



City Women and Religious Change

Looking back on the birth and progress of the Calvinist heresy in the course of his own lifetime, the Bordeaux jurist Florimond de Raemond remarked on how much easier it was to entrap women into heresies than men. The Church Fathers had warned us of this long before. Women were weak and imbecile. They could be as precious as pearls or as dangerous as venomous asps. Very often in our religious quarrels, de Raemond went on, their distaffs spun more evils than could ever be wrought by the partisan slash of seditious swords. He knew this from his own experience, for during a few misguided years in the 1560's he had been part of the Huguenot movement himself.¹

De Raemond was not the only Catholic male to try to discredit the Protestant cause by associating it with the weak will and feeble intellect of the female. Protestant polemicists returned the compliment by characterizing Catholic women as at best ignorant and superstitious and at worst whorish and frenzied.² Most modern historians of the Reformation go them one better: they scarcely mention women at all.

Oh yes, there have been and are exceptions. In a tradition of women's history that goes back to Plutarch and Boccaccio, portraits of individual women have been collected—of the wives of Luther and Calvin, for instance, and of Protestant duchesses and queens—which show that, after all, women had something to do

with the Reformation. More than a century ago the Scottish pastor James Anderson published his *Ladies of the Reformation, Memoirs of the Distinguished Female Characters Belonging to the Sixteenth Century*; and even today are appearing the charming and useful vignettes by Roland Bainton called *Women of the Reformation*. Furthermore, the great political and literary leaders have been given their due: Marguerite de Navarre, sister of King François Ier of France, whose poetry and patronage were so important in the early days of the French Reformation, and her militant daughter, the Huguenot Jeanne d'Albret, queen of Navarre.³

Few social studies exist, however, that try to look systematically at the role of women in religious change in the sixteenth century.⁴ Did the Reformation have a distinctive appeal to women? If so, what was it and to what kinds of women? What did Protestant women do to bring about religious change? And what innovations did the Reformation effect in the lives of women of different social classes?

Some hypotheses have been offered. First, there are those that pick out features of a religious movement most likely to attract women. Max Weber has suggested in his *Sociology of Religion* that women are always especially receptive to nonmilitary and nonpolitical prophecy and to religious movements with orgiastic, emotional, or hysterical aspects to them. Weber's assumptions remind us uncomfortably of the Church Fathers and Florimond de Raemon, but in any case we will want to ask whether such criteria could apply to a religion as disciplined as Calvinism. A broader approach is found in Keith Thomas' study of women in the civil war sects of seventeenth-century England. He suggests that the spiritual status and scope of activity—emotional or non-emotional activity—offered to women are what drew them to new religions. The more spiritual equality of the sexes, the more women in the movement.⁵

A second set of hypotheses concerns the state of life of women before religious conversion. Some historians stress a prior sense of uselessness, of imprisonment, from which fresh religious com-

mitment served as an escape. Speaking of the attraction of Protestantism for the women of the English aristocracy, Lawrence Stone comments, "Given the idle and frustrated lives these women lived in the man's world of a great country house, it is hardly surprising that they should have turned in desperation to the comforts of religion." Robert Mandrou attributes the same kind of motivation to the wives of traders, artisans, and unskilled workers in sixteenth-century France: "Stuck in their houses, wholly occupied by their little courtyards and inner world of family and children, these women no doubt found in religious movements a kind of liberation."⁶

Other historians, however, talk about this liberation as if it had begun to occur even before women were caught up in religious reform. Nancy Roelker sees the Huguenot noblewomen as strong-minded and already quite independent wives and widows who found in the Reformed cause a way to enhance their activities (by converting their relatives, protecting pastors, giving money and strategic advice to male leaders, and so on) while at the same time preserving their feminine identities. Similarly, Patrick Collinson thinks that it was the education and relative freedom of social life that prepared English gentlewomen and merchants' wives to respond positively to Puritanism in the sixteenth century. "The example of modern Islamic societies," Collinson writes, "leads one to expect the enthusiastic, even violent adoption of political causes by a partially emancipated womanhood. Translated into sixteenth-century categories, we are perhaps witnessing something of the same sort in the vigorous religious partisanship of the women of that time."⁷

Which of these hypotheses best fits the case of the Protestant women in French cities? We will answer this question in the course of this essay. We may note in passing, however, that both of them invoke psychological solutions but do not address themselves to the actual content and organization of the new religious movements. Indeed, Robert Mandrou says that his little housewives might be liberated either by Protestantism or by the trans-

formed Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation; it did not matter which.

A third group of hypotheses has to do with the consequences of the Reformation for women. It is usually argued that it was life within the family that changed most for Protestant women, and for the better. Not only the elimination of clerical celibacy but also the definition of marriage as the school of character is supposed to have led to greater friendship and more equal partnership between Protestant spouses than was possible between Catholic spouses of the same period.⁸ Less attention has been paid, however, to the changed roles of women within the life, liturgy, symbolism, and organization of the Reformed Church. Some speculation has been made about the social and psychological origins of Protestant opposition to Mariolatry,⁹ but how did banning the cult of Mary affect attitudes toward women and sexual identity?

Let us ask some of these large questions about an important category of women in France—not the great noblewomen already examined by Nancy Roelker, but the women of the cities. Hopefully, some of the conclusions drawn about France may, with appropriate adjustments, be relevant to other parts of Europe.

[1]

The growing cities of sixteenth-century France, ranging from ten thousand inhabitants in smaller places to sixty thousand in Lyon and a hundred thousand in Paris, were the centers of organization and dissemination of Protestantism. The decades in question here are especially those up to the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572—the years when it still seemed hopeful, in the words of a female refugee in Geneva, that the new Christians might deliver their cities from the tyranny and cruelty of the papist Pharaohs.¹⁰ For a while they were successful, with the growth of a large Protestant movement and the establishment in 1559 of an official Reformed Church in France. After 1572, the Huguenot party continued to battle for survival, but it was now doomed to remain a zealous but small minority.

Apart from the religious, almost all adult urban women in the first half of the sixteenth century were married or had once been so. The daughter of a rich merchant, lawyer, or financial officer might find herself betrothed in her late teens. Most women waited until their early twenties, when a dowry could be pieced together from the family or one's wages or extracted from a generous master or mistress.

And then the babies began and kept appearing every two or three years. The wealthy woman, with her full pantry and her country refuge in times of plague, might well raise six or seven children to adulthood. The artisan's wife might bury nearly as many as she bore, while the poor woman was lucky to have even one live through the perils of a sixteenth-century childhood. Then, if she herself had managed to survive the first rounds of child-bearing and live into her thirties, she might well find that her husband had not. Remarriage was common, of course, and until certain restrictive edicts of the French king in the 1560's a widow could contract it quite freely. If she then survived her husband into her forties, chances are she would remain a widow. At this stage of life, women outnumbered and outlived men,¹¹ and even the widow sought after for her wealth might prefer independence to the relative tutelage of marriage.

With the death rate so high, the cities of sixteenth-century France depended heavily on immigration for their increasing populations. Here, however, we find an interesting difference between the sexes: men made up a much larger percentage of the young immigrants to the cities. The male immigrants contributed to every level of the vocational hierarchy—from notaries, judges, and merchants to craftsmen and unskilled day laborers. And although most of the men came from nearby provinces, some were also drawn from faraway cities and from regions outside the kingdom of France. The female immigrants, on the other hand, clustered near the bottom of the social ladder and came mostly from villages and hamlets in surrounding provinces to seek domestic service in the city.¹²

Almost all the women took part in one way or another in the

economic life of the city. The picture drawn in Renaissance courtesy books and suggested by the quotation from Robert Mandrou—that of women remaining privily in their homes—is rather far from the facts revealed by judicial records and private contracts. The wife of the wealthy lawyer, royal officer, or prosperous merchant supervised the productive activities of a large household but might also rent out and sell rural and urban properties in her own name, in her husband's name, or as a widow. The wives of tradesmen and master craftsmen had some part in running the shops, not just when they were widowed but also while their husbands were alive: a wife might discipline apprentices (who sometimes resented being beaten by a woman's hand), might help the journeymen at the large looms, might retail meats while her husband and his workers slaughtered cattle, might borrow money with her husband for printing ventures, and so on.¹³

In addition, a significant proportion of women in artisanal families and among the *menu peuple* had employ on their own. They worked especially in the textile, clothing, leather, and provisioning trades, although we can also find girls apprenticed to pin-makers and gilders. They sold fish and tripe; they ran inns and taverns. They were painters and, of course, midwives. In Paris they made linen; in Lyon they prepared silk. They made shoes and gloves, belts and collars. In Paris, one Perette Aubertin sold fruit at a stall near the Eglise des Mathurins while her husband worked as a printer. In Lyon, one Pernette Morilier made and sold wimples while her husband worked as a goldsmith. And in an extraordinary document from Lyon, a successful merchant-shoemaker confesses that his prosperity was due not so much to his own profits as to those made by his wife over the preceding 25 years in her separate trade as a linen merchant.¹⁴

Finally, there were the various semiskilled or unskilled jobs done by women. Domestic service involved a surprisingly high number of girls and women. Even a modest artisanal family was likely to have a wretchedly paid serving girl, perhaps acquired from within the walls of one of the orphan-hospitals recently set

up in many urban centers. There was service in the bath-houses, which sometimes slid into prostitution. Every city had its *filles de joie*, whom the town council tried to restrict to certain streets and to stop from brazenly soliciting clients right in front of the parish church. And there was heavy work, such as ferrying people across the Saône and other rivers, the boatwomen trying to argue up their fares as they rowed. If all else failed, a woman could dig ditches and carry things at the municipal construction sites. For this last, she worked shoulder to shoulder with unskilled male day workers, being paid about one-half or two-thirds as much as they for her pains.¹⁵

This economic activity of women among the *menu peuple* may explain in part the funny nicknames that some of them had. Most French women in the sixteenth century kept their maiden names all their lives: when necessary, the phrase “wife of” or “widow of” so-and-so was tacked on. Certain women, however, had sobriquets: *la Capitaine des vaches* (the Captain of the cows) and *la reine d’Hongrie* (the queen of Hungary) were nicknames given to two women who headed households in Lyon; *la Catelle* was a schoolmistress in Paris; *la Varenne*, a midwife in Le Mans; and *la Grosse Marguerite*, a peddler of Orléans.¹⁶ Such names were also attached to very old women. But in all cases, we can assume not only that these women were a little eccentric but also that these names were bestowed on them in the course of public life—in the street, in the marketplace, or in the tavern.

The public life of urban women did not, however, extend to the civic assembly or council chamber. Women who were heads of households do appear on tax lists and even on militia rolls and were expected to supply money or men as the city government required. But that was the extent of political participation for the *citoyenne*. Male artisans and traders also had little say in these oligarchical city governments, but at least the more prosperous among them might have hoped to influence town councillors through their positions as guild representatives. The guild life of women, however, was limited and already weaker than it had been

in the later Middle Ages. In short, the political activity of women on all levels of urban society was indirect or informal only. The wives of royal officers or town councillors might have hoped to influence powerful men at their dining tables. The wives of poor and powerless journeymen and day laborers, when their tables were bare because the city fathers had failed to provide the town with grain, might have tried to change things by joining with their husbands and children in a well-timed grain riot.¹⁷

What of the literacy of urban women in the century after the introduction of printing to Europe? In the families of the urban elite the women had at least a vernacular education—usually at the hands of private tutors—in French, perhaps in Italian, in music, and in arithmetic. A Latin education among nonnoble city women was rare enough that it was remarked—“learned beyond her sex,” the saying went—and a girl like Louise Sarrasin of Lyon, whose physician-father had started her in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin by the time she was eight, was considered a wondrous prodigy. It was women from these wealthy families of bankers and jurists who organized the important literary salons in Paris, Lyon, Poitiers, and elsewhere.¹⁸

Once outside these restricted social circles, however, there was a dramatic drop in the level of education and of mere literacy among city women. An examination of contracts involving some 1,200 people in Lyon in the 1560's and 1570's to see whether those people could simply sign their names¹⁹ reveals that, of the women, only 28 percent could sign their names. These were almost all from the elite families of well-off merchants and publishers, plus a few wives of surgeons and goldsmiths. All the other women in the group—the wives of mercers, of artisans in skilled trades, and even of a few notaries—could not sign. This is in contrast to their husbands and to male artisans generally, whose ability to sign ranged from high among groups like printers, surgeons, and goldsmiths, to moderate among men in the leather and textile trades, to low—although still well above zero—among men in the food and construction trades. Thus, in the populous middle rank of

urban society, although both male and female literacy may have risen from the mid-fifteenth century under the impact of economic growth and the invention of printing, the literacy of the men increased much more than that of the women. Tradesmen might have done business with written accounts; tradeswomen more often had to use finger reckoning, the abacus, or counting stones. Only at the bottom of the social hierarchy, among the unskilled workers and urban gardeners, were men and women alike. As with peasants, there were few of either sex who were literate.²⁰

And where would women of artisanal families learn to read and write if their fathers and husbands did not teach them? Nunnery schools received only a small number of lay girls, and these only from fine families. The municipal colleges set up in the first half of the sixteenth century in Toulouse, Nîmes, and Lyon were for boys only; so were most of the little vernacular schools that mushroomed in even quite modest city neighborhoods during these years. To be sure, a few schoolmistresses were licensed in Paris, and there were always some Parisian schoolmasters being chided for illegally receiving girls along with their boy pupils. But in Lyon, where I have found only five female teachers from the 1490's to the 1560's, I have come upon 87 schoolmasters for the same decades.²¹

Thus, in the first half of the sixteenth century, the wealthy and well-born woman was being encouraged to read and study by the availability to her of printed books; by the strengthening of the image of the learned lady, as the writings of Christine de Pisan and Marguerite de Navarre appeared in print; and by the attitude of some fathers, who took seriously the modest educational programs for women being urged by Christian humanists like Erasmus and Juan Luis Vives. Reading and writing for women of the *menu peuple* was more likely to be ridiculous, a subject for farce.²²

All this shows how extraordinary was the achievement of Louise Labé, the one lowborn female poet of sixteenth-century France. From a family of Lyon ropemakers, barber-surgeons, and butchers, in which some of the women were literate and some (includ-

ing her own stepmother) were not, Louise was beckoned to poetry and publication by her talent and by profane love. Her message to women in 1555 was "to lift their minds a little above their distaffs and spindles . . . to apply themselves to science and learning . . . and to let the world know that if we are not made to command, we must not for that be disdained as companions, both in domestic and public affairs, of those who govern and are obeyed."²³

[II]

The message of Calvinist reformers to women also concerned reading and patterns of companionship. But before we turn to it, let us see what can be said about the Catholic religious activity of city women on the eve of the French Reformation.

In regard to the sacramental life of the church, the women behaved very much like their husbands. The prominent families, in which the husband was on the parish building committee, attended mass and confession with some regularity. The wealthiest of them also had private chapels in their country homes. Among the rest of the population attendance was infrequent, and it was by no means certain that all the parishioners would even get out once a year to do their Easter duty of confession and communion. (The clergy itself was partly to blame for this. Those big city parishes were doubling and even tripling in size in these decades, and yet the French Church took virtually no steps to increase accordingly its personnel in charge of pastoral functions or even to guarantee confessors who could understand the language and dialect of the parishioners.) Baptism was taken more seriously, however, as were marriage and extreme unction. Every two or three years the husband appeared before the *curé* with the new baby, bringing with him one or two godfathers and up to five godmothers. The wife was most likely at home, waiting till she was ready to get up for her "churching," or purification after childbirth (the *relevailles*).²⁴ Moreover, the wills of both men and women show an anxious preoccupation with the ceremonial processions at their funerals

and masses to be said for the future repose of their souls. A chambermaid or male weaver might invest many months' salary in such arrangements.²⁵

In regard to the organizational and social aspects of Catholic piety on the eve of the Reformation, however, the woman's position was somewhat different from the man's. On the one hand, female religious life was less well organized than male religious life; on the other, the occasions in which urban women participated jointly with men in organized lay piety were not as frequent as they might have been.

To be sure, parish processions led by the priests on Corpus Christi and at other times included men, women, and children, and so did the general processions of the town to seek God's help in warding off famine or other disasters. But the heart of lay religious activity in France in the early sixteenth century was in the lay confraternities organized around crafts or around some devotional interests. Here laymen could support common masses, have their own banquets (whose excesses the clergy deplored), and mount processions on their own saints' days—with "blessed bread," music, costumes, and plays. City women were members of confraternities in much smaller numbers than men at this period. For instance, out of 37 confraternities at Rouen in the first half of the sixteenth century, only six mention female members, and these in small proportion. Women were formally excluded from the important Confraternity of the Passion at Paris, and some confraternities in other cities had similar provisions. Young unmarried men were often organized into confraternities under the patronage of Saint Nicholas; young unmarried women prayed to Saint Catherine, but religious organizations of female youth are hard to find.²⁶

Even the convents lacked vitality as centers of organization at this time. Fewer in number than the male religious houses in France and drawing exclusively on noble or wealthy urban families for their membership, the convents were being further isolated by the "reform" movements of the early sixteenth century. Pushed back into arid enclosure, the nuns were cut off not only from illicit

love affairs but also from rich contact with the women in the neighborhoods in which they lived.²⁷ Nor in France during the first part of the sixteenth century do we hear of any new female experiments with communal living, work, and spiritual perfection like the late medieval Beguinages or the imaginative Ursuline community just then being created in an Italian city.

Thus, before the Reformation the relation of Catholic lay women to their saints was ordinarily private or informally organized. The most important occasions for invoking the saints were during pregnancy and especially during childbirth. Then, before her female neighbors and her midwife, the parturient woman called upon the Virgin—or, more likely, upon Saint Margaret, patron of pregnant women—that God might comfort her peril and pain and that her child might issue forth alive.²⁸

Into this picture of city women separated from their parish clergy and from male religious organizations, one new element was to enter, even before the Reformation. Women who could read or who were part of circles where reading was done aloud were being prompted by vernacular devotional literature and the Bible to speculate on theology. “Why, they’re half theologians,” said the Franciscan preachers contemptuously. They own Bibles the way they own love stories and romances. They get carried away by questions on transubstantiation, and they go “running around from . . . one [female] religious house to another, seeking advice and making much ado about nothing.” What the good brothers expected from city women was not silly reasoning but the tears and repentance that would properly follow a Lenten sermon replete with all the rhetorical devices and dramatic gestures of which the Franciscans were masters.²⁹

Even a man who was more sympathetic than the Franciscans to lettered females had his reservations about how far their learning should take them. A male poet praised the noble dame Gabrielle de Bourbon in the 1520’s for reading vernacular books on moral and doctrinal questions and for composing little treatises to the honor of God and the Virgin Mary. But she knew her

limits, for “women must not apply their minds to curious questions of theology and the secret matters of divinity, the knowledge of which belongs to prelates, rectors and doctors.”³⁰

The Christian humanist Erasmus was one of the few men of his time who sensed the depths of resentment accumulating in women whose efforts to think about doctrine were not taken seriously by the clergy. In one of his *Colloquies*,³¹ a lady learned in Latin and Greek is being twitted by an asinine abbot (the phrase is Erasmus’). She finally bursts out, “If you keep on as you’ve begun, geese may do the preaching sooner than put up with you tongue-tied pastors. The world’s a stage that’s topsy-turvy now, as you see. Every man must play his part—or exit.”*

[III]

The world was indeed topsy-turvy. The Catholic Church, which Erasmus had tried to reform from within, was being split by Protestants who believed that man was saved by faith in Christ alone and that human work had nothing to do with it, who were changing the sacramental system all around and overthrowing the order of the priesthood. Among this welter of new ideas, let us focus here on the new image of the Christian woman as presented in Calvinist popular literature.

We can find her in a little play dated around 1550. The heroine is not a learned lady but a pure and simple woman who knows her Bible. The villain is not a teasing, harmless abbot but a lecherous and stupid village priest. He begins by likening her achievements to those of craftsmen who were meddling with Scripture, and then goes on: “Why, you’ll even see a woman /

* Erasmus’ colloquy makes an interesting contrast with a well-known fourteenth-century dialogue between a woman and her confessor, *Schwester Katrei*. Part of the corpus of mystical literature attributed to Meister Eckhart, the tract portrays a woman who ultimately knows more than her confessor—not through religious study or reading, but through experience and illumination. See Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972), pp. 215-18, and Franz Pfeiffer, *Meister Eckhart*, trans. C. de B. Evans (London, 1923), I: 312-34.

Knock over your arguments / With her responses on the Gospel.” And in the play she does, quoting Scripture to oppose the adoration of Mary and the saints and to oppose the power of the popes. The priest can only quote from glosses, call her names, and threaten to burn her.³²

Wherever one looks in the Protestant propaganda of the 1540's to the 1560's, the Christian woman is identified by her relation to Scripture. Her sexual purity and control are demonstrated by her interest in the Bible, and her right to read the New Testament in the vernacular is defended against those who would forbid it to her, as to such other unlearned persons as merchants and artisans. The author of the pamphlet *The Way to Arrive at the Knowledge of God* put the matter sharply enough: “You say that women who want to read the Bible are just libertines? I say you call them lewd merely because they won't consent to your seduction. You say it's permitted to women to read Boccaccio's *Flamette* or Ovid's *Art of Love* . . . which teach them to be adulterers, and yet you'll send a woman who's reading a Bible to the flames. You say it's enough for a woman's salvation for her to do her housework, sew and spin? . . . Of what use then are Christ's promises to her? You'll put spiders in Paradise, for they know how to spin very well.”³³

The message was even put to music during the First Religious War in the 1560's. The Huguenot queen of Navarre sings:

Those who say it's not for women
To look at Holy Writ
Are evil men and infamous
Seducers and antichrist.
Alas, my ladies.
Your poor souls
Let them not be governed
By such great devils.³⁴

And in reality as well as in popular literature Protestant women were freeing their souls from the rule of priests and doctors of theology. Noble churchmen were horrified at the intemperance with which Protestant females abused them as godless men. The

pages of Jean Crespin's widely read *Book of the Martyrs*, based on the real adventures of Protestant heretics, record the story of one Marie Becaudelle, a servant of La Rochelle who learns of the Gospel from her master and argues publicly with a Franciscan, showing him from Scripture that he does not preach according to the Word of God. A bookseller's wife disputes doctrine in a prison cell with the bishop of Paris and with doctors of theology. An honest widow of Tours talks to priests and monks with the witness of Scripture: "I'm a sinner, but I don't need candles to ask God to pardon my faults. You're the ones who walk in darkness." The learned theologians did not know what to make of such monstrous women, who went against nature.³⁵

To this challenge to the exclusion of women, the Catholic theologians in mid-century responded not by accommodating but by digging in their heels. It wasn't safe, said an important Jesuit preacher, to leave the Bible to the discretion of "what's turning around in a woman's brain." "To learn essential doctrine," echoed another cleric, "there is no need for women or artisans to take time out from their work and read the Old and New Testament in the vernacular. Then they'll want to dispute about it and give their opinion . . . and they can't help falling into error. Women must be silent in Church, as Saint Paul says." Interestingly enough, when a Catholic vernacular Bible was finally allowed to circulate in France at the end of the sixteenth century, it did not play an important role in the conversion or devotional life of Catholic leaders like Barbe Acarie and Saint Jeanne Françoise de Chantal.³⁶

Thus, into a pre-Reformation situation in which urban women were estranged from priests or in tension with them over the matter of their theological curiosity, the Protestant movement offered a new option: relations with the priestly order could be broken, and women, like their husbands (indeed *with* their husbands), could be engaged in the pure and serious enterprise of reading and talking about Scripture. The message being broadcast to male artisans and lesser merchants was similar but less momen-

tous. In the first place, the men were more likely already to be literate; and anyway, the only natural order the men were being asked to violate was the separation between the learned and unlearned. The women were *also* being called to a new relation with men. It is worth noting how different is this appeal to women from that which Max Weber considered most likely to win females over to a new religion. Rather than inciting to orgy and emotion, it was summoning to intellectual activity and self-control.

How was the appeal received? France never became a Protestant kingdom, of course, and even in cities where the movement was strong only one-third to one-half of the population might be ardent Calvinists. City men who became caught up in Protestantism ranged from wealthy bankers and professionals to poor journeymen, but they were generally from the more skilled and complex, the more literate, or the more novel trades and occupations. A printer, a goldsmith, or a barber-surgeon was more likely to disobey priests and doctors of theology than was a boatmaster, a butcher, or a baker.

What of the Calvinist women? As with the men, they did not come from the mass of poor unskilled people at the bottom of urban society, although a certain percentage of domestic servants did follow their masters and mistresses into the Reformed Church. The Protestant women belonged mostly to the families of craftsmen, merchants, and professional men, but they were by no means exclusively the literate women in these circles. For all the female martyrs who answered the Inquisitors by citing Scripture they had read, there were as many who could answer only by citing doctrines they had heard. It is also clear that in Lyon in the 1570's, more than a decade after the Reformed Church had been set up, a significant percentage of Reformed women still could not write their names.³⁷ For this last group, then, the Protestant path was not a way to express their new literacy but a way finally to associate themselves with that surge of male literacy already described.

But there is more that we can say about city women who turned

Protestant. A preliminary examination of women arrested for heresy or killed in Catholic uprisings in many parts of France, of women among the Protestant suspects in Toulouse in 1568-69, and of a very large sample of Protestant women in Lyon (about 750 women) yields three main observations. First, there is no clear evidence either that the wives mainly followed their husbands into the movement or that it worked the other way around.* We can find women converted by their husbands who became more committed than their men; we can find wives who converted while their husbands remained “polluted in idolatry” and husbands who converted while their wives lagged behind.³⁸ Second, the Protestant women seemed to include more than a random number of widows, of women with employ of their own—such as dress-makers, merchants, midwives, hotel-keepers, and the like—and of women with the curious nicknames associated with public and eccentric personalities.³⁹ But finally, the Protestant movement in the sixteenth century did not pull in the small but significant group of genuinely learned women in the city—neither the patronesses of the literary salons nor the profane female poets. Louise Labé, who pleaded with women to lift their heads above their distaffs, always remained in the church that invoked the Virgin, although one of her aunts, a female barber, joined the Calvinists.⁴⁰

What do these observations suggest about the state of life of city women before their conversion to the new religion? They do not indicate a prior experience of mere futility and waste or restrictive little family worlds. Rather, Protestant religious commitment seems to have complemented in a new sphere the scope and independence that the women’s lives had already had. Women already independent in the street and market now ventured into the male preserve of theology. And yet the literary woman, al-

* Nancy Roelker found a different pattern among Huguenot noblewomen, who more often than their husbands took the first step toward conversion (“The Appeal of Calvinism to French Noblewomen in the Sixteenth Century,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 [1972]: 402). Class differences help explain this contrast, such as the more significant roles in public life enjoyed by noblewomen than those allowed to city women.

ready admitted to the castle of learning, does not seem to have needed the Religion of the Book. A look at developments within the Reformed Church will indicate why this should have been so.

[IV]

After 1562 the Reformed Church of France started to settle into its new institutional structures and the promise of Protestantism began to be realized for city women. Special catechism classes in French were set up for women, and in towns under Huguenot control efforts were made to encourage literacy, even among all the poor girls in the orphanages, not just the gifted few. In certain Reformed families the literate husbands finally began teaching their wives to read.⁴¹

Some Protestant females, however, had more ambitious goals. The image of the new Christian woman with her Bible had beckoned them to more than catechism classes or reading the Scriptures with their husbands. Consider Marie Dentière. One-time abbess in Tournai, but expelled from her convent in the 1520's because of heresy, Dentière married a pastor and found her way to Geneva during its years of religious revolution. There, according to the report of a nun of the Poor Clare order, Marie got "mixed up with preaching," coming, for instance, to the convent to persuade the poor creatures to leave their miserable life. She also published two religious works, one of them an epistle on religious matters addressed to Queen Marguerite de Navarre. Here Dentière inserted a "Defense for Women" against calumnies, not only by Catholic adversaries but also by some of the Protestant faithful. The latter were saying that it was rash for women to publish works to each other on Scriptural matters. Dentière disagreed: "If God has done the grace to some poor women to reveal to them by His Holy Scriptures some good and holy thing, dare they not write about it, speak about it, and declare it, one to the other? . . . Is it not foolishly done to hide the talent that God has given us?"⁴²

Dentière maintained the modest fiction that she was addressing

herself only to other females. Later women did not. Some of the women prisoners in the French jails preached to “the great consolation” of both male and female listeners. Our ex-Calvinist jurist Florimond de Raemonde gave several examples, both from the Protestant conventicles and from the regular Reformed services as late as 1572, of women who while waiting for a preacher to arrive had gone up to pulpits and read from the Bible. One *théologienne* even took public issue with her pastor. Finally, in some of the Reformed Churches southwest of Paris—in areas where weavers and women had been early converts—a movement started to permit lay persons to prophesy. This would have allowed both women and unlearned men to get up in church and speak on holy things.⁴³

Jean Calvin, Théodore de Bèze, and other members of the Venerable Company of Pastors did not welcome these developments. The social thrust of the Reformation, as they saw it, was to overthrow the hierarchical priestly class and administer the church instead by well-trained pastors and sound male members of the Consistories. That was enough topsy-turvy for them. And like Catholic critics who had quoted Paul’s dictum from I Corinthians that “women keep silence in the churches” against Protestants who were reading and talking about the Bible, now the Reformed pastors quoted it against Protestant women who wanted to preach publicly or have some special vocation in the church.⁴⁴ Pierre Viret explained in 1560 that the elect were equal in that they were called to be Christian and faithful—man and woman, master and servant, free and serf. But the Gospel had not abolished within the church the rank and order of nature and of human society. God created and Christ confirmed that order. Even if a woman had greater spiritual gifts than had her husband, she could not speak in Christian assembly. Her task, said Pastor Viret, was merely to instruct her children in the faith when they were young; she might also be a schoolteacher to girls if she wished.*

* At Nîmes in the early 1560’s four women were charged by the Consistory to seek alms for the poor (Samuel Mours, *Le protestantisme en France au*

And when a female—even a member of the royal family, like Renée de France—tried to go beyond this and meddle in the affairs of the Consistory, the ministers could be very blunt. As a pastor wrote to Calvin about Renée, “She is turning everything upside-down in our ecclesiastical assembly. . . . Our Consistory will be the laughing-stock of papists and Anabaptists. They’ll say we’re being ruled by women.”⁴⁵

Women had been incited to disobey their priests: were they now going to be allowed to disobey their pastors? The pastors quelled them rather easily, and the noisy women subsided into silence or, in a few cases, returned to the Catholic Church. Interestingly enough, during the 1560’s, when so many urban churches needed pastors, even a few men of artisanal background were scooped in as ministers of the Word. Consistories were dominated by wealthy merchants and professional men but usually included one or two prosperous master craftsmen.⁴⁶ But the women, no matter how rich or well read, were just wives: together with men in a new relation to the Word—but unequal nevertheless.

It cannot be said that the French Calvinist women expressed much bitterness about this role. Radical sects of the Anabaptist type did not form in France, as they did in the Netherlands or in Germany, where—in a less professional, less bookish, less hierarchical order—women were allowed to prophesy or speak in tongues along with men. Nor, apart from later witchcraft trials, did the French Reformation ever turn against troublemaking women with the fury of the Jacobins during the French Revolution, who guillotined feminists such as Olympe de Gouges and denied women any political rights, including the right even to wit-

seizième siècle [Paris, 1959], p. 218), but women were not made deaconesses. A proposal that women serve as deaconesses in the Reformed Church was actually made by Jean Morély, former tutor in the court of Jeanne d’Albret. Appearing in his *Traicté de la discipline et police chrestienne* (1562) along with other imaginative ideas for a more decentralized and democratic church polity, the proposal was never realized. Rather, Morély’s work was roundly condemned by pastors in Geneva and national synods in France (Robert Kingdon, *Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement* [Madison, Wis., 1967], pp. 46-84, esp. p. 59).

ness political debate. What is notable about Calvinist women is not that they were subsequently discontented but that the Reformed solution gave a certain style to their activities on behalf of the Gospel. However enterprising the city women were in the cause of the New Jerusalem—and their activities ranged from marching to martyrdom—there were two things they did not do. No Calvinist woman showed (or was allowed to show) the organizational creativity of the great Catholic females of the Counter-Reformation—of an Angela Merici, for instance, who conceived and set up an extraordinary new order for nonenclosed women in Brescia in the 1530's. Nor did Reformed women outside the circles of the nobility publish as much as did Catholic women of the same social milieu. After Marie Dentièrè's *Letter to the Queen of Navarre* with its "Defense of Women" in 1538 (which, incidentally, caused a scandal in Geneva because of its sharp criticism of pastors), no book by a woman was printed in Geneva for the rest of the century. In France there was no Protestant counterpart in the sixteenth century for such an urban poet as Louise Labé.⁴⁷

Now we can understand better why Louise Labé would not have flourished under the discipline of a Calvinist Consistory or have been readily attracted to the Huguenot movement. To be sure, many male poets of sixteenth-century France were discomfited by Calvinism, too. But at least one of them, no less than Pastor Théodore de Bèze, was able to hold on to some of the threads of his literary identity, even after his conversion to the new religion.⁴⁸ But the public and independent identity of Louise Labé was based on behavior that was unacceptable in a modest and brave Reformed woman. The books Louise read and wrote were lascivious; her salons an impure gathering of the sexes; and her literary feminism impudent. She was talked of in Geneva as a lewd female who had corrupted the wife of a Lyon surgeon, persuading her to abandon her Christian husband for the sake of pleasure. In a Protestant poem against the scandalous new fashion of hoop skirts, Louise seems to have been the model of the libertine—a woman who talks loud and

often, affecting to know divine things but really living a life of debauchery. A Catholic deacon in Lyon, Guillaume Paradin, himself a humanist and literary man, thought Louise virtuous, angelic of face, and with an understanding superior to her sex. Calvin said she was a strumpet. There was some truth in both evaluations.⁴⁹

[v]

An examination of a few other areas of Protestant reform reveals the same pattern as in reading Scripture and preaching: city women revolted against priests and entered new religious relations that brought them together with men or likened them to men but left them unequal.

The new Calvinist liturgy, with its stress on the concerted fellowship of the congregation, used the vernacular—the language of women and the unlearned—and included Psalms sung jointly by men and women. Nothing shocked Catholic observers more than this. When they heard the music of male and female voices filtering from a house where a conventicle was assembled, all they could imagine were lewd activities with the candles extinguished. It was no better when the Protestant movement came into the open. After the rich ceremony of the mass, performed by the clergy with due sanctity and grandeur, the Reformed service seemed, in the words of a Catholic in Paris in the 1560's, “without law, without order, without harmony.” “The minister begins. Everybody follows—men, women, children, servants, chambermaids. . . . No one is on the same verse. . . . The fine-voiced maidens let loose their hums and trills . . . so the young men will be sure to listen. How wrong of Calvin to let women sing in Church.”⁵⁰

To Protestant ears, it was very different. For laymen and laywomen in the service the common voice in praise of the Lord expressed the lack of distance between pastor and congregation. The Catholic priests had stolen the Psalms; now they had been returned. As for the participants in the conventicles, the songs gave them courage and affirmed their sense of purity over the

hypocritical papists, who no sooner left the mass than they were singing love songs. The Protestant faithful were firmly in control of their sexual impulses, they believed, their dark and sober clothes a testimonial to their sincerity. And when the women and men sang together in the great armed street marches of the 1560's, the songs were a militant challenge to the hardened Catholics and an invitation to the wavering listeners to join the elect.⁵¹

For the city women, there was even more novelty. They had had a role smaller than men's in the organized lay ceremonial life of the church, and the confraternities had involved them rather little. Previously, nuns had been the only women to sing the office. Now the confraternities and the convents would be abolished. The ceremonial was simplified and there was only one kind of group for worship, one in which men and women sang together. For Protestant tradesmen, many of whom were immigrants to the city, the new liturgical fellowship provided religious roots they had been unable to find in the inhospitable parishes. For Protestant women, who were not as likely to have been immigrants, the new liturgy provided roots in religious organizations with men.

But this leveling, this gathering together of men and women, had its limits. Singing in church did not lead women on to preaching or to participating in the Consistory any more than Bible-reading had. Furthermore, there was some effort by the pastors to order the congregations so as to reflect the social order. In Geneva, special seats were assigned to minimize the mingling of the sexes. And in some Reformed churches the sexes were separated when communion was taken: the men went up first to partake of the Holy Supper.⁵²

Psalms were added to the religious life of the Protestants and saints were taken away—from prayer, image, and invocation. Here the matter of sex was indifferent: Saint Damian departed as did Saint Margaret; Saint Nicholas departed as did Saint Catherine. Protestant men and women affirmed before the Inquisition that one must not call upon the Virgin, for, blessed though she was, she had no merit. And when the magistrates were slow to

purify the churches of their idolatrous statues, zealous members of the *menu peuple* smashed the saints. Females were always included in these crowds.⁵³ Indeed, like the armed march of the psalm-singers, the iconoclastic riot was a transfer of the joint political action of the grain riot into the religious sphere.

But the loss of the saints affected men and women unequally. Reformed prayer could no longer be addressed to a woman, whereas the masculine identity of the Father and Son was left intact. It may seem anachronistic to raise the matter of sexual identity in religious images during the Reformation, but it is not. Soon afterward, the Catholic poet Marie le Jars de Gournay, friend and editor of Montaigne, was to argue in her *Equality of the Sexes* that Jesus' incarnation as a male was no special honor to the male sex but a mere historical convenience; given the patriarchal malice of the Jews, a female savior would never have been accepted. But if one were going to emphasize the sex of Jesus, then it was all the more important to stress the perfection of Mary and her role in the conception of our Lord.⁵⁴ So, if the removal from Holy Mother Church cut off certain forms of religious affect for men, for women the consequences for their identities went even deeper. Now during their hours of childbirth—a “combat,” Calvin described it, “a horrible torment”—they called no more on the Virgin and said no prayers to Saint Margaret. Rather, as Calvin advised, they groaned and sighed to the Lord and He received those groans as a sign of their obedience.⁵⁵

Obedience to the Lord was, of course, a matter for both men and women. But women had the additional charge of being obedient to their husbands. The Reformed position on marriage provides a final illustration of the pattern “together but unequal.”

The Protestant critique of clerical celibacy involved first and foremost a downgrading of the concept that the male had a greater capacity than the female to discipline his sexual impulses. Since the time of the Greeks, physicians had been telling people that physiology made the female the more lustful, the more uncontrollable sex. As Doctor François Rabelais put it, there are

many things a man can do, from work to wine, to control “the pricks of venery”; but a woman, with her hysteric animal (the womb) within, could rarely restrain herself from cuckolding her husband. Given these assumptions, clerical celibacy for the superior sex had been thought a real possibility whereas for the female it had appeared an exceptional achievement.⁵⁶

The Reformers’ observation that continence was a rare gift of God and their admonition “Better to marry than to burn” were, then, primarily addressed to the numerous male clergy and less to the small fraction of female religious. Indeed, sermons on clerical marriage stressed how the groom would now be saved from fornication and hellfire but said little of the soul of the bride. It is surely significant, too, that male religious joined the Reformation movements in proportionately larger numbers than did female. The nuns were always the strong holdouts, even when they were promised dowries and pensions. Though some of them may have been afraid to try their chances on the marriage market, many simply preferred the separate celibate state and organization. When Marie Dentière tried to persuade the nuns of the Poor Clare order at Geneva to end their hypocritical lives and marry, as she had, the sisters spat at her.⁵⁷

The argument for clerical marriage, then, equalized men and women somewhat in regard to their appetites. It also raised the woman’s status by affirming that she could be a worthy companion to a minister of God. The priest’s concubine, chased from his house in ignominy by Catholic reformers and ridiculed as a harlot by Protestants, could now become the pastor’s wife! A respectable girl from a good city family—likely, in the first generation, to be the daughter of a merchant or prosperous craftsman—she would be a helpful companion to her husband, keeping his household in order and his colleagues entertained. And she would raise her son to be a pastor and her daughter to be a pastor’s wife.⁵⁸

Since marriage was now the only encouraged state, the Reformers did what they could to make it more tolerable according to their lights. Friendship and companionship within marriage were

stressed, as many historians have pointed out, although it is a mistake to think that this was unique to Protestant thought. Catholic humanist writers valued these relations within marriage as well.⁵⁹ In other ways, the Reformed position was more original.* A single sexual standard would now be enforced rather than talked about; and the victorious Huguenot Consistories during the Wars of Religion chased out the prostitutes almost as quickly as they silenced the mass. The husband would be compelled insofar as possible to exercise his authority, in Calvin's words, "with moderation and not insult over the woman who has been given him [by God] as his partner." Thus, in a real innovation in Christian Europe, men who beat their wives were haled before Consistories and threatened with denial of communion. The men grumbled and complained—"I beat my wife before and I'll beat

* It does not seem justified to argue, as does Roelker, that Calvin's position on divorce "advanced women to a position of equality with their husbands." "By permitting wives as well as husbands to instigate divorce proceedings," she maintains, "Calvin elevated their dignity and increased their legal rights. Enacted into Genevan law, this could not help but raise the position of women to a higher level" ("The Appeal of Calvinism," p. 406). The institution of divorce with permission to remarry in cases of adultery or very prolonged absence was, of course, an important innovation by Calvin and other Protestant reformers. But this change did not remedy an *inequality* in the existing marriage law. The canon law had long allowed either male or female the right to initiate proceedings in an ecclesiastical court for separation in case of the partner's adultery, as well as for annulment and dissolution in certain circumstances. What determined whether men and women in fact had equal access to separation or divorce before or after the Reformation was, first, the informal operation of the double standard, which tolerated the husband's adultery more readily than the wife's, and, second, the relatively greater economic difficulty faced by the single woman supporting herself and her children in the interval before she was able to remarry. For all but the very wealthy man or woman, divorce or legal separation was an unlikely possibility. In any case, the exhaustive research of Roger Stauffenegger has shown that divorces were very rarely granted in Geneva in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—pastors and Consistory always pressing for couples to solve their disputes. See Keith Thomas, "The Double Standard," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20 (1959): 200-202; John T. Noonan, Jr., *Power to Dissolve* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), chaps. 1-3, 7; R. Stauffenegger, "Le mariage à Genève vers 1600," *Mémoires de la société pour l'histoire du droit* 27 (1966): 327-28.

her again if she be bad,” said a Lyon typesetter—but the situation had improved enough in Geneva by the end of the century that some called it “the women’s Paradise.”⁶⁰

But despite all this, the Reformed model of the marriage relation subjected the wife to her husband as surely as did the Catholic one. Women had been created subject to men, said Calvin, although before the fall “this was a liberal and gentle subjection.” Through sin, it had become worse: “Let the woman be satisfied with her state of subjection, and not take it amiss that she is made inferior to the more distinguished sex.” Nor was this view restricted to pastors. There are many examples from sixteenth-century France of Protestant husbands instructing their wives, “their dear sisters and loyal spouses,” telling them of their religious duties, telling them of their responsibilities toward their children, warning them that they must never do anything without seeking advice first. And if Protestant wives then told their husbands to go to the devil or otherwise insulted them so loudly that the neighbors heard, the women might soon find themselves brought before the Consistories and even punished (as the criminal records of Geneva reveal) by three days in prison on bread and water.⁶¹

Undoubtedly there were many Reformed marriages in commercial and artisanal circles where the husbands and wives lived together in peace and friendship. And why not? Women had joined the Reformation to rebel against priests and pope, not to rebel against their husbands. Although they wanted certain “masculine” religious activities opened to them, Calvinist wives—even the most unruly of them—never went so far as to deny the theory of the subjection of women within marriage.⁶² The practice of subjection in individual marriages during those heroic decades of the Reformation may have been tempered by two things: first, the personality of the wife herself, which sustained her revolt against priestly power and her search for new relations with books and men; and second, the common cause of reform, which for a while demanded courageous action from both husbands and wives.

And what could a city woman accomplish for the cause if she were not rich and powerful like a noblewoman? On a Catholic feast day, she could defy her Catholic neighbors by sitting ostentatiously spinning in her window. She could puzzle over the Bible alone or with her husband or with Protestant friends. If she were a printer's wife or widow, she could help get out a Protestant edition to spread the word about tyrannical priests. She could use her house for an illegal Protestant conventicle or assembly. She could put aside her dissolute hoop skirts and full gowns and start to wear black. She could harangue priests in the streets. She could march singing songs in defiance of royal edicts. She could smash statues, break baptismal fonts, and destroy holy images. She could, if persecution became very serious, flee to London or Geneva, perhaps the longest trip she had ever taken. She could stay in France and dig the foundations for a Reformed temple. She could even fight—as in Toulouse, where a Huguenot woman bore arms in the First Religious War. And she could die in flames, shouting to her husband, as did one young wife of Langres, “My friend, if we have been joined in marriage in body, think that this is only like a promise of marriage, for our Lord . . . will marry us the day of our martyrdom.”⁶³

Many of these actions, such as Bible-reading, clearly were special to Protestant city women. A few were not. The Catholic city women in Elizabethan England, for instance, hid priests in their quarters and, if captured, went to the “marriage” of martyrdom as bravely as did any Huguenot. It was the same among the radical Anabaptists. One kind of action, however, seems to have been special to Catholic city women (as also to the radical Quaker women of the seventeenth century): organized group action among women. On the highest level, this was expressed in such attempts to create new forms of common life and work among females as the Ursulines and the Sisters of Charity and the Christian Institutes of Mary Ward. On the lowest level, this was reflected in the violent activity of all-female Catholic crowds—throwing stones at Protestant women, throwing mire at pastors,

and, in the case of a group of female butchers in Aix-en-Provence, beating and hanging the wife of a Protestant bookseller.⁶⁴

These contrasts can point the way to some general conclusions about the long-range significance of the Reformed solution for relations between the sexes. In an interesting essay, Alice Rossi suggests three models for talking about equality. One is assimilationist: the subordinate group is somewhat raised by making it like the superior group. A second is pluralistic: each group is allowed to keep its distinctive characteristics but within a context of society at large that is still hierarchical. The third is hybrid (or, better, transformational), involving changes within and among all groups involved.⁶⁵ Whatever transformations in social relations were accomplished by either the Reformation or the Counter-Reformation, it seems that as far as relations between the sexes go the Reformed solution was assimilationist; the Catholic solution, with its female saints and convents, was pluralistic. Neither, of course, eliminated the subject status of women.*

Is one position clearly better than the other? That is, within the context of the society of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did one solution seem to offer greater freedom to men and women to make decisions about their lives and to adopt new roles? One important school of sociologists always answers such questions in favor of Protestantism. It is the superior sect: its transcendent and activist Father, less hierarchical religious symbolism, and this-worldly asceticism all make for a more evolved religion, facilitating the desacralization of society. More different choices are also facilitated, so this argument goes, and more rapid social change.⁶⁶

Certainly it is true that the Reformed solution did promote a certain desexualization of society, a certain neutralizing of forms

* The same point can be made in regard to class relations within the two Reformations, the Reformed Church assimilating artisans and even peasants upward in styles of religious behavior and the Catholic allowing greater scope to "peasant religion." Although Calvinism reduced the levels of angelic and ecclesiastical hierarchy, neither church challenged the *concept* of social hierarchy.

of communication and of certain religious places so that they became acceptable for women. These were important gains, bringing new tools to women and new experience to both sexes. But the assimilationist solution brought losses, too. This-worldly asceticism denied laymen and laywomen much of the shared recreational and festive life allowed them by Catholicism. It closed off an institutionalized and respectable alternative to private family life: the communal living of the monastery. By destroying the female saints as exemplars for both sexes, it cut off a wide range of affect and activity. And by eliminating a separate identity and separate organization for women in religious life, it may have made them a little more vulnerable to subjection in all spheres.

As it turned out, women suffered for their powerlessness in both Catholic and Protestant lands in the late sixteenth to eighteenth centuries as changes in marriage laws restricted the freedoms of wives even further, as female guilds dwindled, as the female role in middle-level commerce and farm direction contracted, and as the differential between male and female wages increased.⁶⁷ In both Catholic France and Protestant England, the learned lady struggled to establish a role for herself: the female schoolteacher became a familiar figure, whether as a spinster or as an Ursuline; the female dramatist scrambled to make a living, from the scandalous Aphra Behn in the seventeenth century to the scandalous Olympe de Gouges in the eighteenth.

Thus it is hard to establish from a historical point of view that the Reformed assimilationist structure always facilitated more rapid and creative changes in sex roles than did the relatively pluralistic structure found in the Catholicism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Both forms of religious life have contributed to the transformation of sex roles and to the transformation of society. In the proper circumstances, each can serve as a corrective to the other.⁶⁸ Whatever long-range changes may be achieved, the varied voices heard in this essay will have played their part: the immodest Louise Labé telling women to lift their

minds a little above their distaffs, the servant Marie Becaudelle disputing with her priest, the ex-nun Marie Dentière urging women to speak and write about Scripture, and yes, the Catholic Marie le Jars de Gournay reminding us that, after all, it was only a historical accident that our Lord Jesus Christ was born a male.



