

## Gendered Religion: A Sample from American Protestantism

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In the Christian tradition, religious institutions claim a wide responsibility in shaping the moral values of their adherents and, through them, society at large. Carrying the presumed imprimatur of divine sanction, religious institutions are powerful forces in the definition of self, of family, and of relationships among their believers. Yet these institutions are also shaped by the economic and social forces affecting their members. Since religion, viewed as a set of institutions, both shapes and is shaped by society as a whole, it is possible to examine it on the same basis as other social institutions in the context of gendered history. This essay is not intended to be an examination of the intricacies of religious doctrines. The doctrines of American Protestant denominations draw much of their gender role definitions from similar Biblical sources. Under examination in this historiographical essay is the institutionalization of gender roles within religious denominations, the renegotiations in gender roles in the period between 1880 and 1940, and the role of social and economic factors in those negotiations.

Jean Friedman's *The Enclosed Garden* examines how early nineteenth-century female gender roles were defined and circumscribed by the interplay of evangelical churches, kinship relationships, and community relations. Evelyn Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent* shows how in the later nineteenth century gender roles within the black Baptist church were renegotiated

under the impetus of racial advancement and with the assistance of northern white Baptist women. A more conservative example of gender role institutionalization is examined by Lois Boyd and R. Douglas Brackneridge in *Presbyterian Women in America*. The negotiating of gender roles within Fundamentalism is explored by Betty DeBerg in *Ungodly Women* and Margaret Bendroth in *Fundamentalism & Gender*. Finally, articles by Karen and Pamela Nickless and Priscilla Brewer address issues of gender quality and economic and community authority in Shaker settlements.

Friedman characterizes Southern society as an evangelical community where kinship was the determining factor in social relationships. Geographically widespread kinship groups formed communities centered around local churches, which were the main social forum in a region generally devoid of urbanization. The few urban areas existing in the South retained this kinship social structure because their mercantile basis did not force them to face the same pressures of a large, young, and mostly single industrial class as developed in the urban areas of the North. Within this kinship structure of Southern society, the evangelical churches served both as the main source of reinforcement of social contact among kinship groups and as a major source of social discipline, aimed at intensifying family unity and control. A part of this social discipline involved the preservation of traditional rural gender roles.<sup>1</sup>

Given this characterization of Southern society, Friedman examines three basic ideas: the shaping of Southern white women's concepts of their social and work roles; the effect of religious conversion into a mixed race evangelical community on the self-identity of black women; and the effect of the Civil War on the Southern evangelical community. Friedman's analysis puts the church meetinghouse as a central physical and social structure of Southern communities. The church defined the community socially, by reinforcing kinship bonds and family structure, and morally, by instilling in the community a single defini-

<sup>1</sup> Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1850-1960* (Chapel Hill, 1985), ix - xi.

tion of acceptable behavior through the instrument of religious conversion. While kinship groups were racially segregated, the evangelical community was not. Those saved through the process of conversion, regardless of their legal status, shared the duty of dispensing discipline for the physical community as a whole. The process of church discipline enforced adherence to gender roles in the community. Church discipline was in itself gendered—females generally had no right to vote on disciplinary actions and female transgressions (since women were regarded as the guardians of family morals) were usually punished more severely than male sins.<sup>1</sup>

The evangelical church helped determine women's roles in society largely through its patriarchal nature. Society perceived separate women's religious and secular gatherings as highly improper, since they interfered with the family bonding structure and female domestic and farmstead duties. Likewise, during mixed gender religious classes, the lack of male empathy for women's spiritual problems and the habitual subordinate role women played in Southern households discouraged women from speaking. The church and the kinship structure of society, both dominated by males, tended to reinforce each other in subordinating women internally and isolating them from contact with outside influences. These fixed gender roles for women made marriage their only viable career option. Theoretically, marriage was a partnership in which women had the right to expect male assistance in her domestic sphere; however, male assistance was rarely offered on a regular and continuing basis. This tilted the burden of labor in Southern households unfavorably toward women, whose labor was expected to be offered freely to assist a husband or male relatives. A southern woman's industry reinforced her productive and her social and emotional commitment to the unequal partnership of marriage. Any frustrations or resentments with this situation tended to be internalized as personal concerns due to her relative isolation from other women in

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-17.

the rural south. The degree to which a southern woman could resolve the internalized struggle between the desire for personal autonomy and the expectations of the community determined how well she could be integrated into the full membership of the evangelical community.<sup>2</sup>

Turning to the question of the self-identity of black women in relation to conversion, Friedman argues that although kinship was important in the African-American slave communities, the mothers assumed a larger share of the responsibility for the well-being of the slave family than did mothers in white families. Evangelical faith and conversion experiences played a large role in determining the values of the slave communities. The unique interpretation that slaves placed on evangelicalism and conversion served to empower females and allowed black women to achieve a group consciousness that southern white women lacked. Black conversion imagery, generally maternal in nature, reflected both the powerful feminine components of African religions and the importance of slave women in black slave society as an economic resource capable of gaining special privileges through contact with the master or the master's family. Slave communities regarded black conversions as a chronological process, recalling the generational nature of African identity, which was fundamentally rooted in the female power to bear children. Thus, black women converts gained influence in the slave communities, even among the unconverted, by tapping into the African symbology of women as the mediators between the past and present and life and death. Also, since all members of the elect community had the same spiritual rights, the church offered slave converts a measure of equality with the white community. Black women converts were subject to the same disciplinary standards as white women; however, few black women were subjected to church discipline, Friedman argues, because of the higher importance the black community placed upon conversion as a right of passage to adulthood. As youths, blacks enjoyed a relative

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 37, and 52.



sexual freedom, but after conversion, they were expected to adhere to the adult fidelity advocated by the church community.<sup>4</sup> Although a sense of group identity evolved among the females of black slave communities, no black feminine culture arose in the antebellum period due to the demands of the slave system. Slavery blurred black gender roles and did not permit the female gender segregation necessary for the formation of female community identification. The reinforcement of familial relationships in the transmittal of work skills and the relative isolation of slave women from contact with strange females also prevented the evolution of a feminine culture among the slaves.<sup>5</sup>

The Civil War did not noticeably affect the kinship/evangelical social structure of the South. In some respects, Reconstruction reinforced these traditional gender roles, since families and churches served as refuge centers or structured groups seeking resettlement. The struggle for survival in the economically ruined South focused women's attentions more firmly on family and neighborhood. It was only when the South began to industrialize that community and church values changed enough to allow women into the public sphere, although traditional gender roles continued to be favored by southern women.<sup>6</sup>

Friedman's analysis of gender consciousness among slave women serves as a useful prelude to Evelyn Higginbotham's examination of the women's movement in the Black Baptist church, where she argues:

*that women were crucial to broadening the public arm of the [Baptist] church and making it the most powerful institution of racial self-help in the African American community... Committed to the causes of racial self-help and advancement, the convention movement among black Baptist women contributed greatly to the church's tremendous influence in both the spiritual and secular life of black communities. But the women's movement did something more. It gave to black women an individual and group pride that*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-77.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-114.

*resisted ideologies and institutions upholding gender subordination. The movement gave them the collective strength and determination to continue their struggle for the rights of blacks and the rights of women.*<sup>7</sup>

In Higginbotham's analysis, after black men were disenfranchised by Jim Crow laws in the 1880s, the black churches, as the strongest institutions in black communities, became the logical institutions to act as agencies of self-development, coordination of economic resources, dissemination of information, and as the community arena for public discussion of social and moral issues. Since women made up roughly two-thirds of the congregants, the "public sphere" function of the church served as a forum for critical discourse on the subordinate role of women in the Baptist conventions [denominations].<sup>8</sup> The general pattern of social and economic unrest at the end of the nineteenth century affected the struggle against the limitations of Victorian gender roles by black Baptist women. Their feminism intertwined with the social reality of segregated society. The necessity of combating both gender and racial inequality forced black women to assume multiple, seemingly contradictory, relationships—with white women against black men, with black men against white men and women, with the white middle class against the black lower class, with the black lower class against white society. Higginbotham sees this multiplicity of roles as the key to understanding the feminine black Baptist movement.<sup>9</sup>

The feminist movement in the black Baptist church tied itself strongly to the concept of racial self-help. Blacks viewed education and religion as the keystones of their advancement in society, but they also viewed education not only as individual achievement but in terms of collective empowerment for African-Americans. The growth of the black church women's movement related directly to the increase of educated black women [the Female Talented Tenth]. The Female Talented Tenth played a cru-

<sup>7</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 1 and 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 7, and 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

cial role in both the fight for racial uplift and for gender equity in the church. Ironically, the large presence of women in the educational uplift program was a result of gender inequity in the black schools. Women students were routinely steered into teaching programs, while black males entered primarily ministerial or medical programs. Although uplift represented the positive aspect of the racial mission of the Talented Tenth, the program was essentially racist in its origin and original intent. Racial uplift began as benevolence on the part of northern white women Baptists, an attempt to develop a black middle class to act as a buffer between white society and the black masses. It offered blacks a measure of social progress without the possibility of social integration with white society. Despite this racial intent, Black Baptist women maintained regular social and fiscal contact with their northern white counterparts. This contact functioned as a crucial conduit in promoting racial understanding and in forming a national Baptist women's network. The interracial cooperation of Baptist women exposed another of the gendered roles of the Female Talented Tenth. The alliance of black and white Baptist women was formulated partly on shared Victorian middle class values and ideals, which both parties wanted to convey to the black lower class.<sup>10</sup>

Higginbotham theorizes that as the level of literacy rose among blacks, conflicts with the white northern Baptists over race consciousness and control of the black schools caused southern blacks to split off from the main Baptist convention. The prominent position of women as educators in the black church generated considerable gender friction. Black women sought to carve out their own sphere of influence within the Baptist church by establishing a fiscally independent women's convention as a part of the national convention. Male black Baptists opposed this for social, doctrinal, or fiscal reasons. They feared that educated black women would challenge the exclusive male domain of the pastorate not only by seeking ordination for themselves, but by asserting their right to judge the literacy and training of male

ministerial candidates. Black male Baptists perceived that their educated female counterparts comprised a direct threat to their control of the business and governing aspects of the church structure. Through their independent educational and philanthropic pursuits and organized fund-raising activities, black Baptist women pursued a powerful strategy of building separate female church institutions which were capable of maintaining alliances with both white women (to seek gender equality) and black men (to seek racial equality). The institutional power of black Baptist women eventually led to a reformation in traditional Baptist doctrine that embraced more gender equitable practices.<sup>11</sup>

The relative intradenominational power of women in the black Baptist church can be contrasted with the much more subordinate role played by women in the Presbyterian church of the same period. Lois Boyd and R. Douglas Brackenridge portray the role of Presbyterian women as fitting the very traditional model of the late nineteenth century: active lay volunteers but silent in church governance and ministry. The female organizations of the Presbyterian church began as offshoots and support for male organizations. Although their activities were firmly within the domestic realm, such groups always sought at least to appear to be under male guidance, due to clerical opposition to female organizations.<sup>12</sup> They continued in this fashion until the decline in the Presbyterian clergy and rise of female congregants in the 1870s, when women first entered into missionary work. During the Church Woman's Decade [1870s], the church's official position remained that women were to have no voice in church affairs; however, the prominent role Presbyterian women played in home and foreign missions naturally led to the formation of national organizations to oversee these concerns.

Boyd and Brackenridge characterize the formation of women's executive boards as reluctant actions on the part of Presbyterian women. These boards, while handling large budgets, remained

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 71, 79-80, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Lois A. Boyd and R. Douglas Brackenridge, *Presbyterian Women in America: Two Centuries of a Quest for Status*, 2d ed. (Westport, CT, 1996), 6.



firmly accountable for their finances and actions to the male administrative structure of the church. Boyd and Brackenridge examine the status of women employees of the Presbyterian church by considering the development and professionalization of missionaries. The first female missionaries were the wives of male missionaries. They performed all the domestic duties of the mission home plus actively assisted in their husband's ministry. As missionary wives they received no salary from the church. The demands on the missionary couple's time led the denomination to authorize the hiring of domestic help. Boyd argues that this was the first step toward professionalization, since it removed the missionary wife from the domestic sphere (although she does not indicate who supervised the domestic help). Single women began entering the missionary field by the 1870s as women professionals became respectable and pay was offered by the church. Nevertheless, women missionaries were still seen as functioning in the domestic sphere, and they had no vote in any local mission council until 1920, due to the hostility of male missionaries. Housing was of special concern for single female missionaries. Single female missionaries were not paid well enough to set up separate homes, so they were housed with the family of the head missionary, or else groups of single female missionaries were housed together. The male executive board viewed this latter practice suspiciously in the belief that it led to "unnatural, uncongenial marriages". Deliberately low salaries and strict rules of service, which forbade marriage for three to five years, discouraged the entry of single women into Presbyterian missions. In Boyd's analysis, the recruitment of single women physicians to missionary service provided the vital element in the transformation of the foreign missions into professional medical establishments, which required trained nursing and pharmaceutical specialists, further eroding domestic work restriction on female missionaries.<sup>13</sup>

Christian educator was the only other major religious occupa-

tion open to women. This path also presented gender difficulties. While the opportunity for seminary education was available to women, the jobs available to them upon graduation paid poorly. In addition, they were subjected to clerical suspicion and disapproval concerning their qualifications and attempted curricula innovations. These factors contributed to the failure to establish a professional status for college women in church positions. These problems with women in Christian education continued even after the ordination of women became possible in 1981. Nevertheless, a career in Christian education did have some potential for promotion as a professional into the administrative structure of the church. Christian educators provided the candidates for directors of Christian education appointments, and eventually ministers of education, although males continued to be favored for pastoral appointments. Boyd and Brackenridge describe the women's movement as conservatively following the lead of the secular feminist movement. Presbyterian women generally respected the church policy against females addressing public assemblies. When women began to participate in temperance and reform movements, their public participation did not evolve into a general movement for doctrinal or church governance reform but remained confined to organizations addressing specific social concerns.<sup>14</sup>

The issue of women's activism in church and society is a primary factor, according to the thesis of Betty DeBerg and Margaret Bendroth, in the rise of fundamentalism in the late nineteenth century. They argue that fundamentalism arose primarily as a cultural reaction to the rapid changes in American society, which caused the breakdown of the Victorian separate sphere ideology. Neither author believes that this cultural explanation is totally adequate to explain fundamentalism's popularity because it examines the movement only in relation to exterior forces, not its own literature and practice.

DeBerg analyzed the fundamentalist rhetoric as published in

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 13 and 71-75.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 78-80, and 96.

the popular religious press, in the theory that these were the materials most widely available to the public and the most clearly designed to persuade non-fundamentalists to a new point of view. She argues that a close analysis of this literature reveals that fundamentalists were reacting primarily to disruptions in dominant middle-class gender ideology and social behavior, so matters relating to sexuality identity and behavior were central to their moral and religious instruction.<sup>15</sup>

DeBerg sees Victorian separate sphere ideology as a set of cultural mores used by men in an industrializing society to reassert preindustrial gender roles of the male aggressive provider and the female passive refuge. Under this delineation of gender roles, religion was ceded into the female sphere of influence. This feminization of Christianity accompanied women moving into the public sphere through temperance and moral reform movements, so men perceived themselves as losing the idealized feminine refuge. Even if women did not leave the home, the pressure of the male provider gender role required the male absence from the home, leaving the wife to gain power as the sole resident parent, thereby threatening the patriarchal structure of the family. Alternatively, the woman asserted more control over sexual relations and childbearing, thereby threatening the male concept of marriage. Fundamentalist rhetoric, according to DeBerg, is "full of separate-spheres ideology supported by religious commandment and taboo".<sup>16</sup> Fundamentalists were unwilling to surrender the Victorian ideal of gender-specific traits, which made the compartmentalization of gender tasks a part of the natural order. Their rhetoric reveals that anything that pulled women out of the private domestic sphere was considered a threat to the Christian home.

The Christian home takes on a paramount importance to fundamentalists. Since the Victorian family structure was ordained by God (a monogamous marriage, for the intent of having chil-

ren to be raised in an evangelical Protestant environment), domesticity was moved into the realm of the divine. The home in fundamentalist rhetoric replaces the church as the primary location for religious training and as the cornerstone of Christian civilization. Given the primacy of the home in fundamentalist Christianity, any social or cultural changes in the makeup or importance of the family necessarily changed Christianity itself. Since fundamentalists believed in biblical inerrancy, in their view corruption of the family was inevitably the corruption of Christianity itself. For fundamentalists of the nineteenth century, the only proper course was to reclaim the Christian church for the male sphere. This reclamation involved reducing women's influence in church by limiting her ability to speak, hold office, or engage in independent church work and by replacing feminized Christianity with a religion based on masculine rhetoric and ideologies.<sup>17</sup>

Margaret Bendroth's *Fundamentalism & Gender* agrees with Betty DeBerg's characterization of fundamentalism as a masculine-oriented effort to reclaim religion. She argues that the fundamentalists' attitudes about gender provide the key to understanding the internal development of the movement and its interaction with dominant American culture. Bendroth is concerned with the difference between the rhetoric of fundamentalism (as examined by DeBerg) and the realities of how fundamentalism was instituted and practiced. Her examination of protofundamentalist revivalism in the mid-nineteenth century reveals its essentially masculine character, but she does not argue that this early fundamentalism was anti-feminist. Rather, she attributes its masculine characteristics to a deliberate effort to appeal to possible male converts. In this context, early fundamentalism was not anti-feminist, but served as an opportunity to air masculine grievances against the feminization of religion. Further than this, Bendroth asserts that nineteenth-century revivalism was essentially egalitarian in matters of social class and sex roles, and its millennialist message tended to overshadow or

<sup>15</sup> Betty A. DeBerg, *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism* (Minneapolis, 1990), 7-12.  
<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 58. See also 36-37.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 61, 68, 80-84, and 91-95.



negate rules of social conduct and gender behavior.<sup>18</sup>

Conversion to fundamentalism solved a gender role problem for men. Male religious conversion into feminized Victorian churches required the surrender of the masculine gender ideal of the independent, aggressive sinner. Fundamentalist conversion allowed a man to surrender the old masculine gender ideal for a new one—that of a victorious warrior, aggressively pursuing salvation for himself and the world. Fundamentalist Christianity emphasized the power to serve (which was gender neutral) instead of self-sacrifice (which was feminine-specific).<sup>19</sup>

Early fundamentalism retained some holdovers from feminized religion—women speakers, organizers, writers, and missionaries—but did not encourage these activities. They did not permit the existence of independent women's auxiliaries, although the preponderance of female congregants made it practically impossible to exclude women from support positions. Bendroth presents the tension inherent in the contradiction between the pragmatic necessity of women's public participation in the expansion of fundamentalism with the strict doctrine of feminine subordination as the primary shaping force of early fundamentalism.<sup>20</sup>

The anti-feminine aspects of fundamentalism belong to two "root" movements of fundamentalism: dispensational premillennialism, which traces all sin to Eve's disobedience in Eden (making all women inherently untrustworthy), and biblical inerrancy (Eve was created second and therefore subordinate, as were all women after her). Before fundamentalism was institutionalized (ca. 1900) these two strains of anti-feminist thought were not emphasized and could not have been enforced. The practical necessity of filling positions in the church took precedence. After fundamentalism developed institutional structures, stricter practice in the control of women was enforced. Despite this, Bendroth argues that it is an oversimplification to classify fundamentalists as misogynists:

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism & Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven, CT, 1993), 5 and 13-14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

*The roots of fundamentalist opposition to feminism lie deep within the culture of its origin. They grew from specific doctrinal points within fundamentalism that placed it squarely in opposition to the optimistic, ameliorative tradition of mainstream religion. But to carry the metaphor a bit further, these ideals did not bear fruit as one might expect; the progress of antifeminist attitudes among fundamentalists was always hesitant and slow, normally held in check by the feminine substructure of a religious culture that fundamentalists could never entirely escape. Indeed...antifeminism found its sharpest expression during periods of stress and transition, especially in the 1920s and 1940s.<sup>21</sup>*

Bendroth does not satisfactorily explain why fundamentalism was popular among women, and why they did not rebel against the imposed restrictions on their activities. The women most attracted to fundamentalism would be those who felt comfortable confined to the domestic sphere, but this does not adequately explain the lack of reaction on the part of women to the anti-feminine literature published and preached or their acceptance of losing access to occupations they had traditionally held for decades.

The fundamentalist family was not a replica of the Victorian ideal. It retained and emphasized the basic patriarchal control but further restricted the domestic role of the mother. Her role was carefully delineated to prevent the expansion of domesticity into social welfare. The ideal of home was insular. The role of motherhood also contained inherent conflicts for the fundamentalist woman. She had the primary responsibility for religious training of the children, but fundamentalist beliefs did not include the concept of religious perfection gained through instruction. The responsibility for the child's salvation lay with the child, not in the training given by the mother. In addition, the male distrust of women discouraged any approval or celebration of her motherhood, thus undermining her self-worth in the primary role assigned to her by fundamentalist belief.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

The father's role in the fundamentalist home held theological significance, being an extension of the idea of God as the absolute authority over creation. Fathers dispensed punishment and mercy, but never indulgence. Paternal love was ideally expressed through discipline and sacrifice. Men were also responsible for maintaining the proper order of society. One aspect of this was the careful hierarchical arrangement of fundamentalist families, but equally important was the onus for sexual self-control that resided with fundamentalist men. Unrestrained lust caused disorder in the world, and fundamentalists believed that avoiding undue mingling of the sexes was thus the best method of preserving order in society. Sexual self-control was rooted in the individualism and concept of manly achievement inherent in fundamentalism's masculine gender definition. This had the effect of making fundamentalists more comfortable with those of their own gender. Male camaraderie was fine, but fundamentalists discouraged exclusive female friendships as unnatural and leading a woman away from her proper focus on her husband and family.<sup>23</sup>

As a contrast to the mainstream denominations so far discussed, a consideration of one that lies outside the mainstream, Shakerism, proves interesting in relation to gender role analysis. Conventional historical thought on the Shakers describes their beliefs and lifestyle as gender-equal. This has generally been deduced from their doctrinal tenet of dual male/female components to the godhead, and the establishment of a dual system of gender-separate government within their settlements. Karen and Pamela Nickless' article "Sexual Equality and Economic Authority" challenges this assumption, arguing that:

...the Shaker commitment to sexual equality was not an early feature of Shaker life. Shakers acquired a women's rights ideology only when converts from other utopian movements began to influence Shaker practice in the last decades of the nineteenth century... We find that for most of the history

of the church, economic authority in Shaker business affairs rested with the male authority.<sup>24</sup>

In the Nickless' argument, analysis of the first generation of Shaker documents shows that Mother Ann Lee maintained the standard male dominant hierarchy for family structure. Even after the sect began to live communally, the documentation does not indicate female gender equity. In the dual principles of the godhead, the female principle is referred to as subordinate.<sup>25</sup> The earliest reference to gender equality among Shakers is traced to Frederick Evans, a recruit from a failed Owenite utopian community. Evans' radicalization of a part of Shaker leadership was in step with the general reassessment of gender roles in society at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Nickless' examined the economic institutions and division of labor in Shaker communities to determine if power was shared and labor valued equally. The occupational division of labor in Shaker communities tended to conform to traditional gender roles seen in agricultural communities and did, in fact, confine women more closely to domestic tasks, since communal male farming tended to obviate women's role in agricultural tasks. Similarly, the Nickless' examination of extant records indicate that the economics of production—capital accumulation and outlay—were controlled by the brethren. In both the Nickless and Brewer analyses, women formally were allowed to handle community finances only when the communities exhibited a significant gender ratio imbalance and the value of the agricultural production was overtaken by the prosperity of the women's domestic industries.<sup>26</sup>

Priscilla Brewer reached similar conclusions in her article "Tho' of the Weaker Sex". Brewer theorizes that the Shakers did

<sup>24</sup> Karen K. Nickless and Pamela J. Nickless, "Sexual Equality and Economic Authority: The Shaker Experience, 1784-1900," in *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*, ed. Wendy E. Chantielewski, Louis J. Kern and Marilyn Klee-Hartzell (Syracuse, 1993), 119.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.



not intend to create a social system of gender equality. Authority within the Shaker sect was gender specific to males, and Shaker attitudes about gender traits were traditional for the time. In Brewer's analysis, the spiritual equality of the Shakers stemmed from their commitment to celibacy. As the sect became more committed to worldly concerns the spiritual equality of men and women became less important. As Shaker men were exposed more to the world, they were judged to be more spiritually unsteady. Thus, as in other Victorian religions, women became the guardians of spiritual purity.<sup>27</sup>

The greater spiritual authority of the Sisters did not translate into greater temporal power to enforce their spiritual authority. Brewer interprets the 1837 revival known as Mother's Work as the Sisters seeking alternative power structures to effect change in the community. This revival failed when the Brethren gave it little credence, but Brewer speculates that the Brethren may have retaliated for this attempted usurpation by identifying the Sisters with some typical feminine stereotypes of the period such as emotional frailty and a propensity for vindictiveness.<sup>28</sup>

This essay has explored a cross-section of the gender experiences in American Protestantism. The cases examined here suggest that the institutionalized gender roles within religious denominations are to some degree dependent on the economic and social status that religious women established in society as a whole. The evidence also suggests that the denominations which evidenced the greatest gender role redefinition were also those that provided the greatest agency in the improvement or detriment of the general economic and social status of their members. This reciprocal dynamic is exemplified by the black Baptist women where the church actively promoted the professionalization of women, thereby giving them the tools to establish and effectively maintain powerful women's Baptist con-

<sup>27</sup> Priscilla J. Brewer, "The' of the Weaker Sex': A Reassessment of Gender Equality Among the Shakers," in *Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States*, ed. Wendy E. Chmielewski, Louis J. Kern and Marilyn Kies-Hartzell (Syracuse, 1993), 136-137. <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

ventions. Less dramatic, but equally telling, is the renegotiation of gender roles in Shaker communities once the balance of economic power had shifted in the women's favor. These two examples must be contrasted with the slow and relatively conservative negotiations over gender roles within the Presbyterian denomination where gender equity in the organizational structure was still not established by 1950. The centrality of religious organizations to the black Baptists and the Shakers, and their relative social isolation, by racism or religious intent, appears to have acted as an accelerant to gender negotiation in the period between 1880 and 1940. Presbyterian women did not experience this same social isolation and so did not have the same impetus to change their status. Fundamentalism functions under an impetus for change similar to that which drove the black women Baptists and Shakers. The difference in Fundamentalist gender negotiation is the emphasis on the reestablishment of male gender role dominance. Although the emphasis was different, the establishment of Fundamentalist gender roles was also dependent on the economic and social status of Fundamentalist women. The clear intent of the Fundamentalist denomination was to both limit the economic resources independently available to women and to limit their social role to a secondary status within the domestic household. The establishment of this sharp differentiation of gender roles, although explicitly stated in religious doctrine, could not be accomplished immediately due to the preponderance of women in Fundamentalist congregations. Nonetheless, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Fundamentalists continuously renegotiated gender roles to restrict the public activities of women members in order to reestablish their ideal of masculine control of the family and society as a whole. Fundamentalist women were therefore being slowly moved toward positions of isolation just as black Baptist and Shaker women were moving into more public roles. Religious institutions can thus be considered as serving as both a matrix and agent for social change, but also as reflective of social and economic changes occurring in their surrounding society.