Nineteenth Century Women's Piety: Limitation or Comfort?

by Claire Walsh

During the last days of spring in 1891, Alma and Henry Martyn Rogers began to mourn the passing of their two-year-old daughter, Mary Spencer.[1] She was their third child to die in the span of four years. Prior to Mary's death, two-year-old Bessie and two-month-old Louise Rogers both passed away in 1887.[2] At the time of the tragedies, the Rogers family was living in Kentucky, but they later found a home in Hanover, Indiana.[3] Henry Martyn was a well-known minister and his wife, Alma, was a homemaker. Throughout their lives, they kept an extensive record of family letters, each one chronicling a personal history of grief, love, and life.[4] The Rogers family letters provide a rare insight into nineteenth-century life, especially motherhood. As the matriarch of the family, Alma Rogers's correspondence accounts for a majority of the letters. She received many messages from friends and family over the years, each of whom expressed their condolences for her sudden losses. It is through these letters that a unique picture of grief begins to form, which enforced an unwavering faithfulness in God's plan. This devout lens for viewing death interconnected with nineteenth-century women's expectations to be pious. Strict standards of virtue were necessary to meet the standards of a proper woman. Not only was piety an attribute expected for women but, as Alma's letters reveal, it was a necessity for mothers who had to cope with the loss of their children. Grief only served to strengthen the bonds of submissiveness to God's natural order and strongly informed the way women viewed themselves in the greater context of a patriarchal society.

At the time of the Rogers children's deaths, infant mortality had been slowly decreasing, yet ideas surrounding the ideal Christian death remained, placing importance on mothers as pillars of faith. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, a steady decline in infant mortality can be attributed to better socio-economic conditions and increased medical

---

[1] Mary Spencer Rogers, gravestone, Richmond Cemetery, Richmond, Madison County, Kentucky, digital image s.v. "Mary Spencer Rogers," *FindaGrave.com.*

[2] Bessie Goodloe Rogers, gravestone, Richmond Cemetery, Richmond, Madison County, Kentucky, digital image s.v. "Bessie Goodloe Rogers," *FindaGrave.com*; Louise Tinsley Rogers, gravestone, Richmond Cemetery, Richmond, Madison County, Kentucky, digital image s.v. "Louise Tinsley Rogers," *FindaGrave.com.*

[3] 1920 United States Federal Census, Hanover, Jefferson County, Indiana, digital image s.v. "Martin M Rogers" *Ancestry.com*.

[4] Jen Duplaga, "Henry Martyn Rogers," paper to author, Nov. 11, 2025.

knowledge, which limited the spread of water and food-borne illnesses.[5] A decline in infant deaths, though, did not mean they were any less traumatic. In scholar Lynne Vallone's review of death in Victorian literature, she discussed the work of James Kincaid, who highlighted how "If child death can no longer be seen as inevitable, or at any rate normal, it will seem a worse blow when it happens."[6] This no doubt would have been the case for Alma Rogers, who had to witness the consecutive deaths and illnesses of her three daughters. These grim deaths had to have some form of explanation, and the mystery of God's plan offered a satisfying answer. The consolation that there was a sacred reason for the loss of a child was essential for mothers who had a responsibility to ensure that their children, when the time came, had a "good" death. A "Victorian good death" characteristically dealt with Christianity and required time to prepare and express one's faith in God.[7] The intense devotion nineteenth-century women seemed to possess was detailed by historian Barbara Welter in her work titled "The Cult of True Womanhood." While her article specifically discussed the years 1820-1860, evidence suggests her findings are still applicable to Alma's experiences in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Through her research, Welter observed the widely held belief that "Religion or piety was at the core of women's virtue, the source of her strength. Religion belonged to women by divine right, a gift of God and nature."[8] This apparent predisposition that women had to be virtuous meant that they were the key to cultivating faith within the household.

When looking back on the Rogers family letters, the concepts used to comfort the grieving family almost always revolved around surrendering to God. Death was synonymous with heaven, which one needed to have faith in. After Mary Spencer's death, Alma and H.M. Rogers received a letter from a family friend. It referenced a story they had read in the news in which "a woman who had been greatly afflicted said, it is all right, God never makes any mistakes."[9] In a similar sense, a letter from Alma's mother, following the death of Bessie Rogers,

---

[5] Stephan J. Kunitz, "Mortality Change in America, 1620-1920" *Human Biology* 56, no. 3 (1984): 569–70.

[6] Lynne Vallone and James Holt McGavran, review of *Fertility, Childhood, and Death in the Victorian Family*, by Nancy Fix Anderson, Claudia Nelson, Ann Sumner Holmes, George Eliot, Karl Ittmann, Pat Jalland, Penny Kane, et al. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28, no. 1 (2000): 224.

[7] Sarah McNair Vosmeier, lecture for "American Women's History," Hanover College, September 17, 2025.

[8] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 152.

[9] Letter to Henry Martyn and Alma Smith Rogers, 21 June 1891, folder 7, box 1, Rogers Family Letters, Duggan Library, Hanover College (Hanover, Ind.).

stated “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord.”[10] While Welter discussed piety and the restrictions it placed on women, faithfulness also came as a necessary comfort to grieving mothers. This is most aptly seen through a letter written by Mrs. Perry Brand to the Rogers family, in which she laments the death of Mary and her siblings: “she had two little sisters there. Gone to that world before. They’ll feel no pain or sickness there. Nor taste death anymore.”[11] The touching eight stanza poem found in the letter also illustrated the solidarity experienced between mothers. Mrs. Brand’s haunting details, such as “A little bed untossed” and empty “places around the table,” suggest the possibility that she too had mourned the loss of a child.[12] Women’s perceived closeness to God also made coping with their children’s deaths easier for them than it was for fathers. Scholar Patricia Jalland explored this subject through analysis of the Tait family who, in 1856, lost five of their seven children.[13] Catherine Tait, the mother of the family, wrote about her “submissiveness to God’s will” and acceptance of the deaths of her children. In contrast, her husband Dean Tait had written “no similar discussion of his own state of mind at the time” and instead “retained hope for longer than his wife,” experiencing shock “correspondingly greater.”[14] This fascinating distinction between men and women when experiencing the loss of a child supports the idea that religious teachings affected women differently during the nineteenth century. Women had been taught since childhood to maintain their obedience towards men and God. Conversely, it was difficult for men to grasp their own powerlessness in the face of death, as they had not experienced that same lack of control as women.

The impact of a patriarchal society on how nineteenth-century women viewed themselves and their faith can additionally provide an explanation for their viewpoints on the woman’s rights movements of the nineteenth century. In an 1894 letter to Alma Rogers, her close friend Jennie A. Wyatt informs Alma on the current state of her church. Jennie expresses her frustration by stating “Our leading ladies are “women’s rights” women with their suffrage clubs and anything

---

[10] S Goodloe to Alma Smith Rogers, 25 Sept. 1887, folder 7, box 2, Rogers Family Letters, Duggan Library, Hanover College (Hanover, Ind.).

[11] Poem by Mrs. Perry Brand to Henry Martyn Rogers, 2 June 1891, folder 2, box 1, Rogers Family Letters, Duggan Library, Hanover College (Hanover, Ind.).

[12] Poem by Mrs. Perry Brand to Henry Martyn Rogers, 2 June 1891, folder 2, box 1, Rogers Family Letters, Duggan Library, Hanover College (Hanover, Ind.).

[13] Vallone and McGavran, review of *Fertility, Childhood, and Death in the Victorian Family*, 222.

[14] Patricia Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 137.

to divide their time.... Our former minister was right under their thumbs, and this one has a mind of his own."[15] She conveys a happiness that her Church's new minister, a "staunch good man," was standing up to these leading women.[16] Alma and Jennie grew up in a male-dominated society, maintained by women's piety and virtue. Knowing this, it makes sense that they cannot fathom why the next generation of women would question a society so normal to them. Their faith, as much as it restricted them, helped them cope with unimaginable tragedy. For the two women, they may have believed that if they even entertained the idea of "women's rights" they would be forsaking their religious traditions. In Alma's experience, her surrender to God and subsequently the Church's leadership may have been essential to understanding the deaths of her three daughters. She maintained her faithfulness so that she might one day see her children in heaven. In the words of Reverend J.P. Roth, who wrote to the Rogers family in 1891, "Great as are these afflictions, how much greater would they be without the hope of a future home, a better world, for us…such is the kingdom of heaven."[17] Knowing how important faith was to Alma Rogers and the women she surrounded herself with, one can understand her mentality and respect her devotion.

One of the core traits imposed on the women of the nineteenth century was piety; however, this religiosity informed more than just their virtue. It guided them through loss and hardship. Surrendering to God's will was a comfort. This obedience, though, not only applied to God but to men, who had perpetually been the leaders of society. When a traumatic event occurred, such as the loss of the Rogers children, men could not find the same solace in God that women seemed to possess. An astonishing and haunting solidarity is seen between the women in Alma Rogers's life, who utilized religious teaching as a way to console each other. For these women, their teachings later appeared to contradict the beliefs of a growing population of suffragists. Their cultural and religious beliefs, despite their benefits, held them back from realizing their own potential. They had yet to imagine a future in which women and their daughters could one day achieve equality in society.

---

[15] Jennie A. Wyatt to Alma Smith Rogers, 6 July 1894, folder 5, box 3, Rogers Family Letters, Duggan Library, Hanover College (Hanover, Ind.).

[16] Jennie A. Wyatt to Alma Smith Rogers, 6 July 1894.

[17] J. P. Roth to Henry Martyn Rogers, 2 June 1891, folder 2, box 1, Rogers Family Letters, Duggan Library, Hanover College (Hanover, Ind.).

WORKS CITED

PRIMARY SOURCES

1920 United States Federal Census. Hanover, Jefferson County, Indiana. Digital image s.v. "Martin M Rogers." *Ancestry.com*.

Rogers, Bessie Goodloe gravestone. Richmond Cemetery, Richmond, Madison County, Kentucky. Digital image s.v. "Bessie Goodloe Rogers." *FindaGrave.com.*

Rogers Family Letters, Duggan Library, Hanover College (Hanover, Ind.).

Rogers, Louise Tinsley gravestone. Richmond Cemetery, Richmond, Madison County, Kentucky. Digital image s.v. "Louise Tinsley Rogers." *FindaGrave.com.*

Rogers, Mary Spencer gravestone. Richmond Cemetery, Richmond, Madison County, Kentucky. Digital image s.v."Mary Spencer Rogers." *FindaGrave.com.*

SECONDARY SOURCES

Duplaga, Jen. "Henry Martyn Rogers," paper to author, Nov. 11, 2025.

Jalland, Patricia. *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 137.

Kunitz, Stephan J. "Mortality Change in America, 1620-1920." *Human Biology* 56, no. 3 (1984): 569–70.

Vallone, Lynne, and James Holt McGavran. Review of *Fertility, Childhood, and Death in the Victorian Family*, by Nancy Fix Anderson, Claudia Nelson, Ann Sumner Holmes, George Eliot, Karl Ittmann, Pat Jalland, Penny Kane, et al. Victorian Literature and Culture 28, no. 1 (2000): 224.

Vosmeier, Sarah McNair, lecture for "American Women's History," Hanover College, September 17, 2025.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 15.