

Research Paper

Movement against the cult of True Womanhood in 19th century

Key Issues in African American & Black Atlantic Thought

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Introduction

Over the years, the topic of women in the society has been a highly debated topic since on one hand, there are those who are of the opinion that women are the same with men while on the other hand, there are those who are of the view that men are superior to women. This paper focuses on the topic of cult of true womanhood and explores both sides of the divide as there were those who were opposed to the movement while there were those who were strongly supporting the movement.

Explanation of the cult of true womanhood

The cult of true womanhood that is also known as the ideology of republican motherhood, ideology of true womanhood and the cult of domesticity entail the acquiescent and restraining anticipations of middle and upper class women in the 18th and the 19th Centuries and is to a certain extent still present in the 21st Century (Socolow and Stuart, 2000). These beliefs, can be traced in puritanical utopianism as well as conventional Protestantism and were part of what was known as the separate spheres philosophy system, that was of the view that the man was supposed to be seen in the public and to be involved in the public engagements and initiatives while on the other hand, the woman was supposed to only be involved in private engagements and initiatives such as home chores that comprised of taking care of the children and carrying other different home activities (DuBois and Dumenil, 2008).

As far as the origin of the cult of true womanhood is concerned, the movement can be said to have emanated from the religious beliefs and normative concords of the time, together with the femme covert common laws that originated from England. Thus, in view of the American government as well as the church, once a woman got married, the woman stopped being an independent woman. The reason for that was due to the fact that when making the marriage vows, the identity of the woman got inseparably related to the identity of the husband implying that the laws that were applicable to the man was also applicable to the woman. As a result, only single women who were not married were able to maintain their identity as married women had contractual and no legal capacity of their own.

The true cult of womanhood had four main fundamental virtues. The first virtue was the virtue of deity where women were perceived to have a specific duty to be virtuous and respectful of God who created them from the rib of the man. Thus, the women were expected to be submissive to their husbands and at the same time also obey God's word. The second virtue was the virtue of purity that required that women keep themselves as well as their bodies free from sins or other things that could make them not to be pure. For example, it was the responsibility of the woman to ensure that she avoided any overtures by other men apart from the husband. The third virtue was the virtue of submissiveness as the woman was expected to be totally submissive to the man as the man had dominion over the woman. Finally, the fourth and the final virtue was the virtue of domesticity that stated that the place of the woman within the society

was in the kitchen and the family home. In particular, the mother was considered as been crucial to the class as well as the spiritual upbringing of the children, and was responsible for ensuring that the children grew up knowing their specific gender roles and also aware of what it means to believe in God (Patton, 2000).

Opposition against the Cult of True Womanhood

Just as is the case with any other movement, there are those who are in support of the movement and there are those who strongly oppose the movement. In that view, it is thus not surprising that that there were some people who were in opposition of cult of true womanhood. Indeed, women rights activists were mainly the ones who opposed the movement.

Mary Wollstonecraft, Frances Wright, and Harriet Martineau were among the leading women rights activists at the time who strongly opposed the ideologies of the cult of true womanhood even though they were criticized and accused of being unfeminine. Indeed, Reverend Henry F. Harrington who was one of the proponent of the movement noted that the three women "are only semi-women, mental hermaphrodites," (Maddox, 1999, p.65).

Mary Wollstonecraft was a British feminist who was strongly opposed to the ideologies of the cult of true womanhood. In her work that was titled *A vindication of the rights of woman*, Wollstonecraft expressed her views and opinions on why the ideologies of the cult of true womanhood were not good for the society. Indeed, Wollstonecraft campaigned for women to be educated as she argued that if women were not educated,

the society was to degenerate since the fact that mothers were the primary educators of the children meant that if the mothers were not educated, and then it would be hard for the children to be educated. In her opposition for the support of education for men only, Wollstonecraft explained that the education system was a false system since women were also human creatures and were capable of rational thoughts unlike was the common belief at the time that women were not rational. In responding to the views that women did not really require education and were only to be educated at the pleasure of men, Wollstonecraft noted that learned women could be companion of their husbands and might even study to become care givers such as nurses and midwives. Nevertheless, from the review of the views by Wollstonecraft, it can be pointed out that Wollstonecraft never opposed the view that man was superior to woman. Rather, what Wollstonecraft was advocating for was recognition of the important roles that the woman was playing in the society and thus advocated for the woman to be given a chance to advance in the society by being enrolled to school (Tong, 2009; Wollstonecraft,2003).

Another woman who was strongly opposed to the cult of true womanhood was Francis Wright who was a Scottish born lecturer and a social reformer and became a citizen of the United States in the year 1852. During her time, the topic of role of women in the society was a very common topic as it was the time when the ideologies of cult of true womanhood were being advanced. However, Wright in her role as a lecturer was considered as a rebel of the cult of the true womanhood movement since according to

the movement, she was supposed to stay at home and take care of her children even though she never did that as she lectured in front of both male and female students. In a particular, Wright was opposed to the notion that only men should have access to education and argued that by making education accessible to all children irrespective of their gender, the children will be rendered useful and happy. Her strong campaign for equality resulted to Wright even been criticized by other activists who were campaigning for the rights of women at the time such as Catherine Beecher who alleged that Wright was even opposed to what was sacred and religion (Hamilton, 2002).

Harriet Martineau was another thinker in the 19th Century who was strongly opposed to the cult of true womanhood and was in particular opposed to the view that women could not be involved with the outside world. In order to address that challenge, Martineau played a vital role in ensuring that the concept of volunteered was used by the women to get them outside their homes. As a result, women created new jobs which even if were unpaid, they offered then an opportunity to get to the outside world thus ensuring that they were no longer confined to their homesteads (Lopota, 1994).

In conclusions, it can thus be noted that the main opposition towards the cult of true womanhood never advocated for equality among the men and women but mainly void. For example, the opponents advocated for education for women as well as women to be allowed to work.

Support for the Cult of True Womanhood

On the other hand, the cult of true womanhood had strong support mainly from religious leaders who considered the movement to be compliance to the bible. One of such thinkers was Henry F. Harrington, who referred to those who were opposed to the movement as suffragettes, semi-women, and mental hermaphrodites thus implying that those who were opposed to the movement that advocated for the women to be submissive to their husbands were never going to be true women (Tuner, 2015).

Another supporter of the cult of true womanhood was Cartharine Beecher who mainly supported the movement as she argued that the movement was ensuring that the emotional needs of the family could be now well catered for as the roles of the man and woman within a normal family set up were well defined. In addition, Beecher was of the view that the cult of true womanhood was what has been previously missing in the society since by subscribing with the ideologies of the movement; there would be no conflicts in families (Burke, 2011).

On the other hand, as explained by Welters (1966), the supporters of the cult of true womanhood saw the movement as a 'vehicle' that was going to help instill values and morals into the society at a time when the people were viewed as being disobedient and disrespectful to God. Thus, church leaders and other prominent people in the society supported the movement and encouraged people to comply with its doctrines as the doctrines were seen to be capable of instilling Christian values to the people.

Conclusions

In conclusions, it can be explained that the cult of true womanhood comprised of a protestant resurgence movement that took place in the 1790s and lasted till the 1850s. Nevertheless, the consequences of the movement can be said to still be present in modern society since it is clear that there are those who are convinced that man should have dominion over woman. According to the cult, true women were the moral custodians of the household. The women were specifically ideal for that responsibility since they were perceived to have been spiritually pure and thus nearer to God. The women managed to stay pure as they did not mix with the corrupted environment of the outside world, which affected the innocence. Hence, the fact that men were continually engaging with the world meant that it was impossible for the women to be pure thus when it came to spirituality, men were inferior to women. Presently, it would be hard to envision how the doctrines of the cult of true womanhood could be applicable in modern world even though it cannot be disputed that some of the doctrines are to a certain extent relevant in the 21st Century.

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