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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

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CHRISTIANITY AND THE FLIGHT FROM LOVE

I

FEW can have failed to notice, at some time or other, how anti-feministic is the typical gang of schoolboys, how it rigidly excludes everything savouring of affection, how it even despises Christian names, and how within its pale even the closest friends will all but deny their love for one another.

Investigation shows that this attitude is far more deep-rooted than a casual glance might lead one to suppose. It is indeed astonishing to observe the lengths to which it may go.

Outrageous epithets are often used as terms of endearment while practical jokes, chaff and roughness serve to express and hide affection. Tenderness is derided as being "sentimental", "wet", "namby-pamby", "effeminate"; it is "simply not done", makes one "squirm", is only seen in "molly-coddles", "mothers' darlings" and so on. Expressions of esteem and love are, among such boys, disguised more carefully than smutty jokes, while on the other hand everything that savours of independence and power is glorified.

This taboo on tenderness, as it has been called, extends far further than among groups of somewhat depraved boys and young men. There are, in fact, good grounds for believing that it is the major taboo of civilized man, and in any case it is unimaginable that if a boy ever adopts the taboo in an extreme form, he will simply drop it in manhood. The fact that he drops the schoolboy slang is no reason at all for thinking that the attitude which that slang was used to symbolize has been radically altered. Rather will the old taboo show itself in other forms—in his ideals, in his likes and dislikes, in his relationship with others, in his religion, in the books he reads and so on. And there is no doubt that our civilization to-day shows many of the traits of the boy we are considering. The newspapers and cinemas reveal a disguised admiration for the criminal and for the self-centred man who moulds the world

by his will. On the other hand the quality which was once esteemed under the name of "piety" is now rarely held up as an ideal. And so it comes about that just as the sexual neurotic and the prude gave a very faithful picture of the sex-views of the Victorian age, so the would-be "manly" schoolboy gives a true if also exaggerated idea of modern views on affection.

But what is the meaning of the taboo of tenderness? Why do men like to pretend that they can live without affection? The taboo on sex is easy to understand, for with sexual laxity civilization would become impossible¹ and in their minds men are apt to defend themselves by a certain amount of prudery from this danger which they see ahead. But with affection it is otherwise. Freud's astonishing idea that "platonic" affection is a myth of idealists—that it is no more than inhibited sexual desire—has been shown beyond doubt to be false.² Affection is not sexual though the two may become connected. Yet if men decided to give up the taboo on tenderness, no danger of the fall of civilization would arise. Indeed the denial of affection works incredible harm and nothing could be better for the world than a repudiation of the taboo.

II

The origin of the hatred of affection has recently been discussed by Dr. I. D. Suttie.³ It is due, he shows, to a sudden change which takes place in the development of a child. In early years the relations between mother and baby are affectionate in the extreme, but they change abruptly if the mother has to turn again to a working life. Then the infant finds its love life starved. It feels disconcerted—all that was most firmly established seems to go. No longer does a cry bring a mother's arms. As soon as it can understand it is told it must grow up and be a man. And so the child begins to picture manhood as a lonely life in which he must go his own way with vigour and rest no longer upon a bond of love with others—and especially with mother. He does not relish this manhood, but

¹ As has been conclusively shown by the researches of J. D. Unwin. *Sex and Culture*, O.U.P., 1934.

² Among other investigations the recently published work of N. M. Iovetz-Tereshchenko (*Friendship-love in Adolescence*, Allen and Unwin, 1936), is especially worthy of mention. With the use of intimate diaries the affective and sexual developments of a schoolboy are discussed and it is shown that they are wholly unrelated.

³ I. D. Suttie, *The Origins of Love and Hate*, Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1935.

little by little he finds it is being forced upon him. Then, a few years later, the break is made even more intense. Adler has collected figures to show that at least 70 per cent of children feel miserable during their first day at school. They are taken from the nursery against their will and suddenly made to fend for themselves where there are none to love, to pity, to sympathise or even to listen to their troubles. As a result they turn in vengeance upon their nursery days. They are denied the pleasures they wanted and, by applying the principle of the sour grapes, they banish everything from their minds which suggests the pleasures they have lost. It is this mechanism which is responsible for the reaction from the tenderness of childhood; it is a reaction which in many and perhaps in most cases persists in diminished form throughout life.

Here, then, are the simple facts which make the situation intelligible. And now it is time to discuss the way in which Christianity has become related to the hatred of love. In the first case, it is very interesting to notice that one of the main psychological objections to Christianity at the present day arises on this very score. From the beginning Christianity has set its face against the taboo on tenderness. Deep and *un-disguised* love for fellow believers was actually stated by Christ to be a way by which the world might recognize His followers (John xiii. 35). Love lies at the very centre of Christianity and it is a love which is unashamed and natural, a love which does not seek disguise. It is not the outward behaviour of being kind, far less the mere habit of embrace, but the affection of heart for heart which shows itself in words and thoughtful deeds. But this is what many a man will not have at any cost. It appeals rather to the woman, though even that appeal is disappearing as women tend to become more and more "masculine" in their outlook.

Now there is, as Suttie has pointed out, every reason to suppose that the tenderness taboo is on the increase. To a large extent this has been the inevitable consequence of the war which forced women into industry. The effect of this on family life has been, of course, that the mother can only spend a short time with her child and is then compelled to leave it during the day in order to go to her ordinary work. It can hardly be coincidence that the enormous growth of cruelty in

Europe during the last few years has come just at the time when the war children are coming to maturity. And it seems likely that the taboo on tenderness will increase steadily in future, for with increasing civilization, the speeding up of life and woman's now assured place in work of all kinds, it is unlikely that there will be any change for the better. Again, as Suttie has shown, the repression of affection, when once it has started in a society, is "likely to be cumulative from one generation to another", for the parents will tend to pass on their own love repression to their children. Lastly, the only way in which a child can "grow up" healthily without suffering a loss of love is for home affection to be gradually replaced by an element of play with other children. But with the diminishing size of the family the opportunities for such play are diminishing, and once again the same conclusion follows—the evils of the taboo on tenderness are likely to increase.

III

With these facts in view it is instructive to examine the way in which modern Christianity is meeting the changing situation. And here it is best to start with the public school where the problem is most intense. Has the Church waged war against the anti-feminist spirit? No! It has rather bowed the knee before it. "Public school religion" is for the most part an extraordinary attempt to meet the situation half-way—or even rather more than half-way. The chaplain and headmaster combine to tell the boys how "manly" Christianity really is. They do their best to eliminate emotion and sentiment. And if the chaplain is a rowing or rigger "blue" so much the better—in fact the possession of such a distinction is generally held to be a better qualification for a chaplaincy than a sound knowledge of psychology or a first class in a theological tripos. The headmaster feels safe with such a man, for he is certain that no one who can get a "blue" will call the taboo in question.

With such men representing official religion, a boy is at once brought face to face with inconsistency. He cannot listen to the reading of the New Testament or sing hymns in chapel without feeling an appeal to sentiment. Such things remind him of home and he feels the need of love once more. But the Christianity which he sees denies love in practice

and almost denies it in theory. Only when it is very hard pressed will it express itself in favour of love and even then it does so in an academic kind of way. Is it any wonder if such religion fails to capture the minds and emotions of boys?

What is true of public school religion is true to a lesser extent of much modern religion also. On a gigantic scale Christianity is trying to square its creed with the taboo on tenderness. On every side there is evidence that it is submitting to this taboo in the hope that the male population may be reached. It has been said of one movement that it rejoices more over the changed life of one "blue" than over the salvation of ninety and nine other sinners. This may be a very unkind remark but it is certain that athletic achievements are at a gigantic premium in preaching the modern gospel. Modern man must be assured that nothing a preacher says will remind him of his painfully neurotic condition with regard to tenderness. He will tolerate a form of godliness but only if it is without natural affection. Thus the Church to-day is no longer a bulwark against hardness of heart and emotional indifference. It stands—not all of it, but a growing and large section of it—for compromise on love, which is the greatest of all moral issues.

In this connection the great success of the Oxford Group Movement is most interesting. This movement founds its very existence upon "sharing". Compared with this the four great issues of absolute unselfishness, purity, honesty and love are, perhaps, of relatively minor importance, for these things are ideals which each person is left to interpret in his own way, or even not at all at first. But "sharing" is something practical from the very beginning. It means conquering reserve—letting other people see the secrets of the soul.

"Sharing" is of course defended on the ground that it helps other people. If you go up to someone whom you strongly suspect of stealing apples from your garden and tell him how you used to steal apples from someone else's garden before you were "changed", the chances are that he will look very ashamed of himself and make the necessary confession. But if you say bluntly: "I have reason to suppose you are a thief" your remark may lead to a slander action. "Sharing" is sometimes, therefore, a very useful way of helping other people to acknowledge their difficulties without hurting their

feelings. There can be no doubt that good is often accomplished by its means while much unnecessary "preaching" is avoided.

However, it is impossible to believe that this kind of argument—sound as it is—really lies at the bottom of the Group practice. No one who watches the phenomenon carefully can doubt that the real reason for "sharing" is usually something quite different. It is, in short, a method used in order to increase familiarity with other people, and therefore a disguised way of asking for their sympathy and affection. By revealing his inmost secrets a man or woman feels at one with his fellows. The bars of separation, of reserve, of the unknown which separate him from others are broken. And because the way is now open others are able to warm his soul with their love.

This, then, is the real reason for the desire to "share". And without a doubt the success of the Group Movement depends, not upon a re-capturing of spirit of early Christianity (for there is not really much in common) but upon the fact that it offers a temporary release from the taboo of tenderness, a sphere of life in which some scope is left for love. But this is said in no critical spirit. There is no doubt that at times "sharing" is a legitimate and sensible way of reducing the force of the taboo. Trouble only crops up when the wood is mistaken for the trees, when people "share" for the sake of "sharing" instead of placing love in its rightful place.

Affection should—if we were perfectly honest—be called affection. It has no right to masquerade under roughness, silly names or even its latest phase of "sharing". It is not the thing but the outward deception which is wrong. As John Macmurray¹ has pointed out, it is time that such deceptions were allowed to die, that the emotional life of man should be delivered from a constant fear of expression.

IV

What then should the right attitude of religion be? Will not the Churches lose all their influence if they cease the propaganda that to be a Christian is to be a "man"? Will anyone listen if preachers utterly ignore the greatest taboo of mankind? Well, perhaps it is better that they should not listen

¹ J. MacMurray, *Reason and Emotion*, Faber & Faber, 1935.

if the present policy of the Churches is only producing men who retain a form of godliness but deny the power thereof.

But surely the fact is that the taboo on tenderness is not only Christianity's trial but her greatest opportunity. The example of Freud has taught us what is likely to happen when a taboo is *openly* repudiated. With remorseless logic he exposed the taboo on sex which a few generations ago had turned half the population of Europe into prudes. Did he find that no one would listen to him? On the contrary he was dismayed to find a thousand writers exploiting his ideas—often in most undesirable directions. Before long he had turned the world into armed camps, had brought remorseless criticism on his own head and had undermined and changed the views of millions. Probably no living man has had a greater influence on the thought of the world. If the absurd prudery of the Victorian generation is almost unknown to the young of to-day it is due to one man—Sigmund Freud. That harm as well as good has accrued need not be denied—but the fact remains that Freud has given the Churches an illustration of what might happen if they too would fight convention in its strongholds.

There are good grounds for believing that in our own day the taboo on tenderness is replacing the taboo on sex. In the crusade against prudery men have been promised deliverance if they will eradicate hypocrisy and secrecy about their sexual affairs. But the promised deliverance has not come. The taboo on tenderness has become even stronger than it was before, as if to compensate for the loss of its companion. It is the age-long story of the history of morals repeating itself, for in the past moral improvement has ever been accompanied by the introduction of new and unnoticed vices.

In the new situation there is presented an immense opportunity for true Christianity to-day. Instead of yielding to the taboo the modern parson could treat it as his deadliest enemy. He could explain to the multitudes the reasons which keep them from church. He could tell them how childish and spiteful it is to spend their lives reeking vengeance on their nurseries. He could warn them against letting their children experience any sudden break in the love of their parents. He could explain the way in which the taboo on tenderness promotes misunderstanding between people, how it makes children disobey and hate their parents, how in later life it produces

men and women who are unhappy and reserved, who feel that they have no real friend in the world to whom they can open their hearts, who spend their lives in constant inner strife because they pretend to themselves that they can do without love. He could tell them of the mental disorders which arise from this very thing, of the modern cruelty of Europe which has come about because men have hardened their hearts to pity and have hated the sympathy of others. He could tell the men that if Victorians were prudes about sex we moderns are prudes about affection to quite as great a degree. He could tell them of the naturalness of the love portrayed in the New Testament and invite them either to go on being hypocrites or to find deliverance in the religion of Jesus Christ.

Would modern man listen? There is no doubt that he would. Men always listen when they are told home truths. They may object, may fight the light, may do their utmost to hinder and pour out abusive epithets. But at least they would listen and the supreme indifference to everything a preacher says would begin to disappear. And if people listened to this as they have listened to Freud, the condition of Christendom might be not a little changed.

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