

# Agnes von Harnack, The Ten Commandments of Women's Suffrage (January 1919)

## Abstract

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The writer, teacher, and trailblazer for women's access to higher education Agnes Harnack (1884–1950) grew up in an upper-middle-class Berlin household that gave her access to a formal schooling and to a circle of prominent intellectuals who regularly visited her home. While working as a teacher in her early twenties, Harnack became the first woman to enroll at Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, doing so in 1908, immediately after Prussia's Cultural Ministry had decreed that universities could finally admit women as regular students, rather than just auditors. In 1914, just a few months after her father's ennoblement (and the point at which she added the "von" to her name), Agnes von Harnack joined the National Women's Service (*Nationaler Frauendienst*), which engaged women for the larger German war effort. Harnack worked in the Imperial War Ministry, where she befriended the feminist and political activist Marie Elisabeth Lüders. Both Harnack and Lüders joined the German Democratic Party (DDP) just after the war and seized the new political opportunities that began opening up to women in late 1918. While Lüders became a member of the Reichstag, Harnack published works on the women's movement and women's suffrage. They both later co-founded the German Association of Women Academics (*Deutscher Akademikerinnenbund*, DAB) in 1926, an association that promoted access and opportunities for women in German universities. Harnack (who had married in 1919, after which she took the name "Agnes von Zahn-Harnack") served as the DAB's first chairwoman and also chaired the Union of German Women's Associations (*Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine*) from 1931 to 1933.

These "Ten Commandments" for women voters appeared in the weekly illustrated magazine *Die Woche* on January 4, 1919, just two weeks before elections to the National Assembly. Given that women had first gained the right to vote just a little over a month earlier, Harnack intended these Commandments both to encourage women to exercise their newfound right and to guide them in doing so. In particular, she seemed to seek a balance between urging first-time female voters to follow the lead of experienced political hands (Fourth Commandment, Sixth Commandment on party loyalty) and empowering these same women to have the courage of their own convictions (Seventh Commandment, Ninth Commandment). Finally, as the daughter of a prominent Protestant theologian, Harnack's choice of the Ten Commandments as the vehicle for conveying her message must have come naturally.

## Source

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### Women! Vote!

#### Ten Commandments of Women's Suffrage.

I.

You shall make of the unexpected and weighty right to vote as a female citizen a conscientiously carried out duty.

II.

You shall not believe, whether out of false sophistication or narrow understanding of "femininity," that the matter does not concern you.

III.

You shall not mourn for the good old days in which women had it "so much easier," but rather stand

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resolutely and joyfully on the ground of the present.

IV.

You shall subordinate yourself to proven intellectual leaders; having the same right to vote does not preclude respect for authority.

V.

You shall not kill and bury the high ideals of women's grace and dignity but reshape them for the new era.

VI.

You shall choose a party and not leave it unless necessary; you shall tolerate its weaknesses, as long as you agree with the fundamental direction.

VII.

You shall waste neither your own time nor that of others with politics, but use it judiciously, so that you may reach your own independent convictions.

VIII.

You shall not give false witness against men or women who belong to a different party than you, but you shall also rebuff every defamation of your own party.

IX.

You shall have the courage of your convictions but not the obstinacy of a fanatic.

X.

You shall not covet your neighbor's rights, property, or honor in politics, nor seek your own honor, but you shall direct your will and all your strength solely to the good of your fatherland.

Dr. Agnes von Harnack.

Source: Agnes von Harnack, „Zehn Gebote zum Frauenwahlrecht“, *Die Woche. Moderne Illustrierte Zeitschrift*, Band 21, Nr. 1, January 4, 1919, p. 2. Available online:

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