WOMEN AND EVANGELICALISM IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY UNITED STATES

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One of the most familiar languages of nineteenth century America was Protestant Evagelicalism. It helped millions of young people understand passage from the thoughtless, careless, and frivolous gaiety of youth into serious adulthood. It helped them and their parents make sense – if sense could be made – of ignorance and pain, of disappointing losses and untimely death. It expressed the sentiments of childhood and home and referred both to a general order of existence both transcendent to and inherent in the common as well as individual lives of believers. It encouraged moods and patterns of thought through which individuals learned who they were by rejecting a past that was meaningless or sinful and by embracing a positive and possibly wondrous future. Envangelicalism was intensely personal in that it offered a transformation or re-orientation of the self; it was aggressive in that this offer became also a demand. It was popular in the sense that large numbers of people both received and created it, popular in that its apologists cited presumably widespread conversion as evidence of its truthfulness. It was popular, too, because its various manifestations erupted at different times as contagious collective actions of religious sensibility. Arising as they did from the « people », these manifestations seemed especially authentic and legitimate in a democratic republic [1].

Evangelicalism was popular also in ways that belied the idea of democratic spontaneity and creativity. It was popular in the sense that its values and moods became through a little understood process important

[1] Studies of Evangelicalism should begin with Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District*, New York; William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism from Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham*, The Ronald Press Company, New York, 1959; McLoughlin, Introduction to *The American Evangelicals, 1800-1900: An Anthology*, Harper and Row, New York, 1968; Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America from the Revolution to the Civil War*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1965; Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, Abingdon, New York, 1957, pp. 15-44; and such recent studies as Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England 1826-1836*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988 and Randolph A. Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791-1850*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1987, and Leonard I. Sweet, editor, *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, Mercer University Press, Macon, 1984, among others.

elements in the hegemonic ideologies of both South and North-although it must be added that alternative and resistant ideologies, too, shared an Evangelical basis. African-American piety embraced and expressed Evangelical insights and expectations [2]; abolitionists' language and concepts of immediatism and perfectionism also owed a direct debt to the Evangelical war with evil [3]. If the power of Evangelical language to define the ultimate meaning of conflict attracted the Unitarian who wrote the Battle Hymn of the Republic, it was not attractive to everyone who challenged authority. The rationalistic republican political tradition associated with working men, and the war of Evangelicalism against « the world, the Devil, and Tom Paine » [4] – that is, against that very tradition – limited Evangelical appeal to workers in the growing cities of the North. And yet workers converted even to Methodism, finding in its offer of salvation for all and its contradictory rigor of self-discipline an appeal that has baffled and angered twentieh century historians [5].

The incredible discipline demanded of Evangelicals in the aftermath of their conversion was essentially at odds with the political perception that one's lot in life was not entirely of one's own making. The reason was that Evangelicals of whatever particular sect or denomination projected the subjective drama of defining the self after the experience of conversion onto one of two stages. One was a theatre of possibility; there was struggle to be sure, but it was joyous, hopeful, expectant. The other was a theatre of fretful self-flagellation; the drama was to declare war on the unruly self. In both cases the drama of salvation was essentially personal; one hesitates to call it « individualistic » or to understand it as « egalitarian » because of the ideological and emotional freight identified with those words. (It is freight that is alien to the Evangelical moment of self-realization. It diverts attention from the interior life sparked, shaped, and understood within the

[2] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, Pantheon Press, New York, 1976; Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture Black Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1977; Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978.

[3] See Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1977.

[4] A Methodist ditty sung at camp meetings included: « The World, the Devil, and Tom Paine / Have done their best but all in vain. / They can't prevail, the reason is / The Lord defends the Methodist ».

[5] In *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), Edward P. Thompson wrote a devastating and brilliant caricature which has been modified by Deborah M. Valenze in her thorough and impressive social history of sectarian Methodism, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985. See also Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia 1800-1850*, Temple, Philadelphia, 1980, 115 ff, and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class 1788-1850*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1984, 77 ff. Paul Johnson in *Shopkeeper's Millennium*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977, explains why employers and masters were susceptible to Finneyite revivalism, although he leaves open the question as to why women became religiously active and why workers should have joined the Methodists.

Evangelical ethos and imposes alien liberal or democratic words into the language of Evangelicalism). As a personal crisis it detached the self from previous associations, re-interpreted and re-integrated them and the self into a new understanding of life.

Essential to that newness was participation in Evangelical society – association with others who had shared the same personal experience. If the convert could be assured that master, employer, or boss were like him or her, also consumed in the same joyous or fretful drama as the result of a similar experience of grace, differences of gender, race, or class might very well be dismissed in the moment of self-realization. Behavior after that ecstatic experience however would very likely dissolve the illusion of commonality and possibly raise questions about the authenticity of that experience. Depending on the perception of existential threat – the other or the self – the Evangelical life would be one celebrating autonomy or struggling with the demons of the enemy self. Why one would choose one drama over the other could probably be explained more by probing the mysteries of individual character or psychology than the ideology of sect or denomination[6]. But the polarity is there and it produced both abolitionist fervor and a Biblical pro-slavery argument – neither more Evangelical than the other. (It has of course been argued that this polarity is false because it does not include the evangelical ideology of Afro-Americans and that the latter do in fact exemplify a purer form of Evangelicalism that either of the other two)[7]. It helped also to produce and at the same time subvert what has been called by historians after Barbara Weltner « The Cult of True Womanhood ». Somehow Evangelicalism became identified with both innovation and resistance to change[8].

For students of religious life educated by recent scholarship in the history of women and impressed with the predominance of women in American religious life, the role of Evangelicalism in change and tradition takes on an added dimension. Indeed, the contributions of women's historians to the history of American religious life is impressive and is possibly one of the most innovative aspects of that field[9]. In responding to this outpouring

[6] At least I would like to leave the matter there for the time being. At another time, it would be fruitful to follow the line of argument suggesetd by Gary Schwartz in *Sect, Ideologies and Social Status*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1978. Schwartz studied Pentecostals and Seventh-Day-Adventists and developed two different profiles of the religious in representatives of two distinct bodies of Protestants, one representing a tradition identified with Calvinism and the other that which could be identified with the Wesleyan tradition.

[7] See Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, Chapter 5.

[8] This is all quite familiar. The divided mind of Evangelicalism can of course be dismissed as a function of class and a false problem if one is willing to ignore one of the dominant languages of early American life. But since Evangelicalism was the language of social conflict as well as integration, since it was so plastic and adaptive, and since it was the language of protest and dissent as well as propriety and power it invites something more than dismissal. The demographic argument is also relevant: since it probably included a large plurality of Americans in its membership by 1840, the inner workings of its ideology invite attention.

[9] See for example, Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil with the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft*

of interest in women's history, the ambiguity of Evangelicalism has been sharpened in part because Evangelical feminists have scoured their past for historical legitimation and in part because they found there the patriarchal resistance of Evangelical women as well as men. Other feminists, in analyzing the mixed messages of Evangelical Protestantism, have not decided whether it was a womb or a strait-jacket, whether feminism was birthed from within Evangelicalism or set free from its restrictions. There is a world of difference between birthing and forcible restraint.

If the two options led to this paper, they do not shape it. They have led to a question about the varied experiences of women in American Evangelicalism in the early nineteenth century and especially to the preaching of women and what this preaching revealed about women and religion and the fluidity of early American society. The Second Great Awakening[10] was, before it was an « organizing process »[11] a dis-organizing one. That is, before it supported a fresh impulse of creating new institutions and networks of « new » believers, Evangelicalism attacked traditional religion. It did so not by formal theological re-definition so much as by homiletic assault on the accepted ways of mediating the Divine. Evangelicals felt God's immediate – not mediated – presence in themselves; their response was to embrace this experimental knowledge of Christ as a model for others' lives as well as their own. Their direct, personal ecstatic experience became public in that they seemed to be preaching that experience (and therefore themselves) as judgment on others who had not had similar religious experiences. New England elites had had an agonistic history of persons who elevated their ecstatic experience of the Divine to a place of authority equal to or possibly even superior to Holy Writ. Certainly Anne Hutchinson and the « spiritists » of Rhode Island seemed to oppose all authority, and Whitefield's followers in the First Great Awakening seemed to be equally subversive. Evangelicalism

in Colonial New England, W.W. Norton, New York, 1987; Lyle Koehler, *A Search for Order: The « Weaker Sex » in 17th Century New England*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1980; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1982; Rosemary Radford Ruether and Roesmary Skinner, editors, *Women and Religion in America* (Essays and documents, 3 volumes), Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1981, 1983, 1986.

[10] The « Second Great Awakening » which was supposed to have made Evangelicalism the dominant force in American Protestantism is among the more vague and possibly meaningless concepts of early American historiography. The reason is that the phrase seems to have been adapted to a resurgent Evangelicalism some of whose partisans wanted to identitify their activities with those of the First Great Awakening. [This phenomenon, Jon Butler suggests, was even more vague, inappropriate and possibly fictitious than the Second Great Awakening. See his provocative and no nonsense analysis in « Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction », *The Journal of American History*, 69 (September, 1982), 305-325]. Historians have taken the phrase once applied to localized revivals in Connecticut or New England and New York or Kentucky and assigned a social breadth to it that really means « increased Evangelical activity in early nineteenth century America ».

[11] See Donald G. Mathews, « The Second Great Aweakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1850 - an Hypothesis », *American Quarterly* (Winter, 1969).

during and after the Revolution was equally disturbing, but there was an added dimension to its rebellion; it declared war on Calvinism [12].

In new settlements of the Massachussets, New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine and Nova Scotia hill country after 1776, free holders from older populated areas took advantage of relatively cheap land to develop a simple, mercantile economy [13]. There, between 1776 and 1783 in a democratic economy and culture – where Congregational parishes suffered from want of clergy, there erupted a revival called the New Light Stir. The result was « an overall tendency », writes Stephen Marini, « towards greater human capacity and responsability in the economy of salvation, a more benevolent conception of God, and a simplified gospel stripped of logical paradox and tortuous exegesis ». The resulting sects were « an indigenous ruraly synthesis of extreme experientialism and intellectual rebellion against received Calvinism, a new theological identity for evanescent new religions » [14]. Here on the margins of New England settlement was nurtured a mood within which the gifts of the spirit could allow for ideas, moods, and behavior distinctly at odds with tradition. Universalists could challenge Hell, Free Will Baptists could challenge Predestination, and Shakers could celebrate a woman as the « second manifestation of Christ's spirit on earth » [15]. When Methodists began to preach in the middle states and Virginia at about the same time, the stage was set for the gifts of the Spirit not only to rest upon but also to emanate from women.

This is not to say that there was anything like the explosion of female prophetism found by Deborah Valenze among sectarian Methodists of early Victorian England [16]. But it is possible for scholars now to list somewhere between 40 and 50 women who in one form or the other « preached » in early nineteenth century America [17]. One of these – and one of the first to attract my attention – was Salome Lincoln who was memorialized by her

[12] See Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1982, especially pp. 40-59.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 25-31.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 77.

[16] *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985.

[17] See Joanna Bowen Gillespie, « The Clear Leadings of Providence »: Pious Memoirs and the Problems of Self-Realization for Women in the Early Nineteenth Century », *Journal of the Early Republic*, 5 (Summer, 1985), 197-221, esp. 220-221; also list supplied by Jon Butler of Yale University to Donald Mathews in a personal letter of April 7, 1988. Also William L. Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, Indian University Press, Bloomington, 1986; Jualynne Dodson, « Nineteenth-Century A.H.E. Preaching Women », in Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller, editors, *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1981, 276-289; Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the 19th Century*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1984; Jean McMahon Humez, editor, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1981.

husband and a colleague in 1843[18]. The most important thing about Lincoln and her sisters was not that they were women but that they were religious. If they came from families accustomed to the language of religion, they were religious with an agonistic self-absorption that set them apart from kith and kin. Restlessly if episodically they debated with themselves the meaning of life to the point of an anguished fascination with their own deaths. In this process they discovered how to affirm the self in the face of everything that negated it – what Paul Tillich once called The Courage to Be!

This empowerment of self was the creation of a personal identity through which individuals felt themselves being freed. They were freed first of all from the tryranny of death which they had contemplated – and sin. If it is not altogether clear what sin was, for many young people it was probably the tension associated with sexual maturation and its accompanying social pleasures of frivolatry, cocquettry and dance. Its manifestations were fascination with appearance and an inability to talk about « serious » things – a kind of cosmic superficiality. They were freed also of having their worth as human beings assigned them by class, gender or age. Or even the Eternal Decrees of God. For prophetic women appeared within traditions self-consciously at war with traditional, predestinarian Calvinism. Whether Free Will Baptist. Methodist, or Quaker in background, prophetic women celebrated the free moral agency of people to receive assurance of salvation; it was to them a Revolution of the Spirit, freeing them from psychological bondage to a tradition that denied them any significant role in the formulation of their personal identity. This betokened not recruitment of the irreligious to religion, but rather a transformation within and among the religious from perfunctory heedlessness to commitment. More important for the women involved, the constant self-examination of piety carried with it a promise of a positive result of a renewed self. The rebellion against Calvinism was a celebration of self no matter what the nature of self-discipline because the liberated self became a model for others. As Harriet Livermore of the Christian Connection observed in her *Narration of Religious Experience*, her « experience » had become « public property »[19]. This exemplified such an aggressiveness in matters of the Spirit that opponents accused prophetic women of self-aggrandisement, being « too full » of themselves. Their intensity, « unblemished Christian character », and the fact that they were women seemed to enhance their claim (and that of the men who defended them) to be special emissaries of the Spirit. They quoted I Corinthians 1:27 with ecstatic assurance: « God hath chosen the foolish things of the world, to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty »[20].

[18] Almond H. Davis (editor), *The Female Preacher, or Memoir of Salome Lincoln, afterwards the Wife of Elder Junia S. Mowry*, Elder J.S. Mowry, Providence, 1843.

[19] Harriet Livermore, *Narration of Religious Experience in Twelve Letters*, Jacob B. Moore, Concord, 1826, p. iii.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 82.

Their freedom in preaching seemed to express in its very action the presence of the Divine in their own lives and hence in human life. They did not always heed the Call when they first sensed it, and when they finally felt compelled to speak, they frequently broke silence as something of a surprise to themselves. Salome Lincoln heard a call to preach as she worked in the weaving room of a New England textile mill, but she did not answer it until one night when she entered a prayer meeting with a mind « uncommonly burdened ». Suddenly she felt the « fear of man taken away » and she spoke. Suddenly she was doing something strange according to ordinary men but which also seemed ultimately legitimate because it came by a sacred world in which the ordinary rules of the world did not apply.

How surprised she should have been is unclear. Her husband later remembered that she had loved to « play school » as a child because doing so had given her an « opportunity to assume authority – and children, as well as men, sometimes like to command and be obeyed »[21]. Moreover, the room in which she first preached was in a private home where women were conceded a special authority »[22] and they did indeed exercise it. In the particular place where Lincoln first preached, « one aged woman [immediately] arose and spoke a few words of exhortation » as if it were the customary thing to do[23]. There is something else we should contemplate. Lincoln's first sermon came at about the same time she participated in a walk-out from a textile mill near Taunton, Massachussetts during which she addressed her sisters to hold to the agreement that they had made not to return to the mills until grievances were resolved. She quit the mill rather than return under the same old conditions and in May of 1830 began her first preaching tour of 40 appointments in school houses, crowded homes, groves and even a meeting house now and then[24]. Thereafter she alternated between preaching and working in the mills.

In addition to the social and personal contexts within which Lincoln's public preaching seemed « natural », there was one that was most significant for her. This was the context that made it possible to exert the strength necessary to become a person out of place – and to justify that out-of-placeness as ultimately legitimate – that is, sacred space. She had been enabled to act not by appeal to a society of women or to associates bonded by class confrontation but by empowerment in sacred space where sacred things could happen. This placed the self in a divine order – referring the personal and public expression of that personal experience to a transcendent reality. The sacralization elicited « an emotional attachment to a specific focus of identity », that is: commitment. Through the rituals of preaching, testifying and prayer and the mythic symbolism of an active God involved in the

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[22] Valenze makes this point in her study of British sectarian Methodism.

[23] Davis, *Female Preacher*, pp. 43-45.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 63 ff, 83.

personal transformation of faithful people, these Evangelical women heightened the dialectic of sin and salvation, disorder and order to the point that the order they preached became distinctly disorderly[25].

The disorder was inherent in their gender, their itineracy, and their conception of the people to whom they were called to preach « irrespective of class » or station. Their gender set them apart immediately. They all encountered opposition from male clergymen; the celebrated opposition of the Congregational Clergy of New England to the public lecturing of the Grimke sisters was merely part of a long standing debate about the appropriateness of women public speakers. The role of prophetic women, although clearly exercised in places where women held authority – in private homes – just as clearly was not justified as the exercise of domestic authority. Rather, it was by divine authority in conversion, in the surge for entire sanctification or personal holiness, in the subsequent call to preach, and in the consequent conversion of both women and men. This charismatic, ordaining process was vested in actions inferred to be evidence of God's action because they seemed to come from outside the self, freeing her from bondage and reflecting acts by women during and after Pentecost that were thought to be signs that Christians had fulfilled the prophetic promises of the Old Testament[26]. The fact that women were prophesying was to certain believers of both sexes self-legitimating.

Prophetic women bore testimony as to what God had done for them, enabling them to become sanctified, that is, holy persons. Their public addresses were not therefore careful expositions of scripture; nor were they descriptions of the end times in which they could anticipate a new heaven and a new earth as the two fused into a perfect society. They were, rather, expositions of the sanctified self, expressing in evocative language « loving gratitude » to Christ for a dialectical life of « lively cheerfulness without levity », « sobriety without sadness », and « solemnity without melancholy » in the « joys of pure, undefiled Religion »[27]. In preaching their religious experience prophetic women were like musicians playing intensely moving chamber music, the listeners projecting themselves into the performance, being transformed by the virtuosity of the players into performers themselves. The sex or gender of the actual musicians makes no difference to those seized by the creative and evocative moment; their celebration of self through the cathartic ecstasy of being opened to the Other so unites audience and performer that distinctions between them are lost for a brief moment.

[25] Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred: A sketch for a New Social-Scientific Theory of Religion*, The Free Press, New York, 1976, pp. 11-15.

[26] *Acts of the Apostles*, 2: 1-4, 14-17: Citing Joel 2: 28, « And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy... ».

[27] C.W. Ainsworth, compiler, *Life and Observations of Rev. E.F. Newell*, C.W. Ainsworth, Worcester (Mass.), 1847, pp. 8, 10, 13, 15, 17, 23.

As one person characterised the preaching of a women: « I should not hesitate in pronouncing it, EVANGELICAL, *beautiful* and sublime »[28].

The process expected from preaching, however, was not aesthetic but liminal. The term « liminal » is borrowed from the use made of it by the anthropologist, Victor Turner, in his study of the ritual process and symbolic social action[29]. Turner has reflected on the way in which religion functions to remind humans of their basic equality – what Turner calls *communitas*. In rites of passage, for example, persons are neither children nor adults: they are separated from their past childhood but are not yet inducted into a superior position; they are without status, existing beyond the structured hierarchy that separates individuals from each other and assigns them varying degrees of worth to that hierarchy. In passage individuals are situated where the ordinary rules of the world do not apply, although they submit themselves to the ritual elders as if to God or « the total community ». Turner calls this state of being without status: *liminal* (after *limen*, Latin: margin). In liminal passage individuals understand their relationships with others in liminal space and time basically as equal although they will soon return to a world of structure and status governed by laws and ways that separate them into hierarchies. The feeling and perception of *communitas* (the « spirit of equality » celebrated by one itinerant)[30] is subversive of social structure, Turner points out, and therefore dangerous to order unless confined to liminal space and time. The purpose of prophetic preaching was to separate persons from an old world – which was revealed as disorderly, and place them in a situation where they could feel themselves before the Divine. In that sacred event persons feeling the anguish inflicted by « the world » and sensing directly and intuitively the presence and love of God felt themselves lifted up, separated, « saved » from the source of their affliction and frequently incapable of distinguishing between time and eternity. From this process the convert emerged a new person – hence feeling herself born again. The insights of *communitas* were not to be left in the sacred place where conversion had come. The feeling of liminality and a direct intercourse with God was not to be reserved only for a single sacred event; evangelicalism expected the liminal insight to affect conduct and relationships ever afterward.

In sharing their ecstasy, prophetic women became liminal persons – that is, persons without status representing a challenge to hierarchy and order from the Wholly Other, the Divine. Liminality is associated not only with a ritual process such as evangelical preaching, but also with social inferiority

[28] Davis, *The Female Preacher*, p. 83.

[29] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1969, pp. 94-165, especially 94, 96-97, 103, 125, 128; Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1974, pp. 272-299.

[30] Ainsworth, comp., *Life of E.F. Newell*, pp. 67, 90, 94, 99.

and marginality (hence the use of the Latin word *limen* or margin as the base word for his argument). The public preaching of women could become a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit for Evangelicals, especially those who were in some way or other marginal or of low status. Their very presence let alone the act of preaching represented celebration of communitas even if the promise was not politically achieved[31]. The liminality of prophetic women was underscored by their itineracy. Whether like Peggy Dow and Fanny Newell, they travelled with their husbands, or like Nancy Towle they were associated with a male itinerant to whom they were not married, or like Harriet Livermore or Zilpha Elaw they made their own appointments, these women were not settled pastors. They traveled widely and spoke in the same manner and places as did the early Methodist itinerants – in private houses, schools, taverns, groves, camp meetings and an occasional meeting house. They did not belong to one place, but to many places or no place; if Salome Lincoln belonged to one pattern, it was on the margins of society in mill villages, or on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, or in the Maine hills, or on Cape Cod. Physical distance, geographical marginality, and preaching to workers linked by itineracy underscored her rejection of the world[32]. Coming from outside the locality, preaching a gospel of personal religious experience, celebrating the renewed and renewing self, prophetic women reminded certain men and women of God.

They reminded others of violated gender rules. Their preaching was not liminal but anomalous; as action by women out of place it challenged the sacred order rather than mediating it. Such activity was never embraced by the dominant denominations although Methodist women were frequently vocal in testifying to their « experiences » and a few travelled with their husbands and exhorted after the later preached. Free Will Baptists, « Republican » or « reformed » Methodists and the Christian Connection were the groups most hospitable to prophetic women. But it is clear from memoirs and other biographical materials that females regardless of sectarian proclivities were attracted to these exceptional people. They and their audiences represented a popular stirring among women who found in the public address and private ministrations of their eloquent sisters something they could not find from males. African-American preachers like Zilpha Elaw, Rebecca Jackson, and Jarena Lee came out of vaguely documented networks of « praying and singing bands »[33] of women upon whom they could count for support and to whom they preached. Their appeal may have been across racial lines: Zilpha Elaw's account of her experiences certainly leaves that

[31] Turner, *Ritual Process*, pp. 110, 125.

[32] Davis, *The Female Preacher*, passim.

[33] Jean McMahon Humez, editor, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1981, pp. 6 f, 316-321, 412; William L. Andrews, editor, *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, Indian University Press, Bloomington, 1986, pp. 125 ff, 143 ff.

impression[34]. Incidental references to women's testifying to their faith in prayer meetings, to their collective outwitting of male opponents, their pressing into crowded rooms to hear women preach, their calling to women itinerants for succor from their sick beds[35] all suggest that women felt bonded with them *as* women.

In addition, they felt bonded with the women such as the English Wesleyans, Mary Fletcher and Hester Ann Rogers, whose writings inspired them. They certainly believed themselves justified by authority superior to that of men who carped about women's keeping silence in the churches. That Pauline admonition they explained by a hermeneutic that placed it in the narrow context of the Corinthian church and the broader context of numerous examples of women's praying and prophesying in the « Pauline » church. The order for silence was thought to be in response to disorderly questioning in Corinth and not Pentecostal preaching. And some women pointed out that the English Wesleyan, Adam Clark, had dismissed the objection as a position « too oppressive » for an enlightened age and natural only to « barbarous nations at the present day ». It was also thought to be a vestige of Jewish law abrogated by the Spirit at Pentecost[36]. Prophetic women knew the names of their Biblical counterparts: Priscilla, Phoebe, Aquila, Mary of Magdalene, Deborah; and they knew of the nameless women of the early church who proclaimed the Gospel. But the Bible was not their only authority. The fact that they were able to preach, that they did it well, and that persons were converted under their preaching indicated to themselves as well as their friends that they were acting consistent with the will of God rather than the laws of « man ».

What are we to make of the phenomenon of prophetic women? For the time being it is difficult to give more than a tentative answer. They were never so numerous as male itinerants, and none of them actually assumed pastoral functions except in rare instances[37]. Their historical reclamation suggests the existence of a body of both women and men who could concede the authority of women within religion – a position distinctly at odds with the world of electoral politics, social reform, and indeed the broader realm of public life in America. It could be argued from the fact that much female

[34] Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*, 125, 143 ff.

[35] *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 7071, 74, 95-97, 105, 125; Livermore, *Narration of Religious Experiences*, 106, 126, 161, 187 [« the women wait upon me mostly...]; Davis, *The Female Preacher*, pp. 43-45, 63 ff, 92; Ainsworth, *Life of Newell*, p. 100.

[36] Davis, *The Female Preacher*, pp. 14-15.

[37] Such as the Plublick, Universal Friend [Jemima Wilkinson] or the female successors of Mother Ann Lee. See [David Hudson], *Memoir of Jemima Wilkinson, A Preacheress of the Eighteenth Century...*, R.L. Underhill & Co., Bath, NY, 1821, 1844; Herbert A. Wisbey, Jr., *Pioneer Prophetess: Jemima Wilkinson, the Publick Universal Friend*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1964; Henri Desroches, *The American Shakers: From Neo-Christianity to Presocialism*. Translator John K. Savacool, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1971; Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1981; Anna and Taylor and Lella S. White, *Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message*, AMS Press, New York, 1971 reprint of 1904 edition.

preaching took place in private homes that the domestic locus of social life, the work done there, and the importance of women to both fused to create a social base for religious prophecy that embraced and created a situation favorable to the exercise of authority by women. And that is certainly what Deborah Valenze has argued in her impressive study of sectarian Methodism in England.

In « cottage religion » women lived and preached a gospel that transformed their domestic role into that of a Mother of Israel – urging, leading, reconciling the faithful within the sanctified prencincts of the family. Valenze re-translates religious language into a language of resistance, reflecting values alternative to those of the ruling classes. In the conversion of single women, for example, she sees the possibility of a « ritual renunciation of courtship, marriage, and family life » despite the influence wielded by women prophets based on the household economy. In the rejection of dancing, fashion, gossip, and unholy companions she sees rejection of « a society responsiblie for injustice and unhappiness » – although the idea of an abstracted « society » and its responsibility for justice or injustice probably reflects Valenze's own judgment and intellect than the perception of converts. To be sure, attacks on « little heartfelt religion » among the middle classes and the repudiation of a mimetic ethic of consumption, fashion, « education », and heedless companions suggest a firm conviction of moral and spiritual superiority[38]. They also reflect anger with the powerful as well as a determination to be free of the harmful psychological results of that anger which could all too easily be transformed into self-hatred. The celebration of « pure, undefiled religion » also reflects a concrete understanding of the meaning of salvation; the power of others over the self has been broken, their values repudiated. But all this nonetheless leaves open the question as to the significance of prophetic women.

Perhaps the question can be addressed by looking briefly at other instances of women's action in early nineteenth century American Protestantism. One is the public life of Phoebe Palmer, a Methodis perfectionist from New York City who was one of the most widely known American women of her time in both the United States and Great Britain – at least among religious people. Unlike most of the itinerant women preachers mentioned above, she was reared in comfortable circumstances. And if she did not preach in quite the same manner as did they, she was nonetheless an itinerant who intensified the religious commitment and encouraged extensive female action within American Protestantism. Reared in an intensely religious and disciplined household, Palmer attempted to elicit widespread commitment to the same discipline through preaching the Wesleyan doctrine of entire santification or Christian perfection. It was a focus similar to that preached by prophetic women in Britain and America during the preceding

[38] Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters*, pp. 34-45 ff, 55-69, 277-279.

generation. Palmer was part of a widespread lay revival based on private testimony in prayer and camp meetings. Her public speaking and status as a religious celebrity, her encouragement of female public testimony and action, her encouragement to women to « feel their individuality » through « personal effort » [39], and her goal of « male and female disciples participating [in holiness action] with unreserved freedom » has led some admiring students to think of her as a « religious » o « sanctified » « feminist » [40].

And to be sure, her book, *The Promise of the Father* is a justification of her public ministry linked with the new dispensation at Pentecost when the spirit moved daughters as well as sons to preach. No one seriously thought, she observed, that the apostles called a vestry meeting after Pentecost to decide if the sisters could speak. They simply did so as God empowered them. This was not surprising, Palmer thought, because women were, after all, the first to report the Resurrection! Comparing the admonition to female silence in I Corinthians and I Timothy with other scriptural passages, she found these specific responses to certain local problems: specific disorderly female preaching was forbidden but the general principle of a female ministry was sustained. She observed that women historically had assumed ministries within the church – John Wesley had understood that belatedly. And even in the 19th century women were speaking, she pointed out: in congregational responses in public worship, in repeating the Lord's prayer with their brethren, in congregational singing and in the current revival of religion. Female activism was integral to the Church of Christ!

If Palmer was a « religious feminist », however, emphasis should be on the word « religious » rather than « feminist ». Her goal was not to address the penalties of gender imposed by patriarchy but rather to encourage willing the self into a new life. Prophecy by women within the church was almost a special ministry; she did not challenge gendered restrictions to the pastoral authority of women [41]. If she exulted that « Male and female are now one in Christ Jesus » [42], the spiritual equality to be inferred from that statement scarcely led in the direction of androgyny. Her self-conception was that of a liminal person through whom a transcendent world of reference and obligation could provide immediate salvation. Her obsession was in making religion other peoples' obsession and she believed women should be active in helping her do it. Implications for revolutionary change – except in the self-conception of the sanctified – would have to be made by others.

Palmer and her prophetic sisters had in common a commitment to reviving the church through « pure and undefiled religion ». Despite their dif-

[39] Palmer in the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, February 19, 1857 quoted in Harold E. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer, Her Life and Thought*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, NY, 1987, p. 93.

[40] Raser, *Phoebe Palmer*, pp. 77 ff, 199 ff; Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the 19th Century*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1984, pp. 54 ff.

[41] Raser, *Phoebe Palmer*, pp. 199-209.

[42] Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness*, p. 83.

ferent class backgrounds, they shared, too, a rejection of fashion, frivolity, and encroaching worldliness. Their passion was for the merging of all differences into an effusive piety in which women could be public channels of God's gracious Word. But popular evangelicalism has also been credited with a broader impact by women's acting out the implications of their religious experience and the consequent expectation of moral public action; the result was the base for nineteenth century « feminism ». Originally the interpretation was that « under the banner or revivalism », evangelical women « followed a lengthy, sometimes circuitous, but essentially singular path from benevolent associations through moral reform crusades to women's rights campaigns »[43].

In her testing of this interpretation, Nancy A. Hewitt has found a much more complicated process in which obvious differences among groups of women are explored and the range of their behaviors analysed. Her work suggests that far from leading to women's rights, Evangelicalism stopped short of that goal and was possibly inimical to it. Focusing on Rochester, New York, she finds three different networks of women in competition with each other over goals and means. Evangelical women were one of three; they were bracketed by time and religion by women interested in amelioration of certain social problems (benevolence) and those committed to more radical action moving beyond abolitionism to women's rights. Evangelical women did – as the traditional interpretation has it – move from innovative religious action to new forms of public action such as moral reform and abolition societies, condemning the sexual double standard and slavery. They added numbers and an insistent busy-ness to Quakers and black women who had previously condemned slavery. The new societies did not always incorporate women from benevolent organizations nor did they bring all Evangelical women into the antislavery and antivice camps. What Evangelicalism had in fact contributed, however, was a further area of debate, a new sphere of service where not everyone would agree on policy but where they could agree that the debate about such things was important. Their piety did not dictate a lock-step march into radicalism; but it did entice some Evangelical women into action. Their determination to act for moral goals led to action that carried them into new areas in which further decisions had to be made, the original decision providing impetus but not necessarily direction. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg found in New York City, an activist piety could send women to the homes of the poor where they found conditions and problems that required further action previously unintended[44]. If spiritual rebirth could be linked with specific action – signing a temperance pledge

[43] Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1984, p. 19.

[44] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the City: The New York Mission Movement, 1812-1870*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1967, Chapter 9; Hewitt, *Women's Activism: Rochester*, p. 95 n.

or antislavery petition – it could help to redirect and give impetus to a reform impulse.

An essential part of the process moved women into what Hewitt calls an « ultraist » or radical position. This developed out of the radical tendencies of certain Quakers, Liberal Christians, a few Evangelicals and free black women. Ultraists combined a more confrontational position on slavery with a commitment to women's rights, leaving a large proportion of Evangelical activist women lagging behind. An agonistic relationship developed among the three groups of women with Evangelical in a volatile relationship with ultraists, always seeming to value religious connections over commitment to a radical position. This may account for the fact that one of the major distinctions between Evangelical activists and ultraists was their position on women's rights. Evangelical women were likely to understand their public role as complementary to the public role of men: the dichotomy was not between private and public but between two domains within the public sphere. Ultraists thought that men and women should be coworkers; it was a position based on their marginal positions both to male-dominated political and economic power and the domestic ideal of Evangelicalism. And they appealed not surprisingly to those who were marginal by reason of race and class in public statements made jointly with men. « Ultraists drew », says Hewitt, « on Quaker axioms of equality », on British radicalism and « American political traditions voiced by Thomas Paine. Not the Constitution but the Declaration of Independence was their favorite document » [45].

Hewitt's explanation as to the limitations on radicalism within Rochesterin Evangelicalism provides an hypothesis for further study and synthesis. Although black Evangelical women appear not to have been restricted by the same tentativeness, white evangelical women activists, Hewitt claims, were compromised from taking more radical positions by their submission to God, their conception of themselves as the « feeblest instruments » of His (!) will, and the implications of Christian humility [46]. Moreover, by virtue of their middle class position and the domestic ideology associated with it, Evangelical women activists « employed metaphors and models of home and family with God as the father and the woman activist as the mother » [47]. This natural enough behavior combined with the tendencies of evangelical self-abnegation to prevent the implications of Evangelicalism from being pushed to a radical position. Popular evangelicalism was in effect counterrevolutionary for women. Jean Friedman comes to the same conclusion for white women in the nineteenth century South, although she comes to the opposite conclusion with reference to black women [48]. Evangelicalism seems

[45] Hewitt, *Women's Activism...: Rochester*, pp. 20-23, 40-68, 81 ff, 97-138, 153-176, 216-258, especially 254 ff.

[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

[47] *Ibid.*, pp. 255-256.

[48] Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900*, University of North Carolino Press, Chapel Hill, 1986.

to have affected people differently, depending on social position: significant differences between the religious mood of slave women and white women, Evangelical activists and ultraists in Rochester, prophetic women and Phoebe Palmer were those of class and work experiences. The latter, and economic security, social marginality, and the nature of relationships with those holding power affected the way in which popular Evangelicalism helped shape one's view of self, community, obligation, and total vision of the Other.

Suffusing these differences in varying degrees, however, is the liminal conjunction of social inferiority, marginality, and lack of status. Early 19th century America was a time of great and sometimes traumatic change: Evangelical women caught up in that change to the extent that their status was uncertain seemed more susceptible to radical reform than those whose status was more secure. Black and (former) Quaker women were even more likely to embody a liminal vision of *communitas*; their religious background in which the Spirit empowered women as well as men to testify to the vision was consistent with their social marginality[49]. Popular Evangelicalism conceded liminal status and charismatic leadership to both women and blacks at various times in its career; the liminal ecstasy of prophetic preaching (in which *communitas* was celebrated) surrendered to the logic of structure and hierarchy over and over again in the social creation and re-creation of the 19th century. The liminal insight remained, however. And no matter how comfortable Phoebe Palmer was, and no matter how much she conceded men authority within the structure of 19th century church life, she could still manage to write books[50] and build a public life on the premise that that authority was irrelevant to what spirit-filled women knew and did. The message was not that women should be submissive but that they should assert themselves on the basis of an authority that was not male. That is not a political statement but it is one that places one's personal destiny beyond the decisions of powerful people.

But the models of female liminality were the prophets of the 1820s and 30s. Preceding the reformers and remaining steadfastly liminal they represent not so much the implications of popular Evangelicalism as the possibilities. Their significance for women – as well as men – was that the whole power of the Universe valued them as individuals. And this could be seen in the women who according to the ordinary rules of the world were not supposed to be doing what these women were in fact doing. Within women inhered the totally Other, now breaking down the rules of order, disrupting the usual mediation of sacred things by an immediate action through liminal insight, appeal and process. This was not political action, to be sure. Political

[49] Nancy A. Hewitt, « The Perimeters of Women's Power in American Religion », in Sweet, ed., *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, pp. 255-256; Carrol Smith Rosenberg, « Women and Religious Revivals, Anti-Ritualism, Liminality, and the Emergence of the American Bourgeoisie », Sweet, *loc. cit.*, pp. 227-231.

[50] Phoebe Palmer, *Promise of the Father; or A Neglected Speciality of the Last Days*, Henry V. Degen, Boston, 1859 and earlier editions.

action required planning; it required the development of collective means to dismantle the structures of exploitation; it demanded deferred gratification. Popular Evangelicalism offered immediate understanding and salvation; the mediation of women symbolized the possibilities of its insight into *communitas*; it did not offer revolution save in the individual's sense of self. It was an insight that served women well as long as they understood the meaning of their liminal vision. As Hewitt and others have shown, material circumstances, ignorance, fatigue, and death restricted that vision. But in those prophetic women the excitement of discovery and empowerment revealed for a moment at least the liminal possibilities of popular evangelicalism.