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Defending Girls' Education in Afghanistan

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Despite some progress in recent years, an Afghan girl desiring any education above the most basic level still faces great social, cultural, and political difficulties. For years, the Taliban controlled education in most areas, and while boys and young men were educated in strictly Islamic schools or madrassas, girls were excluded. From 1994-2001 all girls in Afghanistan were banned from attending schools of any sort. Recent figures show that the current literacy level for girls/women stands at only 18 percent.

After a Western-supported government was established in Kabul, secular schools began to open, but Taliban resistance to secular education is still strong, and girls are specific targets. Violence is meant to intimidate and sometimes to harm--as in the case of a notorious acid attack that maimed a number of girls in 2008. According to a Ministry of Education spokesman, only a "few primary schools for girls" and three girls' high schools exist in the entire Helmand Province, an area where the Taliban are particularly strong.

Even in sectors where schools are open, and the Taliban are not a deterrent, tradition usually stops girls from attending school after they reach puberty or around age 11 or 12. A father's priority for his daughter is arranging a profitable marriage, which is seen as a method of earning money or settling disputes. Although the minimum legal age for marriage is 16, 57 percent of all marriages in Afghanistan involve girls under that age.

And married girls don't attend school.

Improving education for girls in Afghanistan isn't simply opening school buildings or filling classrooms. Education develops critical thinking and the ability to reason, as well as helping one acquire knowledge and specific skills. Extremists who resist the development of this kind of reasoning feel threatened by efforts to present more than one view of life, and sometimes

seem ready to do anything they can to stop it, including violent acts that severely injure young women.

Education of the right sort is essential to individual and societal progress. Mary Baker Eddy, a 19th-century theologian, wrote: "Academics of the right sort are requisite. Observation, invention, study, and original thought are expansive and should promote the growth of mortal mind out of itself, out of all that is mortal" (Science and Health, p. 195).

Prayer can support these essential elements of education for girls in Afghanistan by first recognizing that observation, original thought, invention, and study are essentially spiritual. Each expresses an aspect of God. Every individual, male or female, is in fact the spiritual creation of this Mind. As a result, all have these attributes and can exercise them.

Formal education with books and instructional materials isn't the only way to acquire knowledge. The divine impulse for improvement urges individuals to think for themselves, and each individual has the capacity to receive this impulsion. What would oppose this spiritual impulsion is the belief that each of us is merely a material entity, subject to tribal or hereditary forces, and unable to rise above them.

In a tribal society where traditions govern daily life, original thought and invention--especially by women--aren't always encouraged. But our affirming that God makes all things new, and that each day is a new day, can help loosen the limitations of tradition. God is continuously thinking new thoughts, unfolding new ideas. These thoughts appear in our lives as inspiration and intuition. They point beyond material limitations to the spiritual reality, which sees man and woman as equally valued in God's eyes. Such inspiration may challenge old methods and practices, and thus be opposed by those who fear change. Cultivating a receptivity to new concepts in our daily lives can help us pray, with more conviction, that others can be receptive to inspired, new ideas.

Spiritual spontaneity is government by God, instead of human will. God is the head of every family and tribe. God's government is supreme on earth, even in countries where Christianity is unknown, because He is infinite. Acknowledging God as the supreme authority and knowing that every Muslim pledges to submit to God, we can help bring the divine power to bear on situations where tradition seems to stifle individual progress. Such

prayer can encourage independent thinking that reveals fresh ideas and shows how they can be put into practice.

God is the infinite, divine Mind, which includes all right ideas of equality and justice for every individual. No one is inferior in God's creation. No one is excluded from God's control. These divine concepts elevate the personally powerless, and humble the arrogant. It is the power of God, not human will, that transforms human consciousness.

Changing society's view of women isn't the imposition of one human philosophy over another. It's the Divine transforming and uplifting traditional views--whether these are religious or secular. An improved understanding of God results in a radical awakening to woman's value.

In Christian Science, God is understood to be Father-Mother, the source of all feminine and masculine attributes. So, it's natural to regard individuals as reflecting an unlimited range of qualities, regardless of their gender.

Both men and women express intelligence, creativity, energy, compassion, courage. Both girls and boys have the capacity to learn and are worthy of being educated. Our willingness to consciously acknowledge the equality of male and female and the worthiness of women prepares people to permit the education of girls.

Men as well as women deserve our prayers. Properly valuing women transforms and elevates men also. Identifying women as protected and valued by God, and as being worthy of respect, can free men from thinking of them as sensual objects or as property to be disposed of, as social or cultural customs demands. Identifying each individual as having a higher spiritual nature helps reveal everyone's inherent intelligence and goodness. This frees men to develop their intellectual capacity and discover more of their innate talents.

Education is freedom for men and women. It frees the mind from ignorance. It reveals and releases the student's potential. It brings beauty and freshness into depressed lives. It teaches one how to think, leads to discoveries, challenges old methods.

Fear would have those in authority cling to the old ways and resist progress. But Mary Baker Eddy's discovery of Christian Science can liberate all

people, removing oppression and ignorance. Our prayer can help radically revise lives and renew society.

To protect and promote educational opportunities, perhaps we should follow the Biblical counsel that prayers and "giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" (I Tim. 2:1, 2). We can pray that those in authority are open to higher views of God and creation. We can affirm that God's will is always universal equality, justice, and self-government. Then we will be uniting with divine Mind in insisting that all of us value true education. And we'll be courageous enough in our own ways to defend every individual's right to pursue it.

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