

Susan B. Anthony

“The Moral Leadership of the Religious Press” (1893)

I am asked to speak upon "The Moral Leadership of the Religious Press." For one who has for fifty years been ridiculed by both press and pulpit, denounced as infidel by both, it is, to say the least, very funny. Nevertheless I am glad to stand here to-day as an object lesson of the survival of the fittest, from ridicule and contempt. I was born into this earth right into the midst of the ferment of the division of the Society of Friends, as it was called, on the great question which has divided all the religious peoples of Christendom, and my grandfather and grandmother and my father, all Quakers, took the radical side, the Unitarian, which has been denounced as infidel.

I passed through the experience of three great reforms, not only with the secular press but with the religious press. The first one was that of temperance, in which my father was the very earliest man in all Western Massachusetts who put liquor out of his store before he was even yet a married man. From that day in 1816 up to the day of his death, though a manufacturer and merchant nearly all of his life, he never sold a drop of liquor and scarcely ever tasted a drop. Very naturally my first reform work was in the cause of temperance, and I had my first little experience with the religious press on that question. It was no light affair. I can assure you.

I went as a delegate of the New York State Woman's Temperance Association to Syracuse, at the time of the holding of the great annual convention of the New York State Temperance Society, the men's society, and my credentials with the credentials of other women were presented. When the committee reported it was adversely, that it was very well for women to belong to the temperance society, but wholly out of the way for them to be accepted as delegates or to speak or to take any part in the meetings, and I want to say to you that the majority of the men of that convention were ministers. They were not of one denomination or another, but they were of all denominations. I want to say for the comfort of everybody that the most terrible Billingsgate, the most fearful denunciation, and the most opprobrious epithets that I ever had laid on my head were spoken that day by those ministers; and when there was time to report the proceedings the whole religious press of the country, the liberal, the Unitarian, as well as the orthodox, came down on my head for obtruding myself there, claiming that St. Paul had said: "Let your women keep silence in the churches," and no one but an infidel would attempt to speak there. I submit that was not leadership in the right direction.

Then next came the anti-slavery movement. And nobody can say for a moment that either the religious pulpit or the religious press was a leader in the great work of breaking the chains of the millions of slaves in this country; but, on the other hand, church after church was rent in twain; the press—take the old New York *Observer* or the old New York *Advocate*—used to make my hair stand straight for fear I might go to the bottomless pit because I was an abolitionist.

Then the next great question has been this woman question. When we started out on that the whole religious world was turned upside down with fright. We women were disobeying St. Paul; we women were getting out of sphere and would be no good anywhere, here or hereafter; and the way that I was scarified! I don't know, somehow or other the press both secular and religious, always took special pride in scarifying Miss Anthony. I used to tell them it was because I hadn't a husband or a son who would shoot the men down who abused me. Well, now they take special pains to praise. (Applause.) It is a wonderful revolution of the press.

I want to say that the religious press is exactly like the pulpit, and the religious press and pulpit are exactly in the position of the politician and of the political newspaper. The religious press has to be exactly what the people of the country want it to be, if it is not there is no support for the newspaper. The religious press, instead of being a leader in the great moral reform, is usually a little behind (applause,) and to-day, and I am glad Mr. Gilbert has given me this chance to say it, I am glad that the spirit of freedom is abroad to-day, and that the people inside of the churches are demanding that the press shall be a leader in some sense.

People expect too much of the press and too much of the ministers. It is the pews that make the pulpit and decide what the pulpit shall be, and it is the constituents and subscribers for the religious papers that decide what the religious paper shall be, and therefore when you tell me that a minister is thus and so in opposing any great moral reform, or that the religious press and newspaper is thus and so, what do you tell me? You tell me that the majority of the people in the pews indorse that minister, that the majority of the church members who read that paper won't allow that editor to speak anything on the question. That is all. I am glad that the day is changing, and that the people are feeling that the press is a little laggard and want to whip it up a little.

Take the specific question of suffrage. It is but recently that the religious press has begun to speak in tolerably friendly terms in relation to us. Take the great Methodist Episcopal church; think of its having an editor chosen by the general conference, Mr. Buckley, denounce the suffrage movement as something born—not of heaven, and yet if the vast majority of the members of the Methodist church were in favor of the enfranchisement of women and felt that it was a religious duty of the church to take its position in that direction, and of the religious newspaper, the organ of the society, to take position, Mr. Buckley would either be born again or else he would be slipped out of that editorial chair. He would be born again. He would believe in suffrage before he would lose his position.

I am not irreverent. I look to the public press. I look to the president of an organization, to the exponents of any society, religious or otherwise, as to the hands of the clock. They tell the time of day. Representing the suffrage movement, I stand to express the idea how high the tide has risen with the majority of the suffrage men and women of the day, and that is what a leader can do and but little more. We do not get very much ahead. We call ourselves leaders, but generally there are some down in the ranks a good deal ahead of us if they only had power to speak. I wish we had a great woman's rights press that knew how to speak the deepest and holiest thought of the best women of this country on the question of religious liberty, of political liberty, and of all liberty. And next to having such a press of our own is of course having the press of all the different

denominations, of all the different political parties, of all the different interests in the country, come as near as possible to expressing our idea; and therefore, when I take up the Western Methodist paper, I forget what its name is, when I take up the *Advance*, when I take up any of the Western religious newspapers I am made to feel that their editors have been born again into this recognition of the principle of equality of rights in the church for the women as well as for the men. I suppose the New York *Observer* and the New York *Advocate* and so on will have to lag behind until they are moved over on the ferry boat. However much they hold back, they have to go with the boat. I suppose these old papers will hang back just as long as they possibly can.

I cannot tell you how rejoiced I have been in listening to the papers which have been read here to see the liberality of spirit, to see the growing feeling of recognition of everybody who has inside what the Quakers used to call "the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world," and consequently, the old Quaker preacher used to say, "every woman." He always had to add that. I have heard that preached in a singsong tone thousands of times, and that was the difference between the Quakers and the other religious sects. The Quakers always believed "consequently woman." Whatever right or duty or privilege was spoken of as having been obtained for man was "consequently for woman."

I think I have said it all, and I want to thank every editor of every liberal religious newspaper in the land for speaking on the side of perfect equality of rights to woman, for I believe that the first step toward religious equality is political equality, and I believe that our Puritan ancestors, in coming here for religious liberty, and first establishing political liberty, laid the foundation for religious liberty, and I do not believe religious liberty can exist anywhere except where political liberty has been thoroughly and fully established; and when we do have political liberty and equality fully established for the women of this country as it is for men, then you will see that the newspapers and the speakers and the politicians of the world will not be saying: "Oh, you cannot do anything with women, they are so bigoted religiously that you cannot get an idea into their heads." When the women are politically free they will dare to study all these great moral questions, and they will dare not only to study them but they will dare to write them and speak for them out of their souls.

One paper spoke of the opening of the gates of the Fair on Sunday. I have stood with my friend, Mrs. Stanton, from the beginning of the agitation, in favor of the opening of the gates on Sunday. Not because I do not venerate God and all his works, but because I do venerate God and all his works. (Applause.) Think of man allying himself to God and becoming almost a god in the creation of those wonderful works down in the White City. I talked with a gentleman, Theodore Stanton, the son of my friend Mrs. Stanton, this very noon at the Palmer House lunch table, and he said: "Of all the fairs that I have ever attended, there was nothing there to begin to compare with the wonders which are gathered at Jackson Park, in this city." Now, friends look at that thing calmly for a moment, not from the standpoint of the bigotry of the pulpit or the backwardness of the press, but from your own heart of hearts and just see this; there are centered in that park, in those State and National and governmental buildings, the woman's building with all the rest, the very highest product of the human brain, the best brain, the highest moral development of this world. There are object lessons

placed there for us to look at, and to say that for us to go there and study those wonderful productions of the hand and the brain of man is violating what we term the American Sabbath—is violating any injunction of God—well. I cannot understand it. To me, if I want to feel to venerate God, and if I want to feel that man is rising and approaching divinity itself, I go there and look at those wonderful productions.

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<http://ecssba.rutgers.edu/docs/sbaexpo.html>