

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR A STUDY OF WOMAN

by

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INTRODUCTION

A. Some fundamental remarks are essential before starting a more detailed analysis of the subject.

1. The whole field of "woman's role and task in the world" is a very complex one, made up by a wide range of contributions from different fields. To see it only through one concrete angle can, in spite of its validity, lead to a narrow view of things and even to serious mistakes. The need is felt for a comprehensive thinking and research.
2. Only having in mind this comprehensive thinking, we can speak of a study on woman as a field in itself. This means that as well as one cannot discourse on physics if one has not studied it, one cannot make too many statements about "woman" if this does not come at least from a minimum of information. This seems quite impossible as the fact of being a woman gives a secure feeling of knowing it all!! For a study of woman among women, strict objectivity is a basic requirement!
3. When we start studying "woman" we are not (obviously!) aiming at a feminist society. On the contrary--what we aim at is having women fulfilling their own personal vocation and task in the best way within society, in harmonious relationships among themselves, with men, fully and deeply involved and taken up in all structures of society.
4. Words and concepts about the role of woman that were widely spread 20 or 30 years ago were certainly born out of a true intuition of values, -but were not justified and unfolded enough in their fundamentals and consequences. Nowadays, study and research in the different fields contributing to the definition of the role and task of woman have given a serious scientific foundation to those intuitions. The interesting fact is that those intuitions have not been developed as such, but have been reached on another level. They have been purified from their moral and sentimental approach and are now the expression of an existential and global approach on a scientific basis.



5. To study the role and task of woman, we cannot anymore take a few abstract ideas (even if they are extremely valid in themselves) and from them, through a deductive reasoning, draw certain guiding lines. We need to start from reality, from the human person as a woman seeing her as she is and appears in the multiple relationships that define her insertion in life and society.
6. The study of woman does not follow singular rules... Already in the "profane" knowledge, -we realize that nothing nowadays be grasped in a splendid isolation. Everything has roots in many different grounds and its understanding depends on the clear insight we can have on those grounds. The same is true for the life of the Church. We have come to connect realities which, in the past, were always seen as separate points, e.g., unity and mission, dogma and sacraments, structure and life, etc. In the transmission of the Christian message, this trend is particularly striking--modern catechetics is directed towards the whole person and aims at reaching all the expressions and spheres of life where the person is "situated."

B. Any study of "woman" must then take the whole person, and this means:

- a. the person as she is and appears in her bodily and psychological makeup and "devenir" (process of becoming??):

Biology
Psychology

- b. the person as she is in her relationships with other people and in the happenings of actual facts (in time and space):

Sociology
History

- c. the person as she appears in the minds of other people (the world of fiction):

Literature
Cinema

- d. the person as she is in her natural being--this should not be an independent thinking, but should be built on the basis of the elements given by the fields mentioned above, worked out according to the method of thinking proper to:

Philosophy

- e. the person as she is in God's Plan--like the philosophical interpretation, we don't come here to a completely independent field. We are on the realm of:

Theology

nourished by the contribution of the profane fields
(Philosophy included).

- C. Any study of the role and task of woman needs, therefore, the simultaneous study of the relevant facts from all those fields and their consistent interaction for a balanced synthesis.

In some fields, there are good books and articles, but very often they overstress their own approach leaving the others (equally important!) as sidelines. Moreover, there is no adequate synthesis in the whole. Maybe time is not yet ripe for it. But there is in the world a consistent development to which our contribution as an International Movement so much built on the nature and task of woman could be a very decisive one.

Just as examples and without aiming at all at giving full summing up of the trends, I will try to do a bird's eye view on the aspects which seem most relevant to me in all these different fields. They are not comprehensive, and as I will write them in very condensed way, they won't appear with all the "nuances" they should contain--but I leave it for a further stage of our work together.



I. BIOLOGY - PSYCHOLOGY

I am not going to enter into details about these two fields. (Please see notes of Magdalene's talk.) I only want to stress the two main lines of research:

1. Biology points out to the undeniable fact that woman is made to conceive. It is not only the fact that she bears the child but the physical determination of her being by the requirements of this fact. The existential approach we are looking for obliges us to take this into account in any further development about the role and meaning of woman's life in the world. The capacity to conceive is deeply linked with other attitudes in life and special physical aptitudes.
2. Psychology has to be seen in its interdependence with physiology. To look for static sets of values is completely out-of-date. We need to see woman (an man, too!) in the dynamic interplay of physical or psycho-somatic determinations and of free and changeable psychological attitudes. What we look for in the study of the psychology of woman is a global interior attitude towards life revealed both on the conscious and unconscious level. The capacity to conceive has then also a strong psychological expression.

II. SOCIOLOGY

We should perhaps try to draw a cross-section of women's situations in life. We would need to look at women and work, women and family, young women and their interests in our time, women and civic life, etc..... It seems to me that a practical way of doing it would be:

1. taking the headings that come usually under the "status of women"
 - the relationships of women with the existing structures of society
2. taking headings which come more from ad hoc situations or which express trends and feelings, belonging more to the realm of the cultural situation of woman in society.

I am going to stress a few points visible in the world today:

1. The coming of age of women, if it is a fact already achieved in the Western countries, is still on the way in more than half of the world. This coming of age is achieved in completely different cultural and social circumstances. What is happening in those countries can reveal interests, abilities, potentialities (or handicaps) in the nature of woman which the gradual transition that took place in the West had hidden.

Just two examples:

- a. Basic interest and wisdom of women in political affairs in spite of illiteracy in African countries;



- b. Studies already done in the West about the situation of women workers in regard to the family plus studies done about the situation of women in family life both in Africa and Asia may lead to a broader understanding of the so discussed subject of relation of women to work and family.
2. There is a clear evolution of the feminist trend in the West as the situation of women in society becomes more stable (e.g., stability over a longer period of the percentage of women's labour, of the percentage of married women who work outside home, of girls following a career or getting higher education..) As the situation has become stable any preference shown by women for certain ways of life (type of job, for instance) becomes an indication towards a better knowledge of the task women are naturally inclined to fulfill. Importance of such studies in countries like the States where statistics are regularly available.

One concrete example:

Though in most of the Western developed countries, the technical liberal professions (e.g., architect, engineer...) are open to women very few women are willing to go there. It would be very enlightening to see if this fact is still a part of tradition and "social inhibitions" or if it is something in the nature of woman directing her preferably towards certain expressions and activities...

3. One particular aspect of the evolution of the feminist trend which has acquired an importance by itself is the broadening of the concept of participation in public life. Facing the new conditions of the developing countries and at the light of the importance given in the last years to the human element in structures and institutions, the contents of participation in public life has been widened in its scope. Public life is not anymore in the current terminology the limited field of politics but includes all the organized forms of activities of the community. Participation in public life includes then for women all the traditional forms (in modern terms, of course!) of care and concern they tend to express towards all parts of the community. A re-evaluation of service in whatever expression it may be done as part of the participation in public life is one of the most striking facts.
4. There is a growing awareness of the potential force women are in the world. Several indications of this trend are:
- a. Women are gathering themselves at all levels in dynamic strong organizations which aim at giving them a certain training to reach a definite purpose. (The All-Pakistan Women's Association is promoting a complete revolution in the way of living of the women of that country; in Argentina the 280 existing women's organizations on the national level are learning to work together in common projects reaching the whole country; in Japan women have met recently this year to study the conditions of women of the new generation; women are forming organizations also on the regional level as the South-East Women's Association and the still on-the-way AA-African Women's Association...)

- b. In the last years there has been a growing number of meetings concerned with the role of woman or the position of woman in society--they have been held in Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia... In its thirty-fourth session, this year, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations has urged all the responsible bodies of the United Nations, as well as the non-governmental organizations to organize local, national, regional seminars having in view an international seminar in the future concerning the advancement of women in the developing countries...
- c. There has been even in 1961 a proposal made by the Polish delegate to the Commission on the Status of Women to set up an International Institute of Research to study the "services rendered by women to society" and "the influence of society on woman." It should be made clear that the Commission on the Status of Women, with its thorough way of dealing with the different items of the agenda and having reached a stage when there is not any more much need to fight for the rights of women, is becoming a kind of permanent body of research at least in certain fields.
- d. UNESCO has included in its program of social sciences a special study of new sociological methods which can help to evaluate the social condition of woman and the relation of her nature to the historical and cultural conditions (pointed out through studies on the quality of women's vote and other aspects of her participation in political life).

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III. HISTORY

Our main concern with this historical approach is not to discover "the great women of the past though their lives may be very inspiring!... We need History to give scope in time to the actual facts and current trends. Those facts can gain or lose relevance when they are seen in the general development of History and in the concrete development of the interpretation of woman's role and task in society in connection with the social and cultural situation. We have come to realize nowadays that our vision of woman's role was always a relative one, depending on the philosophy prevailing at each time and on the public opinion concerning women. The importance of such "relativistic" approach has led to a re-evaluation of the historical elements and of certain fields in the historical sciences.

I stress some of those fields where research would lead to very enlightening results:

1. The study of History of different civilizations and cultures and of the role women played in them seems fundamental. I don't mean with this primarily the study of primitive societies but rather the study of more developed civilizations where a specific culture has developed through the ages (Asian countries, for instance). Such a study may eventually lead to the finding out of a common denominator in the way women have been linked with the environment.
2. The study of the History of Europe and of the role women played in it has also a deep significance. If we go through art, literature, events, institutions, we discover a most confused, varied, "sinueux" development of the relationships between the sexes. One cannot find a straight line, a universal opinion; in the same period it varies from country to country; it varies in the same country from period to period. However, this varied development is already in itself an indication. It points out to a continuous interplay between the sexes throughout History, showing their reciprocity in all situations and the need not to study the nature and task of woman in an isolated way but in consistent exchange with a study of the nature and task of man!
3. The comparative study of Religions is another important aspect, mainly in their mythical elements.



In the past, for instance, woman was often presented in connection with the great myths of abundance, fruitfulness... Nowadays, myths acquire a new significance in the discovery of truth, the scientific study of such myths becoming a most valid element.

4. The History of the Church has a very important part to play. It is somehow included in point 2, as the History of the Church in regard to woman is very much reflected in the History of Europe. However, it is still to be developed the status of women in the Church.

IV. LITERATURE

Literature is somehow a picture of the current opinion, crystallizing the convictions which are in a latent state in the minds of the people. It shows the unconscious feelings about the position of women in society. At the same time, it points out to trends ahead - it reveals how society will probably be in a few years if the feelings today unconscious are going to undergo a normal development. The dangers and possibilities of the future become more clear. They help to be critical and alert about apparently unobvious trends and facts of today.

Possible fields of research could be:

1. Post-war literature has a twofold interest:
 - in some cases it makes extremely clear the dependence of human behavior from the social conditions; the connection between the essential elements of the nature of woman and the envioning world may eventually be clarified;
 - in other cases, where the social and family context has been deeply shaken if not completely ruined, the human person (and the woman then!) may appear in the specificity of her elementary concerns, aspirations and personal conflicts.
2. Russian literature since the "destalinization" may be another field of promising interest. Before that, all literature was party-motivated not conveying therefore a message with enough objectivity for our study. Two things could perhaps be specially studied:
 - in spite of the indoctrination are there specific elements which point out to the role and task of woman?
 - is there already a new physionomy of woman built up by marxism?



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3. Existentialist literature in its apparent indifference for women as such has a tremendous interest. Just some facts: we can notice in that literature:

- relation 'woman-child': refusal of conceiving and absence of child-fact in women's life leading to complete human annihilation of woman;
- relation 'woman-society': indifference to the environing world (living isolated in a room, no sense of home, disrespect for material things, absence of the others in the personal conflicts) leading to madness;
- relation in the couple: withdrawal of woman from her role as conceiver killing in the long run the very nature of man (he becomes incapable of changing the world...)

V. PHILOSOPHY

On the basis of the elements of the different fields already mentioned a philosophical reflection can take place.

A philosophical synthesis of the anthropology of sexes is still in its beginning. Christian tradition, acknowledging differentiation of sexes, never inspired a philosophy of sexes. There has been for many centuries an over-estimation of speculation with the consequent underestimation of concrete reality pointing out obviously to the physical duality of the human being.

When in the last century some attempts began to be made into another direction they were taken up too quickly in a romantic interpretation of reality which gave room to much criticism. Nowadays, with more scientific foundations, new attempts are made to see and study the human being in its basic and irreducible duality. This means that it is impossible in 'good' anthropology of our time to speak in terms of a neutral human being who later happens to be man or woman. Any study of the human being has to see it already at the starting point as man or as woman.

Some points:

1. In this approach we are not looking for a set of feminine qualities or for special capacities. What we want to seize is the global attitude of woman which is central and decisive in her definition as a human being. What we want to discover is how this human being who is a woman grasps and faces reality and life in her inmost being.



(There it seems possible to say that the woman seizes the world as a world in need to be loved and to be cared of while the man seizes the world as the object of his work. Then the fundamental experience for man is the resistance of the world while for the woman is the value...)

2. If man and woman are two possibilities of the human being then it is meaningless to look for the opposite qualities in man as it has been done in many books! There is no simetry, no complementarity in the sense of two sets of elements which would correspond one by one.
3. The face-to-face relationship between man and woman is a very important element to the definition of the nature and task of woman. Marriage being the most complete experience is not unique and practically all situations of women in the world have an aspect of that relationship.

VI. THEOLOGY

There is practically nothing elaborated on the previous elements. This is a matter which is not contained in the Revelation as such! Therefore it is essential to take into account all the elements of the profane knowledge regarding woman and her role.

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The Catholic Church is particularly poor in this regard. The Eastern churches have a certain theological thinking on this subject and their study is certainly most valuable.

Some of the Protestant Churches have also developed sole aspects of biblical theology - specially the Lutheran Church of Sweden where more than 395 articles were written about the priesthood of women!!

The main question in Catholic Theology seems to be the following:

- 1) Gen. 2, 18-25 (using typical expressions of Hebrew culture) points out to the same dignity of man and woman and as aspects of the Word of God which become more and more precise through the Bible, acquires its second and full meaning in Ep. 5, 31-32, describing the relationship man-woman as image of the relationship of God with the redeemed mankind.
- 2) A more "nuancee" exegesis of those texts, together with the development of the Theme of the New Eve



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mainly in the Fathers of the church (as studies in Mariology have unfolded it), brings a certain hesitation to the way the previous statement has been formulated. Does the woman point out to the Church attitude in general or is this only true in the particular situation brought by the sacrament of marriage?

- 3) As the inner reality of the significance of human life is the calling of every human soul to a bridal relationship with Christ, is woman then only a beautiful sign of it exteriorly? and then can we say that we apply the biblical texts to her as an literary image?
- 4) Or can we think of an intermediary level where somehow nature acquires a deeper spiritual meaning?
- 5) Or shouldn't we try a completely different approach looking more for what woman really is than for what she symbolizes? Don't we need then to see her how she is and appears in the actual fulfillment of the Plan of Redemption through time?

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