundamentalism. Official statements in the WCTU press and by white-ribbon leaders emphasized a literal interpretation of the Bible.³⁵ The WCTU press repeatedly insisted

that successful social reform had to stem ultimately from a literal and fundamental gospel theology and had to be furthered by those who had "learned their social science from the Bible."³⁶

The doctrine of fundamental Protestantism became manifest in all facets of WCTU propaganda: printed material, articles in official publications, speeches by members, and in the educational material for the young. WCTU theoreticians, however, made no effort to reconcile the fundamentalist concepts of man's sinful nature and God's predestined design for this world with the previously mentioned environmental view and the implied doctrine of the possible perfectability of man. Still, this organization of women, devoted to "divinely-directed" social reform activity, furnished additional evidence that the social gospel movement was not limited, as some historians have maintained,³⁷ to liberal Protestant churches and/or to liberal groups within Protestant churches. As already shown, WCTU activity also indicates that many female Protestants were no longer willing to sit in their church pews and homes while men controlled society. These women not only began to question the ability of men to rule and to reform society, but they began to advocate the God-given social superiority of women.

Opposition to the WCTU arose simultaneously with its inception and grew larger as the organization increased its membership, activity and influence. Much of this opposition stemmed from interests, especially the brewing and distilling industries, antagonistic to the specific reforms stressed by the white-ribboners. Other opposition, however, came from men who often sympathized with the reform objectives but reacted negatively towards the expressed idea of female social superiority and female reform activity. These men, the most outspoken of whom were clergymen, were shocked that well-meaning women, especially those who called themselves religious, would "become public spectacles and would agitate under a fallacious banner of Divine direction." These men believed that women possessed superior attributes only in regard to home-making and that the ideas advocated and the activities proposed by the WCTU, if adopted by women, would lead only to a neglect of the home.³⁸

The WCTU was not throttled by this opposition. Inspired by the two-fold belief that society needed reforming and that women, because of their divinely bestowed superior qualities, were to be the major reformers, the white-ribboners exerted much influence in American society from 1874 until the early 1920's. They increased their membership from 135 in 1874 to 345,949 in 1921. They established chapters in fifty-three states and territories. They added to their ranks almost one-half million juvenile and honorary members.³⁹ Although important, these figures alone indicate but one portion of the organization's influence. The dissemination of propaganda and the pressure put upon legislators, public officials, educators, min-

isters, and the general populace in regard to many reforms brought results both on a national and on a state level.

An exemplary achievement of WCTU activity was the movement for "scientific" temperance instruction.⁴⁰ By 1877, white-ribboners had convinced the International Sunday School Committee to adopt regular temperance lessons in supervised church quarterlies.⁴¹ Because of WCTU persuasion, moreover, the Methodist Episcopal Church endorsed Sunday school temperance lessons in 1880, and the Methodist Episcopal Church South soon did likewise.⁴² The resolution of the North Alabama Conference of Methodist Churches in 1885 indicated the effectiveness of WCTU persuasion techniques: "... We will teach temperance from the pulpit, in the Sunday-school, and from house to house until public opinion is properly educated."⁴³ This terminology was specifically that used by the WCTU.

The white-ribboners did not rest with temperance teaching in Sunday schools. They became even more concerned with "scientific" temperance instruction in the public schools. This idea, although not unique to WCTU women, became a white-ribbon endeavor and success. Due almost solely to the influence of the WCTU, Vermont in 1882 passed a law requiring "scientific" temperance instruction in the public schools. Michigan and New Hampshire followed in 1883, New York and Rhode Island in 1884, ten other states in 1885. By 1887, twenty-three states had enacted such laws. By 1897, temperance education laws were on the statute books of the federal government and forty-one states, and by 1901, there was not a political division in the United States without such a law.⁴⁴

Not content with merely the passage of laws, the white-ribboners, by putting pressure upon publishers, were able to control the writing and the use of hygiene and physiology textbooks. The women made sure that the textbooks used by students emphasized the evils of alcohol and advocated total abstinence rather than moderation. The story concerning the successful attempts to institute "scientific" temperance instruction and to editorialize textbooks is important in the history of education in the United States.⁴⁵

The successful institution of "scientific" temperance instruction, although perhaps the most significant, was but one of many WCTU achievements. Other WCTU temperance activities were also successful. Indeed, an historian of the Prohibition party asserted that the WCTU did more than did any other organization to wield public sentiment in favor of total abstinence and prohibition.⁴⁶ Two historians of state prohibition movements each depicted the WCTU as the most important temperance organization in their respective states.⁴⁷ Even the distilling and brewing industries agreed that the WCTU influenced public opinion in regard to prohibition more than did any other single organization.⁴⁸ The president of the National Retail Liquor Dealer's Association, for instance, advised his organization in 1912: "We need not fear the churches, the men are voting the old tickets; we need not fear the ministers, for the most part they follow the men of the churches;

we need not fear the YMCA, for it does not do aggressive work; but, gentlemen, we need fear the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the ballot in the hands of women; therefore, gentlemen, fight woman suffrage."⁴⁹

The other achievements of the WCTU cannot be assessed so readily, yet indications exist that they were plentiful. WCTU activity played no small part in the passage of state legislation prosecuting prostitution more severely and raising the age of legal consent of women.⁵⁰ White-ribboners affected the women's rights movement, especially in regard to woman suffrage.⁵¹ They influenced the social welfare movement and even the labor reform movement.⁵² In all their activity the white-ribboners repeatedly advocated their unique idea of female superiority.

The WCTU crusade impressed many important men. Henry Ward Beecher, Charles M. Sheldon, Josiah Strong, Walter Rauschenbush and other religiously-oriented reformers first viewed the white-ribboners with favor because of their temperance advocacy. Soon these reformers, by their own admissions, were won over to the women's rights and other reform movements by the female crusaders.⁵³ The same development occurred with Neal Dow.⁵⁴ Samuel Clemens, John Greenleaf Whittier, William Cullen Bryant, Andrew Carnegie, and many others, not necessarily connected with the temperance reform, also acknowledged their being won over to many reform movements by WCTU persuasion.⁵⁵ These men were aware of the idea of female superiority. Whereas antagonists sarcastically attacked the white-ribboners for uttering "such blasphemy," the men acknowledging WCTU influence did not deny the idea. When these men considered the reforming ability displayed by WCTU women, they affirmed, if only by implication, that women possessed certain qualities superior to men.⁵⁶

The idea of female superiority remained the driving force behind WCTU activity until the early 1920's. At that time, however, the white-ribboners, highlighted by a few that had for years viewed with some suspicion the previous "do-everything" reform policy, became increasingly content with society in general. They did not continue to proclaim adamantly their uniquely superior reforming abilities. Rather, they began to emphasize that many advocated reforms had been realized and that the general position of women in society had never been better. They pointed to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment as the prime example in both these regards. Only one problem continued to remain important for them. WCTU women limited their scope almost entirely to a concern with alcohol. They argued for total abstinence and for compliance with the recently passed Eighteenth Amendment.

The transition from an organization dedicated to the broad ideology of female superiority and to a program of general social reform to an organization dedicated almost exclusively to one reform hurt the prestige of the

WCTU. The decline of the WCTU, evident not so much in membership figures as in the influencing of public opinion and legislation, has been steady up to the present time. Apparently, American men, as well as non-WCTU women, were influenced more by an extreme ideology and a general program than by an ideology and program concerned with but one specific problem. Even in regard to temperance-prohibition persuasion, the white-ribbon activity proved most successful when put within this larger framework. Such a consideration may provide historians and sociologists with an additional clue with which to study reform activity.

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Footnotes:

¹ See, for example, Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler, Woman Suffrage and Politics (New York, 1936).

² See, for example, Ralph Waldo Hartley, The Age of Unreason (Boston, 1936).

³ See, for example, Eleanor Flexner, Century of Struggle: The Women's Rights Movement in the United States (Cambridge, Mass., 1959).

⁴ See H. Addington Bruce, Woman in the Making of America (Boston, 1933), 156-87.

⁵ See Helen F. Tyler, Where Prayer and Purpose Meet (Evanston, Ill., 1949), 1-3.

⁶ The women's crusades of 1873-4 consisted of sporadic attacks by women upon saloons in various states. Most of the crusade activity took place in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and New York. The object of the attacks was to convince or to force saloon keepers to close their establishments. For a detailed treatment of the crusades see Norton Mezvinsky, "The White-Ribbon Reform, 1874-1920" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Department of History, University of Wisconsin, 1959), 48-60.

⁷ Tyler, Prayer and Purpose, 1-3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The sixteen states were Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Alabama, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Colorado and California. Oregon was expected to have a delegate at the convention but there is no evidence documenting her arrival. Minutes of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union (NWCTU), 1874, 7.

¹⁰ Some disagreement exists as to the exact number of states officially represented at the first convention. In her autobiography, Glimpses of Fifty Years (Chicago: WCTU Press, 1889), 349, Frances Willard recorded that eighteen states were represented. In Where Prayer and Purpose Meet, Helen F. Tyler claimed seventeen states were represented officially. In

the Minutes of the NWCTU, cited above, however, only the sixteen states are mentioned. The latter source appears to be the most authoritative.

11 The white ribbon became the WCTU symbol, and WCTU members became known as white-ribboners.

12 See "Economy as a Remedy for the Condition of the Laborer," Union Signal, xxvii (April 18, 1901), 8; "The Light Hour Day," ibid., xxvi (May 17, 1900), 9; Minutes of the NWCTU, 1886, 85-87. Lillian M. N. Stevens, A Brief History of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (Evanston, Ill.: WCTU, 1907), 57.

13 LuLu Loveland Shepherd, "The Mormon Kingdom and the Liquor Traffic," Signal, xlii (Dec. 14, 1916), 7, 11.

14 "The Immigration Problem," Signal, xxi (Feb. 7, 1895), 8; Minutes (1909), 113.

15 "What Shall We Do with Him" Signal, xv (Oct. 17, 1889), 8.

16 See "The Health Crusade," Signal, xv (Jan. 31, 1889), 8.

17 "Trial by Jury," Signal, xx (March 29, 1894), 8.

18 See Minutes, 1887, 84; ibid., 1895, 46-47; "The Wastefulness of War," Signal, xxxi (Dec. 7, 1905), 3; Lucinda B. Chandler, "Shall We Have Boys Trained for Soldiers?" Signal, xx (Feb. 8, 1894), 4; "Patriotism's Call to the WCTU," ibid., xliii (Apr. 19, 1917), 10.

19 See Mezvinsky, "White-Ribbon Reform," 205-28.

20 Frances Willard, Glimpses of Fifty Years (Boston, 1889), 411, 413-4, 218-20, 422-4, 430.

21 Various sociologists proposed similar theories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See, for instance, Frank Lester Ward, Applied Sociology (New York, 1906), 21-2, 130-2; Ward, Dynamic Sociology (New York, 1924), i, 8-9, ii, 2-17.

22 See Minutes, 1877, 142; ibid., 1886, 85-7; "The Wastefulness of War," Signal, xxxi (Dec. 7, 1905), 3.

23 Minutes, 1884, 34.

24 ibid., 1874, 23-8; see "Lucinda B. Chandler, "Shall We Have Boys Trained for Soldiers?" Signal, xx (Feb. 8, 1894), 4.

25 Minutes, 1887, 84; ibid., 1895, 46-7.

26 See Minutes, 1877, 142; ibid., 1894, 47-8.

27 See "Economy as a Remedy for the Condition of the Laborer," Signal, xxvii (Apr. 18, 1901), 8; "The Eight Hour Day," ibid., xxvi (May 17, 1900), 9; Minutes, xii, 1886, 85-7.

28 See "The Concentration of Wealth," Signal, xvi (Apr. 24, 1890), 8-9; "Christian Socialism," ibid., xv (July 25, 1889), 8-9; Minutes, 1889, 115-7.

29 Minutes, 1874, 5, 6, 11.

30 Ibid., 24.

31 Interview with Miss Estell Bozeman, educational director of the NWCTU, June 16, 1958. Miss Bozeman related that the Holy Spirit talked

to and directed her in 1958, just as it had done to other WCTU women in 1874 and in each succeeding year. Miss Bozeman's declaration is typical of statements made annually by various delegates to the NWCTU conventions.

³² The unrestrained attacks made by this seemingly savage woman upon the saloons of Kansas between 1899 and 1901 have become almost legendary. Carry Nation, a WCTU member, considered herself the agent of God and believed that Jesus directed her. This view was little different from that proposed by official WCTU spokesmen and accepted by most white-ribboners. Carry Nation's activity, however, was so extreme that she received no backing and little approval from either the national or Kansas WCTU organizations. Mrs. A. N. Hutchinson, the state president of the Kansas WCTU between 1899 and 1901, had Carry Nation admit that the WCTU officially knew nothing about and would take no responsibility for any of the hatchet raids. No mention is made of Carry Nation in the Kansas state WCTU reports of 1899, 1900, 1901 or 1902. See Minutes of the 1899, 1900, 1901, and 1902 Annual Conventions of the WCTU of Kansas, in Annual Reports of the Kansas WCTU, 1897-1904. See also Agnes D. Hays, The White-Ribbon Reform in the Sunflower State (Topeka, Kans.: WCTU, 1953), 53-4.

³³ See Mezvinsky, "White-Ribbon Reform," 81-263.

³⁴ There were exceptions, most notably those few members who belonged to Unitarian or Universalist churches. See ibid., 74, 303.

³⁵ See Minutes, 1888, 49; "The Ideal Sunday," Signal, xii (Feb., 1892), 8.

³⁶ See Wilbur F. Crafts, "The Gospel, the Very Heart of Social Reforms," Signal, xl (Sept. 17, 1885), 5. This statement by Reverend Crafts, which appeared in an official WCTU periodical, expresses well the WCTU viewpoint.

³⁷ See, for instance, Richard Hofstadter, Social Darwinism in American Thought, rev. ed. (Boston, 1955), 107-8; Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind (New Haven, Conn., 1950), 170-1.

³⁸ See Abigail S. Dunningway, Path-Breaking (Portland, Ore.: privately published, 1914), 194-207.

³⁹ Minutes, 1911, 397; 1921, 71-92.

⁴⁰ The WCTU defined temperance as total abstinence.

⁴¹ See Ernest H. Cherrington, The Evolution of Prohibition (Wester-ville, Ohio: American Issue, 1920), 229-30.

⁴² Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1880, 246-7; 1886, 197-8.

⁴³ Minutes of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, 1885, 23; also see James B. Sellers, The Prohibition Movement in Alabama, 1702 to 1943, in the James Sprunt Studies in History and Political Science, xxv (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1943), 55.

⁴⁴ Tyler, Where Prayer and Purpose Meet, 244; "The New Declaration of Independence," Scientific Temperance Journal, civ (Jan., 1905), 65-71; Chicago Daily Tribune, Aug. 21, 1887, p. 2.

⁴⁵ For a detailed treatment of this story, see Mezvinsky, "White Ribbon Reform," 147-91.

⁴⁶ David Leigh Colvin, Prohibition in the United States (New York, 1926), 299.

⁴⁷ Seller, Prohibition Movement in Alabama, 56; Daniel Jay Whitener, Prohibition in North Carolina, in James Sprunt Studies, xxvii, 104.

⁴⁸ See Thomas C. Cochran, The Pabst Brewing Company (New York, 1948), 302-24; Dunningway, Path-Breaking, 194; Carrie Chapman Catt, The Real Enemy (Pamphlet printed by National Woman Suffrage Association, no date).

⁴⁹ As quoted in Edward M. Sait, American Parties and Elections (New York, 1927), 67.

⁵⁰ See Mezvinsky, "White-Ribbon Reform," 233-63.

⁵¹ A minority group in the WCTU opposed woman suffrage and withdrew to form the Non-Partisan WCTU. See *ibid.*, 192-232; Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, ed., A History of Woman Suffrage (Indianapolis: Fowler and Wells, 1902), lv, 141.

⁵² See Mezvinsky, "White-Ribbon Reform," 228-32.

⁵³ See "The Sheldon Idea," Signal, xxvi (Feb. 1, 1900), 9; "First Brooklyn's WCTU," *ibid.*, i (Apr. 8, 1880), 6-7; Josiah Strong, editorial in Our Country, as quoted in Massachusetts WCTU Press Bulletin, Boston, Dec. 2, 1889.

⁵⁴ Minutes, 1899, 112; Neal Dow to Frances Willard, Portland, Maine, June 7, 1876, Frances Willard MSS, Collection, Frances Willard Memorial Library, NWCTU, Evanston, Illinois.

⁵⁵ See "Seen Through Many Eyes," Signal, xxxvii (Aug. 3, 1911), 18; "The Temperance Cause and the Best Methods for its Advancement," *ibid.*, iv (Dec. 3, 1881), 2; "Letter-to-the-editor," *ibid.*, ix (May 17, 1883), 4; "Carnegie and the Man Who Drinks," *ibid.*, xxviii (Feb. 6, 1902), 8; Henry W. Blair to Frances Willard, Washington, Apr. 2, 1885, Louisa May Alcott to Frances Willard, New York, Jan. 23, 1887, John Greenleaf Whittier to Frances Willard, Davers, Mass., June 7, 1876, William Cullen Bryant to Frances Willard, New York, June 7, 1876, Frances E. Willard MSS.

⁵⁶ Neal Dow stated this explicitly when he wrote to Frances Willard in regard to the signing of a prohibition petition. Neal Dow to Frances Willard. See fn. 54.