

time, he caused great damage to the unity of the West. But, undeniably, the fact that France is once again a great power is largely due to de Gaulle and his influence. His stature probably saved the country from civil war in the aftermath of the 1944 liberation and almost certainly again in 1958 and 1961 during the Algerian War. He extricated France from the Algerian morass, albeit untidily and at enormous cost. His last legacy was to provide France with a strong, workable constitution to replace the anarchy of the Third and Fourth

Republics. It is an irony of fate that the principal beneficiary of this constitution should have been a leader of the Socialists he so despised, President François Mitterrand—while his own heirs stand divided over the legacy he left them.

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## *A Woman's Place Was in the Temple*

**A HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE WEST.** Vol. I: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints. *Edited by Pauline Schmitt Pantel. Trans. by Arthur Goldhammer. Harvard. 572 pp. \$29.95*

**HER SHARE OF THE BLESSINGS:** Women's Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World. *By Ross Shepard Kraemer. Oxford. 275 pp. \$24.95*

If until the present century no one wrote a history of women in Greco-Roman antiquity, perhaps it was because there seemed so little to say. Women spent their lives then, and for centuries after, bearing, nursing, and raising children. Poor women performed other strenuous chores, as time and strength allowed. Richer women enjoyed their leisure; a few even read and wrote. But virtually all were excluded from civic life, unless they were closely related to men in power. The advent of Christianity brought little change, except in one respect: Women were excluded from the leading role they had formerly played in religion.

The notion that monotheism is superior to polytheism has kept us from seeing paganism as the social and moral equal of our own religions. Because pagan rites and myths were classified as mere superstition, the role that women played in an-

cient religion was largely overlooked. Recently, scholars have returned to ancient women some of the credit they deserve. But the diffuse nature of the ancient evidence has not made the task easy. Because most women did not write, there are no eyewitness narratives of what they thought and felt when they enacted their characteristic rituals.

We will probably never know what it was like to be a priestess in the Athens of the fourth century B.C. officiating at the sacrifices on behalf of the city or enacting the role of the bride of the god Dionysus. Nor are we likely to find out why (some 500 years later) a woman gave up her own name to become priestess of the goddess Demeter, charged with initiating the Roman Emperor Hadrian into the Eleusinian mysteries. Did women who bound ivy in their hair and carried ritual wands in honor of Dionysus experience the destructive ecstasy that makes Euripides' drama *The Bacchae* (406–05 B.C.) so terrifying? Or did they simply regard these and similar orgiastic rituals as holiday outings? Such evidence as we now have makes it impossible to provide authoritative answers.

Yet because the gods and goddesses, with few exceptions, required priests or priestesses of the same sex as themselves, we do know that women had a central role in the sacred life of many polytheistic com-

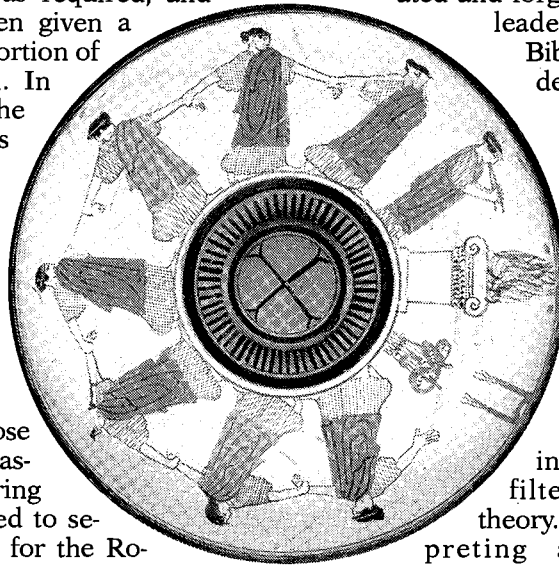
munities. Being a priestess was usually a part-time job, limited to duties such as putting new wreaths on sacred images, lighting torches, or washing cult statues. (In Athens "laundress" was an honorific title.) For Athens's annual festival, the Panathenaea, girls from the best families were elected by the assembly to weave a new robe for the goddess Athena and to carry the sacred objects in the long procession from the marketplace to her temple on the Acropolis. It was an honor for a young woman to bear the basket of barley in which the sacrificial knife was concealed. Even though women did not actually slaughter the animals, their ritual presence at sacrifices was required, and priestesses were often given a particularly choice portion of the sacrificial meal. In the city of Argos, the calendar year was measured by the tenure of the priestess of Hera, the most important goddess in the city. In Rome the six vestal virgins received civic honors and ritual privileges virtually equal to those of men; they even assisted in the butchering ritual and thus helped to secure the gods' favor for the Roman state. In the early Empire, priestly titles, including "father of fathers," were awarded to the wealthy women who underwrote the costs of civic cults and public works.

By contrast, the role allotted to women by the early Christian church was circumscribed and marginal. Only men could officiate in rituals or hold high ecclesiastical office. Women in full-time service to the church had to be as celibate as the six Roman vestals, but they enjoyed none of the vestals' special privileges.

*A History of Women: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*—the first in a five-volume history of Western women

from antiquity to modernity—employs various perspectives to understand the place of women in ancient religion. Anthropologist Louise Bruit Zaidman discusses the contrast that ran through the whole Greco-Roman world between the important role played by women in ritual and their exclusion from politics. She shows how marriage and other rituals helped to "tame" young women for their mature roles as wife and mother. Monique Alexandre, a historian of ancient religions, describes how those roles played by women in the early church became increasingly subordinated to the male priesthood as the pagan tradition was repudiated and forgotten. Male Christian leaders used the Hebrew Bible as authority in order to forbid women to teach and to administer the sacraments.

If other essays here are less successful in conveying a sense of what women's lives were like, it may be because their authors look at the evidence from a distance and interpret it through the filter of contemporary theory. The dangers of interpreting ancient evidence through a grid of modern construction are also apparent in *Her Share of the Blessings*, Ross Shepard Kraemer's survey of "women's religions among pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Christian world." Kraemer, a professor of religious studies at the University of Pennsylvania, approaches the ancient sources from both a feminist and an anthropological perspective. Her vantage point often keeps her from seeing that practices that seem negative to us may even have had a positive value (or vice versa) in the ancient world. Kraemer ponders, for example, the significance of St. Paul's insistence that women wear veils in the "assembly" of the



faithful (1 Corinthians 11:5-10). Following anthropologist Mary Douglas's "insight that the human body is par excellence the symbol of the social body," she argues that St. Paul would have required women to wear veils as a sign of subordination. Yet as historian Aline Rousselle points out in "Body Politics in Ancient Rome" (in *A History of Women*), veils and head coverings in fact served as a protection, warning men that these women were untouchable under Roman law.

Kraemer's avowedly feminist perspective tends to make the women she studies more independent or self-assertive than they may ever have wanted to be. In particular, Kraemer seems determined to present Jewish and Christian women as equal in power to their pagan counterparts, and she argues that certain anomalies in certain Jewish rituals preserve aspects of lost "goddess" cults. She tries hard to believe that anonymous texts that pay some attention to women were written by women, though of course no one can prove that they were (or were not).

I wish she had listened more closely to one voice of a religious woman that has come down to us, that of St. Perpetua of Carthage (martyred A.D. 203). Perpetua is

in fact allowed to speak the final words in *A History of Women*. Like her pagan predecessors, she derived honor and glory from her religious service without ever defying the men in her religious community or the dominant values of her society. In the text of her martyrology, which preserves part of her diary, Perpetua describes her imprisonment and trial by the Romans and her rejection of her family. But for all her independence and determination, Perpetua obeys and respects her male deacons. Although she dreams that her faith can transform her into a man who is capable of defeating the devil in single combat, she never questions the monotheistic male-dominated faith that caused her to abandon her baby and die a horrible death in the arena. Ultimately, neither feminist theory nor abstract behavioral grids can explain her decision to die. Like the men who died in the arena with her, she was a convert, a religious fanatic who believed that her faith could lead her away from her present troubles to a new and more glorious life.

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## OTHER TITLES

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### *History*

**DIDEROT: A Critical Biography.** By P. N. Furbank. Knopf. 524 pp. \$30

*Aufklärung, lumières*, the Enlightenment—so the various European languages name the rational and secular development of 18th-century thought that made the modern world literally

"thinkable." But only in English is the definite article affixed to imply a uniform historical movement. Nothing can refute the monolithic image of *the* Enlightenment better than the example of Denis Diderot (1713–84). Voltaire was crusadingly and invariably right; Montesquieu, admirably logical and a bit dull; Rousseau, dependably contrary. But Diderot's mind, as biographer Furbank shows, was like fireworks go-