

REFLECTIONS BY JAMES TEPFER ON WOMEN

INSPIRED BY "AN OCCASIONAL LETTER ON THE FEMALE SEX," IN THE *BULLETIN*, VOLUME 13, NUMBER 1, SPRING 2012

A. Leonard Thomas' 18th Century letter on the female sex was unapologetically truthful, culturally perceptive and deeply poignant. It puts every member of the male sex on alert and invites him to a vigilant self-scanning to purge atavistic tendencies where they might exist. However, it is vital that members of the contemporary "gentler gender" also take note of Thomas' reference to women as wives and mothers and the pivotal role the latter play in forming a wholesome marriage bond and of raising mature and respectful children. In this sense, it is important for young women on the threshold of a new age of equality (anticipated in the 19th Century by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*) to examine their own attitudes toward the man-woman relationship. As social pioneers, women must consciously cultivate friendship, collaboration and mutual justice with the opposite sex. If this is not understood, there will be a strong tendency for young women to expect that a "new world order" of genuine equality and respect will come about simply by men being told how unfair and domineering they have been and can be now. It never worked from the pulpit for a preacher to scold sinners every Sunday and it certainly won't work continually to point out the defects of men as a continual spur for them to improve. Women and men are, in some sense, psychologically interdependent for the mutual realization of their innate humanity and social potential. Men need to treat women with genuine respect and as equals not simply to compensate for past mistakes (or current ones), but because it contributes to women's blossoming into full self-hood. Likewise, no man can possibly live a full life as a human being--irrespective of his success in the socio-economic world--without the felt-respect and active encouragement of the opposite sex. This begins with his mother and expands outward in ever-expanding concentric circles to encompass sisters, relatives, wives, friends, acquaintances, co-workers and the like. I say all this because I sense a strong tendency in many commentators to emphasize wrongs and give only a nod to the gains that women have made historically in this country--with the spirited assistance of many conscientious men in different spheres of life and livelihood. Thus, even if men could become saints, purge themselves entirely of the will to dominate and scrupulously observe an exacting *quid pro quo* in the market place, a deeper challenge would still exist--a corresponding willingness of every woman to assess each man individually

(not just as a member of a gender) and to hold themselves to the same ennobling standard. If this is not recognized by politically active feminists it can only harm the future and frustrate both men and women.

A good example of the caveat that I am suggesting is to be found in the germinal, social revolution that is taking place across the Muslim world--especially in the Middle East. Women are the primary revolutionary vanguard. They--the most oppressed of the many oppressed in the world--are displaying immense courage and they are doing so in unusual and unexpected ways. As Robin Wright points out in her brilliant and insightful book, *Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World*, intrepid women in Saudi Arabia, Iran and elsewhere are rebelling against jihadist extremists, political authoritarians and traditional Muslim clerics alike. However, most women are clearly discriminating in what they do and what they stand for. They welcome the democratic, republican principles of the West and their emphasis on human equality. But, interestingly enough, they evince no desire to embrace the extremes of the West with its undisciplined tendencies to polarize and to embrace change for its own sake. Many of these thoughtful women activists of the Islamic world (singers, poets, writers, comedians, etc.) clearly reject many materialistic values as well as the magnetic attraction of self-indulgent libertarianism--a powerful vice that arises out of the intoxication fermented by little liberties dearly won. Most of the pioneer women that Wright interviews in her book treasure the best of their cultural values, their complex family obligations and many of their finer ancient customs. In light of this, they want to purge Islam of its false interpretations and of its harsh aberrations. They want to restore the open-texturedness of Muhammad's Islam, create a respectful wholesomeness to the man-woman relationship and enjoy the fruits of democratic politics suited to their indigenous cultures. In essence, they want to be co-partners with men in creating rejuvenated societies that are both open to the expansive, egalitarian currents of the 21st Century while holding on to cherished personal and desirable social values. Self-determination and community obligations are inextricably interwoven into the fabric of a fulfilling life and a vibrant civilization.

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