



to feel the privilege. Otherwise, the exemption risks becoming something else. It risks becoming a prohibition. And the history of mankind is littered with exemptions that have gradually been transformed into prohibitions because privilege has been used against groups of people as well as being granted to them. For an exemption to function properly as a privilege and not as a prohibition society has to share a common understanding and respect about what issues are burdensome, onerous and unpleasant and for whom they might be particularly arduous. We have to agree about what circumstances would be special or difficult, and for whom they would be hard or heavy to endure. Above all, we can't exempt people from doing something they want to do. We can't exempt people from privileges. To call it a privilege when you offer someone the possibility of exemption from a privilege is to be sarcastic.

When I read in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that women are exempted from going on pilgrimage, I know Bahá'u'lláh is not being sarcastic. So I do not understand.

Pilgrimage in most religious traditions has accrued the significance of privilege for the pilgrim, and in some cases, even for those who meet the pilgrim. This is not a material or physical privilege, but a spiritual one. Regardless of the fact that there have been pilgrims who have abused this tradition in the past, who have used it to take advantage of the gullible, to flaunt it as a personal achievement, to assume it has endowed them with superiority, the tradition has survived. Indeed, the muddle of motives and the confusion between the outer journey with the inner arrival has inspired some of the greatest works of literature in the past. To have attained pilgrimage has been a sign of personal blessing, and to desire it is often the goal of spiritual life, a symbol of re-dedication. The hard road of pilgrimage has often been used as an atonement, and even the most cynical pilgrim secretly anticipates rewards awaiting him at the threshold of his heart's desire. In the Bahá'í Faith, this tradition remains intact, with one remarkable distinction: women are "exempted" from it.

That single exemption calls a great deal into question: about the tradition itself, about the past and future, about women, and about the use of words. How can one be "exempted" from pilgrimage? Certainly one can be given a choice: to go or not to go. Certainly one can be absolved of the obligation. But how can one be "exempted" from a privilege? As long as pilgrimage is the subject under discussion and "exempted" is the verb, I don't understand.

Women in the twentieth century, in the West, with access to air travel, medical services, a normal body and a modest independence, may wonder about being singled out and chosen for this dubious distinction. They may wonder how they are supposed to value an exemption which implies a set of circumstances and conditions that it were better to change rather than avoid. They may

wonder whether women may not be led to use this exemption for reasons other than being female and whether men might not be led to dissuade women from taking pilgrimage on the grounds that it is not after all essential. They may wonder why they have a privilege by virtue of their sex which they may not need, while others, who are not women, but who may need the exemption on grounds of health or economics, do not have it. Above all, they may wonder why they are being relieved of doing something which according to centuries of tradition and inference in the Bahá'í writings, carries implications of blessing for the entire human race. They may wonder about the slippage that can so easily take place between exemptions and prohibitions. And most of all, they will remember, with a little sinking of the heart, a little stagger of hope, that this slippage generally happens when a spiritual authority makes special distinctions; that this slippage generally happens when an exemption is provided by religion that sets a certain group apart, when God kindly tries to arrange human affairs in such a manner that would alleviate burdens from certain members of society, namely women. What generally happens is that a slippage occurs, a slow, invisible slippage as men pervert the exemption into a prohibition. This is no accusation, no condemnation. Six thousand years of habit is hard to break. It's in the genes, leave alone in the myriad subtle threads of association and expectation that hold societies together. It can't be helped, but it mustn't be ignored. To ignore is to re-write history and avoid truth.

Of course there have always been ways of re-writing history. There have always been ways of re-defining the exemption from privilege in terms of privilege in order not to think about the darker side of human nature. It is not difficult. The Catholic church did it for centuries. Fascist societies have justified all kinds of atrocities this way.

Totalitarianism  
called it "re-education".

All that is required is a sleight of mind:

if we can conveniently ignore recent research in science which shows how women are better equipped, physically, than men are to endure sustained strains and strength-sapping 'rigours' as must be met in long voyages and can forget the evidence of all those remarkable women travellers since the last century who have broken every record of endurance;

if we can forget the stamina of all those women in the world who undergo 'rigours' in the field and in the home far more unrewarding and arduous than anything which can be anticipated in travel towards the heart's eternal home;

if, too, we can forget that women suffer no biological defects that would render them any less capable of travel than men as long as they have been permitted, like men, to run and jump and develop their natural strengths instead of pining and reclining and feeding themselves and starving themselves and squeezing themselves into corsets, and stuffing their minds

with soap operas, and in short, turning themselves into invalids;

and if we can ensure that women's minds, which have been allowed to stretch with their bodies, can be confined once more in that primitive and primordial darkness, so wonderfully cultivated by centuries of patriarchal fear, that taught them to stay at home and always practice thrift, that ensured they never roam abroad or entertain strangers without risk to their chastity, that evoked a world of rapists round every corner;

and finally, if we imagine that Bahá'í pilgrimage will one day ripen out of its original purity and rot into decadence, will become a test of endurance, apparently more 'rigorous' for women than for men, and that the House of Justice itself will not be able to prevent the vulgarity and the materialism and the crass superstition and the sheer tawdriness that results from millions of people's acts of homage, year after year after year;

then yes, women may prefer to visit the Shrines by means of virtual reality, and yes, the exemption from the physical journey would then become a privilege.

But this is surely what we mean by slippage. It is the result of the mind's busy work of justification. When we start looking for meanings, when we start inferring and assuming and discovering imagined implications we will come up with horrors. Unless the context of society is already strongly opposed to such a slippage, unless all the other laws and regulations make it impossible for this abuse to take place, unless God Himself protects women from having exemptions turned against them, these horrors will happen again and again.

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