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Alexis J. Chapman '06   April 28, 2006

Sisternity:
Religious Inspiration and the Political Identities of
Early American Feminists

Alexis J. Chapman

An undergraduate thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts Degree

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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O woman, woman! Upon you I call; for upon your exertions almost entirely depends whether the rising generation shall be anything more than we have been or not.

> MARIA W. MILLER STEWART
> to the Afric-American Intelligence Society of Boston, 1832

I should feel exceedingly diffident to appear before you at this time, having never before spoken in public, were I not nerved by a sense of right and duty, did I not feel the time had fully come for the question of woman's wrongs to be laid before the public, did I not believe that woman herself must do this work; for woman alone can understand the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of her degradation.

> ELIZABETH CADY STANTON
> to the Woman's Rights Convention, 1848

INTRODUCTION

The London World Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840 found American and British abolitionists gathered "to celebrate the end of the apprenticeship system and focus attention on the scale of slavery and the slave trade elsewhere."[1] The Convention was organized by the recently formed British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) to invite abolitionists to discuss the next steps in the campaign to abolish slavery and the slave-trade in all parts of the world.[2] A recent split in the American abolitionist movement had occurred over the broadly expanding political and social radicalism of William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) that advocated women's rights, pacifism, and "no human government,"[3] as well as radical religious ideologies of racial and gender equality.[4] The AASS remained a radical organization and the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (AFASS) was created and modeled after the political, spiritual and social leanings of the BFASS.[5] The "New Organization," as the AFASS was called by Garrisonians, valued women's participation only in auxiliary groups, much as the BFASS.[6] Delegates from all three organizations were present at

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[1] Louis Billington and Rosamund Billington, "'A Burning Zeal for Righteousness': Women in the British Anti-Slavery Movement, 1820-1860," Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914, ed. Jane Rendall (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 96.

[2] Claire Midgley, Women Against Slavery : The British Campaigns, 1780-1870 (London: Routledge, 1992) 122.

[3] The Garrisonian concept of "no human government" was a "hostility to any political action against slavery." Midgley, Women Against Slavery 123.

[4] Kathryn K. Sklar, Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement 1830-1870: A Brief History with Documents (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000), 54-55.

[5] Billington and Billington, 96.

[6] Kathryn K. Sklar, "'Women Who Speak for an Entire Nation': American and British

the London World Anti-Slavery Convention and all faced the challenge of the

controversy over the "woman question."

Specifically, the presence of the female delegates from America

"disturbed the peace" of the Convention and their presence was equally

upsetting to *both* British men and women.[7] Suddenly, the British abolitionist

movement was faced with the same crisis that had, in part, split the American

abolitionist movement: the question of women's rights and whether or not the

fight for them was the duty of abolitionist organizations. Elizabeth Cady

Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, editors of *History of*

Woman Suffrage, described the conversations about the possibility of female

delegates from America attending the Convention as being held in an air of

"excitement and vehemence of protest" as if "the news had come that the

French were about to invade England."[8] Before the Convention took place,

British delegate Charles Stuart, a close friend of Angelina Grimké and her

husband Theodore Weld, cautioned the organizing committee against the

attendance of the female American abolitionists who were "of the most

troublesome description." These female delegates from America may have

been abolitionists and allies in the anti-slavery cause, but they also believed

Women at the World Anti-Slavery Convention, London, 1840," Yellin, Jean F., and John C. Horne, eds. The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America (Ithaca: Cornell P University, 1994), 303.
[7] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, et al., eds. History of Woman Suffrage: Volume 1, 1848-1861 (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1881), 33.
[8] Stanton, et al., History of Woman Suffrage 54.

in, as Stuart described, "intruding women into public life."[9] Many male

British abolitionists sought to undermine any independent action taken by the

American women and subsequently many of the activities that the American

female delegates took part in, including a meeting between themselves and

other British women, were organized and carefully supervised by British

men.[10]

  Not only had Stuart taken it upon himself to warn the Convention of

the American female delegates, but American clergymen, arriving earlier than

many of the female delegates, continued to incite opposition against their own

countrywomen.[11] At the Convention, radical American women and men

were disappointed to find so many had spoken out against seating the

American female delegates. While white British clergymen were able to

support the controversial rights of seating black men as delegates at the

Convention, the idea of granting equal rights to women broke too many

church doctrines for them to allow.[12] American women performed similar

duties to British women in anti-slavery societies, such as praying and

petitioning against slavery, but for the British abolitionists, both male and

female, the American women delegates were "those terrible women."[13] The

American female delegates were amongst the many female abolitionists in

[9]   Sklar, "Women Who Speak For An Entire Nation" 306.
[10]   Sklar, "Women Who Speak For An Entire Nation" 314.
[11]   Stanton, et al., History of Woman Suffrage 54.
[12]   Beverly Zink-Sawyer, From Preachers to Suffragists: Woman's Rights and Religious Conviction in the Lives of Three Nineteenth-Century American Clergywomen (Louisville: Westminster John Knox P, 2003)   17.

America who exercised greater power in their respective mix-gendered organizations by speaking to audiences made up of both men and women, as well as voting on society legislation. It was the act of speaking to mixed-gender or "promiscuous" audiences, as well as electing board members and voting in meetings (within Garrisonian anti-slavery organizations, at least), by American female abolitionists that was so disturbing to the majority of British abolitionists. For the British and conservative Americans, the fight for slavery was appropriate for women because it was part of the "worldly nature" of Protestant and evangelical reform guided by church teachings. When American women spoke in front of promiscuous audiences and called for their own rights to be recognized (not just the rights of the slave) too many social norms were violated.[14]

At the Convention, American feminists and abolitionists were entering the environment of "old England" where the idea of a woman acting as a delegate was still shocking and unacceptable to many British citizens and the gender customs they adhered to.[15] Still, American women came to the Convention as delegates of their respective organizations.[16] Looking back at the events that transpired at the 1840 Convention, Lucretia Mott would write

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[13] Stanton, et al., History of Woman Suffrage 53.
[14] Zink-Sawyer, 17.
[15] Michael S. Kimmel and Thomas E. Mosmiller, eds. Against the Tide: Pro-Feminist Men in the United States 1776-1990 (Boston: Beacon P, 1992) 81.
[16] Lucretia Mott, Sarah Pugh, Abby Kimber, Elizabeth Neal, Mary Grew, Ann Green Phillips, Emily Winslow, and Abby Southwick were the American female delegates who attended the Convention of 1840, Elizabeth Pease, Anne Knight, and Marion Reid were some of the British women present. Stanton, et al, History of Woman Suffrage 54.

about the hostility directed towards the female delegates by white and black men who "thought [the presence of female delegates] would lower the dignity of the convention and bring ridicule on the whole thing."[17] Glaswegian Reverend George Harvey believed the presence of female delegates at the Convention would be "acting in opposition to the plain teaching of the word of God."[18] The stubbornness of Mott and the other American female delegates at the Convention did not wane under the criticism and antagonism. Mott recorded in her journal that "[s]everal [men] sent to us to persuade us not to offer ourselves to the Convention - Colver rather bold in his suggestions - answered & of course offended him."[19]

For all their stubbornness, however, the great disturbance caused by the presence of the American female delegates at the Convention disturbed the American female delegates who were taken aback by the hostility. The hostility against them, though, created a commitment between two particular women who would meet at the Convention for the first time: Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Their meeting would lead to the plans and eventual realization of the Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls eight years later.[20] The reaction of British women to the behavior of the American women at the Convention, who persistently articulated their right as women to

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[17] Lucretia Mott, Slavery and "The Woman Question": Lucretia Mott's Diary of Her Visit to Great Britain to Attend the World's Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840 (London: Friends' Historical Association and Society, 1952) 29.

[18] C. Duncan Rice, The Scots Abolitionists: 1833-1861 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981) 89.

[19] Mott, 29.

be delegates, was mixed. While female abolitionist societies in Britain were more likely to defend the radical position of the immediate abolition of slavery as opposed to the gradual emancipation promoted by male British abolitionist organizations, they seemed to possess a "disinterest in challenging their exclusion from positions of formal power within the movement."[21]

One possible explanation for the hostile reactions to the question over women's rights at the Convention and the hesitancy of British women to address their rights may have been the deeply embedded social structure of separate spheres that dictated the roles of each gender in society. While American abolitionist organizations had and were wrestling with the question of women's rights, the British anti-slavery movement did not experience the same split over the "woman question" because British women had not actively demanded more inclusion into the upper levels of the anti-slavery organizations hierarchies. Both American and British cultures functioned under a strict social system of separate spheres that American women had chosen to rebel against. In her book *The Slavery of Sex*, Blanche Glassman Hersh argues that separate spheres served as a major obstacle for women to overcome in order to establish their right to move out of the private sphere, which was their "natural" domain, into the public one.[22] The ideology of separate spheres determined women's proper place to be within the realm of

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[20]   Sklar, Women's Rights 49.

[21]   Claire Midgley, "Anti-Slavery and Feminism in Nineteenth Century Britain," Gender & History Vol.5 No.3 (Oxford; New York: Brown Blackwell, 1993) 346.

[22]   Blanche Glassman Hersh, The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America

the private, and allocated the public sphere as the proper domain of men.

Separate spheres was an institution of social binaries: the public sphere of

politics, economy, and the state resided at the opposite spectrum of the private

sphere of the home, domestic duties, and the family.[23] What developed in

separate spheres for men and women were distinctly gendered roles that

mandated certain social and political duties and responsibilities. While men

were able to act as public citizens as men, women emerged from the private

into the public only through their relationship to men: as mothers, daughters

(of fathers), sisters (of brothers), and wives.[24] Women were not political

citizens themselves, but were responsible for raising political citizens in their

sons.[25] Early American feminists, however, found a way to step outside the

sphere that they had been assigned to before British women.

The "disinterest" of British women for their own rights is confusing

considering their history of early feminist thought (Mary Wollstonecraft's

Vindication for the Rights of Women, Mary Astell's *Some Reflections on*

Marriage) and radical anti-slavery positions (Elizabeth Heyrick's *Immediate,*

Not Gradual Emancipation). Mary Wollstonecraft wrote in as early as 1792

that "I do not wish [women] to have power over men; but over themselves,"

(Chicago; London: University of Illinois P, 1978) 190.
[23] Carole Pateman, The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory
(Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989) 5.
[24] Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in
the United States (Cambridge: Belknap P, 1992) 320.
[25] Skocpol, 322.

which was and is one of the many tenets of feminist struggle.[26] It is strange

considering that such fiery feminist thinkers were writing in Great Britain

long before American feminists like the Elizabeth Cady Stanton had been

born. The Convention of 1840 brought to light the tension not only over the

"woman question" but why American women were demanding their right to

be delegates of equal standing to their male counterparts and British women

were not. The silence of British women may seem strange given that they had

taken more radical positions on abolition (such as the ideology of

immediatism) earlier than British men or American men and women had

adopted them.[27] Long before American feminists began to stand up for their

rights, British women, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, were comparing the

status of women as being on the same level as a slave.[28] Why did American

women develop an active feminist movement first, and play such an important

role as catalysts for the British feminist movement, when British women were

the ones who had already framed so many feminist ideas?

In this thesis I will argue that American women's drive to fight for

their own rights was directly influenced by the unique religious and spiritual

movements of the early nineteenth century in the United States. Being given

space to question and redefine their religious identity allowed American

women to begin to define a political identity for themselves. Many historians

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[26] Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects (London: T. F. Unwin, 1891) 203.
[27] Midgley, Women Against Slavery 104.
[28] Wollstonecraft, 203.

have overlooked the importance of religion in the women's rights movement which may be due to the secular lenses used to look at this time period with. There is also a tendency to describe many of the early American feminists, such as Stanton, as anticlerical and then to associate the whole suffrage movement as anticlerical.[29] Anticlericalism, by definition, is "opposed to the influence of the church or the clergy in political affairs."[30] I think many times when persons like Stanton are described as anticlerical it is in reference to a belief that a direct relationship to God and scripture is better than one mediated through a priest (who is usually male). The tendency, however, to clump anticlericalism with the statement that many of the American feminist women were anti-religion is a mistake and even to suppose that they were opposed to the influence of the church or clergy in state affairs would be wrong. A better way of understanding the relationship between religion and the early women's rights movement is to look at the ways that these women were re-imagining and re-constructing their religious identity and the religious structures that were dominated by men. Through reconstruction of their religious identities they changed their political ones.

　　While the atmosphere of radical religious and spiritual thought offered a remarkable space for American women to question and counter the oppressive teachings of church doctrine and hierarchy (an atmosphere not found in Britain), it was the articulation of a specifically female political

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[29] Zink-Sawyer, 9.

identity that set American women apart. In other words, the commitment of radical religious and spiritual traditions to a more democratic understanding of individual ability meant that early American feminists began to assert their own right to be political individuals. Specifically, American women imagined themselves to be members of a "sisternity" that was a expressly gendered political identity. While British women were sisters to their brothers, American women became sisters to their sisters, because they recognized that public and political life was designed only for men and a sisternity that operated independent of and against the male political system was necessary. Drawing upon Carole Pateman's analysis of the fraternal social contract, in the second part of my thesis, I will argue how early American feminists understood themselves in a distinctively female sisternity of women within a social contract that recognized only the political power of men.

The way that women understood themselves to be sisters and the formation of a sisternity was manifold, but it would require a deconstruction of the "natural order" that subjected women to men. The natural subjection of women had been defended through church doctrine and civil legislation that repeatedly viewed women as non-political persons. Women addressed the structure of oppression first in the private sphere by challenging the marriage contract and the right to govern their bodies. Their defiance moved into the public realm through their activities in such movements as abolitionism that

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[30] "Anticlerical," Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1993.

found them in "un-womanly" positions (such as speaking in front of

"promiscuous" audiences) and also by directly attacking church doctrine that

defined women's private and public roles as subordinate to men. Women

challenged the status quo in their speeches and writing, for as Stanton wrote in

both *The Woman's Bible* and a letter to William Lloyd Garrison:

> How can woman's position be changed from
> that of a subordinate to an equal, without
> opposition, without the broadest discussion of
> all the questions involved in her present
> degradation? For so far-reaching and
> momentous a reform as her complete
> independence, an entire revolution in all
> existing institutions is inevitable.[31]

The revolution of the American women's movement was the rejection of

women as subordinate to men and the adoption of a gendered political identity

(sisternity) that opposed the exclusive rights of the social, political, and

religious hierarchy of male institutionalized power by defining women as

rational and politically capable individuals.

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[31] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, The Woman's Bible (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1993) 11.

CHAPTER ONE
The Religious Identities of Early American Feminists

It was early in the American abolitionist movement that women challenged the hierarchy and doctrines of religious institutions that maintained the ideology of women's subjection to men. Evelyn Kirkley describes religion as impacting the woman's rights movement in three ways. First, religion was "used in both pro- and anti-suffrage arguments, if not as the primary argument, at least as an element."[32] Second, religion acted as a source of powerful personal motivation for early American feminists. Finally, Kirkley argues that the fight for women's rights, and specifically the right to vote, was presented as a crusade stamped with the zeal of righteousness and made respectable under religious rhetoric and ideology.[33] I would also add that religion played an important role in the development of the political identity of early American women. Finding their place spiritually allowed them to find themselves in politics. The subordination of women was seen as "natural" because it was a decree of God. Women had to surpass the laws of the state created by men that kept them oppressed by going to the original source of those laws, which were based largely on Christian morals and ideas. Some early American feminists would use their critique of Christian doctrine to argue for women's empowerment whether it was arguing that women's equality was a God-given right or arguing for women's rights by rejecting

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[32] Zink-Sawyer, 12-13.

Christian doctrine and relying on personal spiritual authority.

The 1840 Convention highlighted the conflict of women's rights in the American anti-slavery movement and the social and political differences towards gender between British and American societies. Whereas women in the United States were beginning to use the abolitionist movement as a platform to demand their social and political rights as women through their anti-slavery work, women and men in Great Britain remained silent over the "woman question." Answering the "woman question" involved, in part, exploring the spiritual and religious traditions that had placed women in their current social sphere. American women and British women were held in similar social spheres (the private and domestic realm) but their respective societies were disparate in their political and spiritual/religious atmospheres.

American women had expanded their sphere of influence and activity farther than their British sisters when they met in London at the World Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840. Differing social and religious climates found women in America touring the country as preachers and abolitionist speakers while British women remained active in the abolitionist movement, but isolated to only interacting with other women. Even when British women were working in their abolitionist organizations, they usually met in private settings of female-only anti-slavery society meetings.[34] The earliest women's anti-slavery societies in Britain were created in 1823, developing as

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[33] Zink-Sawyer, 12-13.

extensions to the acceptable role of women as philanthropists for various religious societies that promoted the expansion of evangelical Christianity.[35] British women within organizations such as the Anti-Slavery Society distributed pamphlets encouraging other women to take up the "sacred cause" of abolition while being sure to stay within a woman's appropriate "sphere of influence."[36] The Anti-Slavery Society directly addressed women's roles as mothers encouraging them to instruct "the rising race with an abhorrence of slavery."[37] The function of British women in the anti-slavery movement mirrored the domestic duties of women in the private sphere which required women to be subordinate to the men of the household.[38] Women's anti-slavery societies in Britain were the strong and under-appreciated backbone of the larger abolitionist movement, raising funds for and awareness of the anti-slavery cause with more efficiency than male organizations in Britain. British women were also responsible for radicalizing the abolitionist ideology in Britain and the United States with Elizabeth Heyrick's book *Immediate, Not Gradual Emancipation*, published in 1825. Her book was the first time a white British abolitionist would call for the immediate emancipation of slaves.[39] Heyrick's immediatism ideology was not instantly accepted by British male anti-slavery societies, but was first adopted by British female

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[34] Sklar, "Women Who Speak for an Entire Nation" 303.
[35] Billington and Billington, 82.
[36] Billington and Billington, 85.
[37] Billington and Billington, 85.
[38] Article, Midgley, 348-349.
[39] Midgley, Women Against Slavery 104.

abolitionist societies and then American anti-slavery societies.[40]

One particular episode during the 1840 Convention illustrated the paradoxical disconnect British women had between their anti-slavery work and their hesitancy towards political action. By their request, the American female delegation met with British women from various anti-slavery societies, though the meeting was formally arranged and organized by British men.[41] While Lucretia Mott had requested a public meeting, pressure from male British delegates forced the meeting eventually to take place in the private lodgings of the American female delegation.[42] Mott described being "disappointed to find so little independent action on the part of the [British] women" and the meeting itself was seen by another American delegate, Sarah Pugh, as very frustrating because the British women feared stepping "out of their sphere."[43] While American female abolitionists felt it was their right and their place to discuss issues surrounding the anti-slavery movement in a setting unregulated by men, the British women attending the gathering were reluctant to overstep established social norms. Yet, even when British women were meeting with other women in the privacy of the American women's lodgings, a place very similar to the many living rooms that these British women had campaigned for the rights of slaves, they were still paradoxically passive in addressing issues of abolitionism and their own rights as women.

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[40] Sklar, "Women Who Speak for an Entire Nation" 323.
[41] Sklar, "Women Who Speak for an Entire Nation" 314.
[42] Sklar, "Women Who Speak for an Entire Nation" 314.
[43] Sklar, "Women Who Speak for an Entire Nation" 314-315.

Many British women argued that their involvement in the anti-slavery movement was not a political activity, but was merely an extension of their work in their evangelical philanthropic societies. Middle-class British women who expressed the sentiment that abolitionism was charitable, not political work identified themselves as "maternal activists." Maternal activists were women, like abolitionist Hannah Moore, "who stressed women's unique qualities and roles" which promoted the "domestic basis of both their private and public *duties*, and their spiritual rather than social equality."[44] By not adopting a mantel of independent political identity, "maternal activists" could maintain moral influence on the social and political actions of British men without transgressing social norms. They were auxiliaries to the male abolitionist organizations, not leaders of the anti-slavery movement (or at least that is how they wanted their actions to be interpreted). A fewer number of British women identified themselves as "egalitarian activists" who believed that it was their *right*, as opposed to *duty*, to be involved in political life, and they were influenced by the writings of egalitarian feminists such as Wollstonecraft. British egalitarian activists developed ties and garnered support for their opinions with American women and men who shared and encouraged their egalitarian views.[45]

While the American female delegates were more radical in their abolitionist ideologies, it was not their radical abolitionist ideologies that

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[44]   Midgley, "Anti-Slavery and Feminism" 346.

concerned the male delegates opposed to their presence at the London

Convention. No seats were denied to the radical abolitionists, like William

Lloyd Garrison, who with other "Garrisonian" delegates, sat with the

sectioned-off American female delegates during the Convention

proceedings.[46] What American women wrote and spoke about, however, was

nothing short of controversial in both the United States and Britain. Angelina

Grimké at the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women argued that

there was a need "for woman to move in that sphere which Providence has

assigned her, and no longer remain satisfied in the circumscribed limits with

which corrupt custom and a perverted application of Scripture have encircled

her."[47] In her book *The Anti-Slavery Cause in America and Its Martyrs* Eliza

Wigham, an egalitarian feminist and Scottish abolitionist, described the

Grimké sisters as having a "peculiar adaptation" for speaking.[48] Wigham's

book was written in 1863, nearly thirty years after Angelina Grimké's feminist

comments at the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women. It was not

until the 1860s in Britain that the feminist movement began to take off, with

women such as Wigham starting to support both anti-slavery and feminism.[49]

Other British abolitionists, who attended the London World Anti-

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[45] Midgley, "Anti-Slavery and Feminism" 346.

[46] Sklar, "Women Who Speak for an Entire Nation" 306.

[47] Ira V. Brown, "'Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?': The Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, 1837-1839," Abolitionism and Issues of Race and Gender, ed. John R. McKivigan (New York; London: Garland P, 1999) 190.

[48] Eliza Wigham, The Anti-Slavery Cause in America and its Martyrs (London: A. W. Bennet, 1863) 32.

[49] Midgley, Women Against Slavery 172.

Slavery Convention, such as Elizabeth Pease and Jane Smeal, did not begin to push for women's rights until the 1860s. It was in the 1860s in Britain that the anti-slavery movement was starting to lose momentum, and historian Claire Midgley suggests that "the winding down of the British anti-slavery movement released reforming energies which were channeled into the newly organized women's rights movement."[50] In a letter to Angelina Grimké in 1838, Elizabeth Pease would express concern about discussing women's rights in anti-slavery societies in Britain, arguing that woman would do more good "by *actions* than by words" and that acting on "moral questions" was more appropriate than speaking on them.[51] Pease found, like Wigham, the Grimké sisters' call to public speaking not only "unusual" but predicted that "unusual it will doubtless continue to be."[52] Pease's concern over women speaking in public reflected the concern of many of her countrywomen and men who found the work of women speaking on controversial moral issues too public (or male) a role for women. The action of raising money for anti-slavery causes, distributing pamphlets, and holding slavery-free produce fairs and bazaars maintained the modest appearance of a well-behaved woman actively doing good but not seeking public titles (such as an official delegate of an anti-slavery Convention) or seeking to act beyond auxiliary support to male abolitionist organizations. Although Sarah Grimké did not attend the World

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[50] Midgley, Women Against Slavery 173.
[51] "Letter from Elizabeth Pease to Angelina Grimké, Darlington, 12 February 1838," Midgley, Women Against Slavery 158.
[52] "Letter from Elizabeth Pease to Angelina Grimké, Darlington, 12 February 1838,"

Anti-Slavery Convention, she wrote to Pease arguing in support of the women

delegates sent to the Convention:

> Certain it is that [women] are under bondage to
> men & that our rights & privileges as human
> beings are little understood, & less appreciated,
> by our own, as well as the other sex. I
> apprehended injury to the cause of the slave, the
> cause which called the Convention together, but
> it may be the means of extending the usefulness
> of woman in that very cause. One thing is very
> clear, I think, viz. that the Convention had no
> right to reject the female delegates; as members
> of the A. S. S. they were entitled to a seat,
> unless it could be proven that they were not
> persons.[53]

Sarah Grimké's argument in support of the American female

delegation does not argue for what women should do, as Pease and many

others did, but what they cannot do since as women they are "little

understood" and "less appreciated" by both men and women. The discussion

between the Grimké sisters and Pease was over the potential of women in the

anti-slavery movement: women could remain determined auxiliaries to the

cause, stretching the edges but not breaking the boundaries of the private

sphere of duty, or women could seek to step in to the sphere of the public.

Pease was not convinced that women were "qualified to stand so

conspicuously forward" as speakers because speaking was viewed as a

intellectually-based or male activity unlike fundraising or holding parlor

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Midgley, Women Against Slavery 158.
[53] Larry Ceplair, The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké: Selected Writings 1835-1839 (New York: Columbia UP, 1989) 352.

socials.[54]

The comments and concerns of Pease's were very similar to those of other British female abolitionists and anti-slavery societies. The Glasgow Emancipation Society, headed by Jane Smeal, confirmed Pease's opinion of women as supportive auxiliaries to men by expressing "no desire to step beyond their appropriate sphere."[55] Other British abolitionists, like Eliza Conder worried about the societal norm of separate spheres being jeopardized by the insistence of American women for women's rights. Conder asked "If we are to start out of our spheres who is to take our place? who, as 'keepers of the home' are to 'guide the home', and train up children?"[56] Conder believed that women were supposed to raise citizens, not become ones.

Another Scottish group, the Glasgow Female Anti-Slavery Society was formed to support Garrisonian abolitionists, but in their *Appeal to the Ladies of Great Britain* they avoided making any direct statement of support for women's rights within the abolitionist movement.[57] The "woman question" was not viewed as beneficial for the cause of abolitionism, but seen as a controversial issue that would damage the reputations of women in anti-slavery societies and would distract attention away from the actual cause of abolitionism.[58] The same worry that the fight for women's rights was

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[54] "Letter from Elizabeth Pease to Angelina Grimké, Darlington, 12 February 1838," Midgley, Women Against Slavery 158.
[55] "Glasgow Ladies' Auxiliary Emancipation Society," Women Against Slavery 158.
[56] Midgley, Women Against Slavery 165.
[57] Billington and Billington, 97-98.
[58] Midgley, Women Against Slavery 165.

disruptive to the cause of abolitionism was not absent in the American anti-slavery movement. But when a schism between the conservative and radical abolitionist groups took place, American women were able to voice their demands for equal rights. In Britain, no such definitive split took place due to the absence of a public controversy over the "woman question," and it was not until the anti-slavery movement was beginning to die down that British women diverted their energies to their own rights.

Since the church was deemed an appropriate outlet for civic action for women by standards of the Cult of True Womanhood,[59] it was in religious gatherings and activities that some American women began to act politically, instead of "womanly." In an early act of civil disobedience, Angelina and Sarah Grimké protested the discrimination against black members of the Quaker church (who had to sit separate from white members on a bench in the back of the meetinghouse) by sitting with the black members. Their protest resulted in Sarah Grimké being "publicly silenced and rebuked" for preaching against discrimination during the meeting.[60] By beginning their actions of protest in the church, some of the earliest critics of Angelina and Sarah Grimké were clergy who would become angered that the sisters were speaking

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[59] The Cult of True Womanhood is a contemporary term used to describe a Victorian ideology that defined the "true woman" as a caretaker and nurturer both in and out of the home in antebellum America, though the virtues of True Womanhood (purity, piety, domesticity, and submission) were desirable for women to attain in Great Britain as well. For more information please see: Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States (Cambridge; London: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1992).

[60] Margaret Hope Bacon, Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986) 105.

in front of mixed-gender, or "promiscuous" audiences.[61]

It is not surprising that Hicksite Quaker women, who belonged in a church structure that espoused the spiritual equality of the sexes, would be some of the strongest and loudest activists against women's oppression.[62] It was Mott's Quaker-based spiritual convictions that had inspired Stanton when they both met at the 1840 Convention. Mott exposed the Scotch Presbyterian Stanton to the more radical and social justice-oriented Hicksite Quaker philosophies. Stanton described how "[t]ruth for authority, not authority for truth" was the "the fixed mental habit in which [Mott] most rigidly held herself."[63] Even though Mott practiced the more traditional form of Quakerism, many American and British Quakers considered Mott's Quakerism radical. The majority of British Quakers were part of the Orthodox tradition of Quakerism and it was predominantly Orthodox Quakers that attended the 1840 Convention. Even more liberal Quakers, like Elizabeth Pease, who would not hesitate to support the duty of "any female minister in our Society . . . to preach the Gospel," would not use her Quaker beliefs to argue for women's rights.[64]

The ostracizing of Mott's Quaker beliefs was a result of the Hicksite-Orthodox schism that divided the American Quaker community in America in 1827. The schism resulted in two distinct Quaker traditions as a result: the

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[61] Bacon, 105.
[62] Thomas Hamm, The Quakers in America (New York: Columbia UP, 2003) 184.
[63] Stanton, et al., History of Woman Suffrage 422.
[64] Midgley, Women Against Slavery 157.

more traditional, but radical Hicksites and the more conservative Orthodox

Quakers. The Hicksite Quakers maintained the importance of "the Inner

Light" and the idea of "the Christ within the believer over the Christ of the

Bible," which meant that Hicksite Quakers were encouraged to explore and

question their spirituality.[65] Hicksite men and women were more likely to

share responsibilities at work and in the home and were not as heavily

influenced by the notion of separate spheres as Orthodox Quakers were.[66]

Hicksite women were especially active in the women's rights movement and

advocated a more radical form of feminism in comparison to other Quaker

denominations.[67]   The majority of British Quakers was Orthodox and

practiced the model of separate spheres in both their public (political) and

private (spiritual) lives.

Anti-slavery societies in Britain at the time of the 1840 Convention

were still segregated by gender and the structure of these larger national

groups had exclusive male leadership supported by auxiliary women

societies.[68] Unlike in the United States, most British women were restricted

to speaking to female-only audiences, where American women, such as Maria

W. Miller Stewart and the Grimké sisters, were speaking to mixed-gender

audiences in the United States. Public life reflected church life and vice versa,

especially in Britain. In both arenas a clear hierarchy of male power and

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[65]   Bacon, 92-4.
[66]   Bacon, 93.
[67]   Hamm, 85.
[68]   Sklar, "Women Who Speak For An Entire Nation" 303.

mediation dictated laws and social "normalcy" through their doctrines. When religious traditions presented members with an egalitarian approach to spiritual practice, like Hicksite Quakers, they were likely to continue their egalitarian practices in the public and political sphere like Lucretia Mott and her husband.

Quakerism in the United States, especially Hicksite Quakerism, had granted women larger social powers and freedoms, and whereas Orthodox Quakerism provided strong support in the British anti-slavery movement, it was detrimental to the advancements of the rights of British women. There was a

> . . . unanimous effort among British Quakers to seek acceptance in a society that limited the right to vote to members of the Church of England. In their quest for the right to vote, British Quakers had distanced themselves from their radical origins and were adopting many forms of Anglican worship, including creeds that upheld the divinity of Jesus.[69]

One reason American women did not have the same pressures as British women did to work for male suffrage was because universal white male suffrage had already been attained in the United States.

British women found themselves not only acting as the backbone of the abolitionist movement, but as strong supporters of the Chartist

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[69]   Sklar, Women's Rights 51.

movement.[70] Chartism, a movement that developed around the *People's Charter* of 1838, sought amongst many moral reforms, universal male suffrage.[71] The Chartist movement reached a head in April of 1848, but did not succeed in its goals of universal white male suffrage.[72] A few months after petitioners gathered outside of Parliament to demand male suffrage, women in America would gather to discuss women's rights at Seneca Falls. While the Chartist detoured women's energies in Britain, an important ingredient missing from the British women's abolitionist movement that delayed their entry into their own national women's rights movement was the liberal religious fervor that inspired so many American women in the anti-slavery movement. Religion in America, mixed with the democratic value of individualism, had produced an ideology of personal ability to succeed or be saved that was predominantly absent from the spiritual circles of many British women in the abolitionist movement.

Of course, not all radical American abolitionists were Quaker; transcendentalism, spiritualism, premillennialism, Unitarianism, and universalism were also very influential.[73] Two other factors strongly influenced the religious convictions of radical American abolitionists: the Second Great Awakening and "Garrisonianism." The Second Great Awakening swept through the United States during the 1820s and 30s,

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[70] Sklar, "Women Who Speak For An Entire Nation" 321.
[71] Dorothy Thompson, The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 30.
[72] Thompson, 311.

promoting an evangelical message of emotionally charged "revivalism."[74]

The Second Great Awakening not only influenced and revitalized smaller

religious movements like the Hicksite Quakers, but much more mainstream

Protestant denominations such as Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists,

and Methodists.[75] American Protestant religion began promoting a message

of individualism and human responsibility which meant that each individual

man and woman had the moral capability and free will to attain spiritual

redemption.[76] The Grimké sisters, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton,

and Susan B. Anthony, would be some of the many American women to

defend their practice of questioning religious discourse and its influence on

societal standards through the importance of individual free will and moral

capability to discern truth. The spiritual individualism adopted by many

during the Second Great Awakening meant that at its most basic philosophy,

women and men could rely on individual experience with God over the

experience of God through the mediation of clergy to achieve salvation.

The belief that "*immediate* and complete repentance for wrongdoing

was the only acceptable proof of genuine Christian character" would be a

pivotal influence in the adoption of immediate abolition of slavery by radical

American and British abolitionists, especially by women's societies and

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[73] Speicher, 5.
[74] John R. McKivigan, The War against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865 (Ithaca; London: Cornell UP, 1984) 19.
[75] Sklar, Women's Rights 12.
[76] McKivigan, The War 19.

organizations [italics mine].[77] The feeling of immediacy around the need for

souls to be saved was carried over by abolitionists who felt an equal sense of

urgency about the abolition of slavery. One reason that slavery was seen as a

sin was because slaves could not choose to be saved if they were not free

human individuals. In her *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*,

Angelina Grimké reminded southern women that "we are commanded to love

God with *all our minds . . .* and we commit a great sin, if we *forbid or prevent*

that cultivation of the mind in others, which would enable [slaves] to perform

this duty."[78] Immediatism had a much farther reaching impact on social order

in the United States than it did in Great Britain, primarily because slavery was

"an entrenched, indigenous system of labor" in the United States. Also,

immediatism became associated with racial equality.

It was William Lloyd Garrison who established the first American

immediatist newspaper, *The Liberator*, and cemented the association of

immediatism with radical social, moral, and racial ideologies. In Britain,

where the goal of immediate emancipation was articulated in 1824 by

Elizabeth Heyrick, immediatism was promoted with religious rhetoric that

described the anti-slavery movement as a "holy war" and a "Christian

Crusade."   British women were able to adopt immediatism but bypass its

more political agenda by placing an emphasis on abolitionism as a moral

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[77]   McKivigan, The War 19-20.
[78]   Angelina E. Grimké, Appeal to the Christian Women of the South (New York: [American Anti-Slavery Society], 1836; reprint New York: Arno, 1969) 87.

cause.[79]

It was not only women in Britain who considered the anti-slavery movement a "Christian Crusade" because churches and clergy in Britain showed greater unanimous support for abolitionism than churches in America. The abolitionist movement in America, on the other hand, received mixed support from churches, with many churches hesitant to support the anti-slavery cause, especially not the cause for immediate emancipation.[80] American churches were regarded by many American abolitionists, such as those belonging to the AASS, as holding "the keys of the great prison of oppression" by not supporting the anti-slavery cause.[81] American women were called upon to petition U.S. churches to declare slavery a sin; specifically, daughters and wives of clergymen were to convince their fathers and husbands that abolitionism was a truly Christian cause.[82] It was in the United States that women's frustration who could only petition the men around them to enact any sort of political change that led early American feminists to begin to challenge their oppressed positions in society. The frustration that resulted because of lack of direct political power, mixed with the individualistic zeal of the Second Great Awakening, produced an environment conducive to the process of women reexamining their positions

[79] Sklar, "Women Who Speak For An Entire Nation" 322-324.
[80] McKivigan, The War 7.
[81] "AASS, First Annual Report . . . 1834," McKivigan, The War 14.
[82] Angelina Grimké, "Letter to Jane Smith: New York, December 17, 1836," Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement: 1830-1870, Kathryn K. Sklar (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000) 91.

within civil society. It was a conducive environment for the beginning of a women's rights movement because both men and women were responsible for their individual salvations. Individual salvation meant personal responsibility in all acts of life and women especially believed that their personal and moral responsibility was needed in the public and political sphere. The concept that they had moral responsibility to act politically in the public sphere through petitioning, voting and passing legislation in their various organizations, as well as conducting campaigns to affect state and national legislation, was conceived in an atmosphere of spiritual accountability.

The call for men and women to take individual responsibility for their salvation found many women becoming ministers and itinerant preachers.[83] Maria W. Miller Stewart, an African-American writer and lay preacher, and arguably the first American women to speak in front on "promiscuous" audiences reflected on her career as a speaker, saying "my soul became fired with a holy zeal" for the cause of abolitionism. Though she would feel the "spirit of God" during her speeches she also wrestled with a sense of shame because of her public speaking.[84] Stewart's shame for speaking so boldly in public to mixed-gender audiences probably stemmed from her understanding of the realm of speaking as reserved for men because of the "unwomanly"

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[83] Sklar, Women's Rights 21.
[84] Maria Stewart, "Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston, 1833," Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement 1830-1870: A Brief History with Documents, Kathryn K. Sklar (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000) 82.

emotions and actions it provoked.[85] The Second Great Awakening, just as it was helpful in promoting spiritual individualism that included both men and women, was problematic for early American feminists because it also maintained the concept of separate spheres and praised woman's "natural piety and their natural goodness." Some popular sermons of the time were entitled *The Excellence and Influence of Female Character* or *On Female Excellence* that upheld the moral superiority of women.[86] Angelina and Sarah Grimké were both inspired by the evangelical message of the Second Great Awakening and began speaking tours that addressed mixed-gender audiences.[87] With special importance placed on the individual in the fervor of Second Great Awakening, women used the language of spiritual individualism to criticize the universalization of political individualism, which was not universal at all. Many women in America began to question, with specifically religious rhetoric, how female individuals should be subordinate to male individuals if all free and equal individuals are just that: free and equal.[88] Sarah Grimké argued that "it will be impossible for woman to fill the station assigned to her by God, until her brethren mingle with her as an equal."[89]

Sarah Grimké realized, along with many other early American feminists, that while religion could be liberating, there was always a threat of

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[85] Sklar, Women's Rights 21.
[86] Catherine A. Brekus, Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845 (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina P, 1998) 146.
[87] Sklar, Women's Rights 4, 21.
[88] Pateman, The Disorder of Women 40.
[89] Ceplair, 217.

religious conservatism that undermined women's rights. Early feminists in America worried about the dangers of "rigid adherence to sect and sectarian doctrines."[90] Yet, while religion could be both liberating and oppressive to women, American women were "intent on preserving the integration of the sacred and the secular."[91] Stanton approached the obstacle of the predominance of conservative spiritual doctrines in politics and society by not adapting to them (as British Quakers had done in order to appear more Anglican), but by demanding a new, radical look at church structure and biblical texts. By re-interpreting what the Bible said about women, early American feminists established new identities in the public sphere, and specifically in the political realm. Both American women and British women used religious language and ideology to defend the anti-slavery cause: American women would continue to use the same language, but would both expand and change the ideology to defend the fight for their own rights. Early American feminists like Sara T. Smith at the 1838 Convention of Anti-Slavery Women, defended women's right to speak to mixed-gendered and mixed-raced audiences on political issues like anti-slavery, by arguing that woman must follow her "own conscience" and not allow "man [to] assume the prerogative of Jehovah, and impiously seek to plant himself upon the throne of the Almighty."[92] The speeches made by these early abolitionists and

[90] Anna M. Speicher, The Religious World of Antislavery Women: Spirituality in the Lives of Five Abolitionist Lecturers (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2000) 7.
[91] Speicher, 7.
[92] Sara T. Smith, "Address, Convention of Anti-Slavery Women, 1838," Karlyn Kohrs

feminists were controversial and considered very dangerous to the welfare of society. The early American feminist response to the oppression of women, as revealed through their speeches, was to hold all institutions responsible for the subjection of women.

The response of many early American feminists to Christian doctrine was inspired by the work of William Lloyd Garrison and his brand of "Garrisonian" abolitionism. "Garrisonianism," though not a religious tradition itself, was a response to the conservative religious doctrine that oppressed both African-Americans and women. William Lloyd Garrison's particular take on the scriptures influenced early feminists, especially ones who were already Hicksite Quakers, and further radicalized many beliefs held by American abolitionists. Garrison's philosophy of racial and gender equality did not reject Christian doctrine, but understood Christian scripture as liberating. It was a scriptural passage quoted by Garrison, "In Christ Jesus, all are one: there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female," that peaked the interest of sexual equality in the Grimké sisters and inspired others like Mott and Stanton.[93] Yet, as has been described earlier, Garrison's egalitarian vision was not the same as the vision of the women who were proponents of *women's* rights. Saying there was "neither male nor female" in Christ was problematic to the universalization of individual, which was supposedly egalitarian, but strictly referring to white,

Campbell, <u>Man Cannot Speak For Her: Key Texts of the Early Feminists Vol II</u> (New York;

male individuals. Early feminists identified themselves as women and their language is not gender neutral; to argue for equality meant that they must first identify what is unequal and who was being oppressed. One way in which this deconstruction took place was through a feminist approach to Christianity. American women, and later on, British women, began to realize that their entrance into political life would require a deconstruction of the "natural order" that subjected women to men.

Garrison also imagined "no human government" and was opposed to the use of political action for abolitionism. While women were fighting for suffrage, Garrisonian groups were boycotting elections because they believed elections were counterproductive to "the gospel of peace."[94] Women like Stanton, did not agree with Garrison's political, or rather anti-political position. Stanton was "in favour of political action" as she was "unwilling to have the making & administering of those laws left entirely to the selfish & unprincipled part of the community."[95] More importantly, women like the Grimké sisters, Mott, and Stanton did not agree with Garrison's non-gendered re-visioning of Biblical texts and social identities. Early American women were quite adamant in defining themselves as powerful and rational women, and did not speak or write in a language like Garrison's that was non-gendered. In Mott's "Discourse on Woman" she used the Bible as a primary

London: Greenwood P, 1989) 12-13.
[93]   Sklar, Women's Rights 14.
[94]   Sklar, Women's Rights 55.
[95]   Sklar, Women's Rights 55.

source to find stories of women's leadership and strength in order to argue for

women's rights. Mott also spoke of the modern woman, reassuring the

audience that a woman would not become less feminine through public life

but that the public sphere was worthy of women:

> Her self-respect will be increased; preserving
> the dignity of her being, she will not suffer
> herself to be degraded into a mere dependent.
> Nor will her feminine character be impaired.
> Instances are not few, of women throwing off
> the encumbrances which bind her, and going
> forth in a manner worthy of herself, her
> creation, and her dignified calling.[96]

Mott, like her fellow feminists, may have found the idea of "no male

or female" appealing, but the current social order that they were a part of

clearly defined "male" and "female" in civil society. Society was not made up

of non-gendered individuals but both public and private spheres relied on the

built-in definition of woman as subordinate to man. Women recognized that

the individual was gendered and as early feminists like Mott demonstrated

above they wrote in a language that addressed women's public and private

inequality. Mott did not condemn all the "natural" positions or titles of

women, such as caretakers of the home and wives, but did condemn society's

unwillingness to allow women to be anything other than "domestic." As

women's sphere of activity and influence was expanded by women, for

women, the definition of "individual" within male-dominated society was

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[96] Lucretia Mott, "Discourse on Women, 1849," <u>Man Cannot Speak For Her: Key Texts of</u>

challenged. The language of the early feminist movement developed from the

rhetoric of the abolitionist movement that was filled with Christian imagery of

liberty and equality (equality of the races). Garrison, who was a leader in

defining the radical language of the abolitionist movement both in the United

States and Britain, defending both abolitionism and women's rights through

quoting scripture like "In Christ Jesus, all are one . . . there is neither bond nor

free, there is neither male nor female."[97] The language of early American

feminists would not mimic Garrison's gender neutrality, but would instead

speak of gender and the political identity of women as specifically female.

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the Early Feminists Vol II, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (New York; London: Greenwood P, 1989) 83.
[97]   Sklar, Women's Rights 14.

CHAPTER TWO
Sisternity and the Political Identity
of Early American Feminists

Garrison's version of gender-equality that used religious doctrine

which was gender neutral was promising to some, but was not utilized by

early American feminists in their writings and speeches. Early American

feminists wrote and spoke in terms of "woman" and "man" and did not start a

"human rights movement" but fought for *women's* rights. The effort of early

American feminists to become full citizens combined the use of spiritual

language, the community formed around religious and political conviction,[98]

and the ideological shift of religious authority from residing outside of a

woman to within her, to establish an explicitly gendered political identity of

"sisternity" that challenged what Carole Pateman calls "the fraternal social

contract."[99] John Locke, classical contract theorist, imagined that only free

and equal individuals would be able to enter into a social contract with each

other. The liberalism of Locke that replaced the patriachalism of Sir Robert

Filmer and similar theorists maintained the subjection of women under men

by separating the public and the private spheres through sexual divisions.

Through sexual divisions and the creation of the social contract, the insecurity

of the state of nature was replaced by the order of civil society.

Not everything in the state of nature, however, is abandoned upon

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[98] Speicher, 11.
[99] Pateman <u>The Disorder of Women</u> 33.

entering into a social contract. Locke writes in the *Second Treatise of Government*:

> To understand political power right, and derive
> it from its original, we must consider what state
> all mean are naturally in, and that is, a *state of*
> *perfect freedom* to order their actions, and
> dispose of their possessions and persons, as they
> think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature,
> without asking to leave, or depending upon the
> will of any other man.[100]

Within the bounds of the law of nature for Locke is the rule of "a *husband* over his wife."[101] The "natural" subjection of women to men was never discarded, but hidden within the fraternal social contract in the form of a sexual contract. Women were never able to enter into the fraternal social contract because they were never "free and equal" and could never be individuals because of the sexual rights of men over women.

Carole Pateman explores how women's natural subjection became a permanent construction in modern civil society by contract theorists. Patemen argues that the fraternal social contract is a contract between brothers who have overthrown the father/paternal/king figure: it is the "separation from the (private) sphere of real birth and the disorder of women" and the formation of a community of men, who as brothers, create and obey laws that establish men to be free and equal individuals within a political fraternity.[102] The

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[100]   John Locke, Second Treatise of Government, ed. Richard H. Cox (Wheeling: Harlon Davidson, 1982) 3.
[101]   Locke, 2.
[102]   Pateman, The Disorder of Women 42, 45.

institutionalization of women's inequality and subordination to men was hidden within the creation of a fraternal social contract between brothers. For Pateman "the brothers' collective act . . . to claim their natural liberty and right of self-government is not merely to claim their natural liberty and right of self-government, but *to gain access to women*."[103]

While Locke's argument for free and equal individuals in the state of nature is counter to Filmer's defense of patriarchal monarchy, the subjection of women under men for both Locke and Filmer is defended in their theories with belief in the "natural" power of the husband over the wife. The definition of the natural foundation of civil society had much to do with what Filmer stated was "the original political right" that had been given to Adam by God "to fill the empty vessel [Eve]". Since women are nothing more than "empty vessel[s]," women are politically irrelevant; Locke argues that the sexual right of the husband (Adam) over the wife (Eve) is not political because Eve's subordination is "what every Wife owes her Husband," he says further that "the Power that every Husband hath to order the things of private Concernment in his Family" is a "Conjugal Power, not Political."[104] "Individual" in contract theory was quickly defined to refer only to men, in order to counter any feminist arguments that emerged with women like Mary Astell asking, "If all Men are born Free, how is it that all Women are born

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[103]   Pateman, <u>The Disorder of Women</u> 42-45.
[104]   Pateman, <u>The Disorder of Women</u> 38-39. Quote 39, insert mine.

Slaves?"[105] Creating the new fraternal social contract meant that men as brothers took the political right of the father (the patriarch), which included the conjugal or sexual right of men over women. Access to women was structured, further, through the use of separate spheres and the marriage contract.

The separation of the public and the private, which took place upon the creation of the fraternal social contract, permanently relegated women to the realm of the private and stripped them of any political power except if exercised through their male relations. Without political power or being recognized as a "free and equal individual," justice for women and the ability to control access to their bodies was unavailable. Justice is a virtue only of public institutions because justice and the laws that maintain it are built within the contracts between individuals, and only men, as brothers and citizens, are vested with the rights and privileges of the free and equal individuals.[106] The fraternal social contract's hidden sexual contract restricted women to the realm of the private but gave men access to both public and private realms as "free and equal individuals" who were the natural masters over women. Modern civil society created by the fraternal social contract was never a contract between free and equal individuals, but between brothers who were more equal and freer than their mothers, daughters, and sisters.[107] With brothers overthrowing the father, the father no longer had exclusive rights to women,

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[105] Pateman, The Disorder of Women 40.

but brothers, through the fraternal social contract, established marriage law which protected the "natural foundation of civil society."

Marriage law or "*conjugal bonds*" between husband and wife was one mechanism that politicized the female body without actually giving political powers to women. In order for "the feminine body [to] become part of a (liberal or socialist) fraternal body politic" women's identities in the public and private sphere were "structured around women's bodily (sexual) difference from men."[108]   It would be misleading, though, to call the marriage contract a contract at all. Rather, the relationship defined through marriage is a symbol of status.[109] Marriage was not a choice for many women, but a necessity because it was very difficult for unmarried women to earn a living or be accepted by society. According to Hendrik Hartog the strict divide between the married and non-married was the basis for two very different legal, physical, and moral experiences. Before marriage sex was fornication, but upon marriage the man gained the sexual right over woman and sex became "duty and right." Once married, the woman, now wife, ceased to exist in civil or public society except through her husband; a wife had no more rights than a slave in marriage as her husband became her master. Wives were property to their husbands; upon marriage women legally became "feme covert" or a "woman covered by her husband." Wives were limited to where

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[106]   Pateman, The Sexual Contract 20-21.
[107]   Pateman, The Disorder of Women 40, 119-121; quote, 119; quote, 43.
[108]   Pateman, The Disorder of Women 50, 4.
[109]   Pateman, The Disorder of Women 165.

they could travel since they had to live where their husbands demanded, a wife's wages went to her husband, and even her children were the property of her husband.[110]

As property of their husbands, women had no right over their bodies in both the sense of sexual access and contractual law because the woman as wife was reduced to existing only through her husband.[111] The marriage contract defined how women (their bodies and the sexual access to them) operated or were operated in civil society. Putting women into a marriage contract addressed the "natural" differences between men and women in the fraternal social contract. The so-called marriage contract was able to integrate women into civil society while establishing women's subjection to men's power because the marriage contract both established women as individuals able to enter into a contract and endorsed the patriarchal right of men over women.[112] A woman and a man about to be married could establish between themselves a contract of duties and responsibilities, but because the marriage contract is defined *by the state* and not between free and equal individuals women have no room to maneuver legally because their status as wife has already been defined. Man's status was also clearly defined in marriage as husband. But the husband, as head of the household, was ruler of the private sphere and entering into the public was able to meet with other men as

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[110]   Pateman, The Disorder of Women 121.
[111]   Hendrick Hartog, Man and Wife in America: A History (Cambridge; London: Harvard UP, 2000) 93-98; quote, 115.
[112]   Pateman, The Disorder of Women 119, 181.

participants in government.[113] Using Pateman's argument, marriage is a contract of "specifically modern means of creating relationships of subordination, but because civil subordination originates in contract, it is presented as freedom."[114] The freedom of the individual in the fraternal social contract is men's sexual mastery or rights over women.

The abolitionist movement provided a framework for early American feminists to understand themselves in the hierarchical structure of civil society. These early feminists understood that reform was necessary in all areas of society and as Stanton wrote in *The Woman's Bible* "all reforms are interdependent, and that whatever is done to establish one principle on a solid basis, strengthens all."[115] Early American feminists through moral reforms, establishing institutions of higher learning for women, and breaking down religious hierarchy, challenged the social contract that had oppressed them in all facets of society. The Transatlantic Sisterhood between American and British abolitionist was an excellent example of how these women stretched beyond the isolation of their private homes to participate in a movement larger than their immediate community. Harriet Martineau, a British feminist and abolitionist actively involved in both reform movements in America and Great Britain, took "heartfelt pleasure" in being given lifetime membership into the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and becoming "one of your sisterhood in

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[113] Hartog, 101.
[114] Pateman, The Disorder of Women 118.
[115] Stanton, The Woman's Bible 11.

outward as well as inward relation."[116]

The response of early American feminists to their institutionalized oppression was multi-layered but I argue that women, from empowerment and motivation gained through spiritual and religious traditions, began to construct a political identity that attempted to challenge the dominant fraternity. Before women could understand themselves in a sisterhood or "sisternity" with one another, early American feminists had to address the division between the religious and spiritual doctrine that was used to empower themselves (politically and spiritually) and also employed by anti-feminists to oppress women. Religious and spiritual language was commonly used in the speeches of early American feminists. By acting on what Stanton called "the holy of holies of her own self" and interpreting the world on their own terms, women in America became part of evangelical Protestant communities by establishing positions of spiritual power for themselves. These positions of power allowed them to travel to some degree as independent women through the public sphere. While they were still working for a moral cause as opposed to an explicitly political one, they were nonetheless empowered by a spiritual movement that recognized the importance of individual power in both men and women. Becoming an itinerant preacher, inspired by the message of the Second Great Awakening, did not translate women's abilities as preachers into

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[116] Maria Weston Chapman, Harriet Martineau's Autobiography, (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1877) 224.

any greater authority in the sphere of civil society.[117] The itinerant female
preachers of the 1830s and 40s were not ordained or recognized by official
church authority and it was not until 1853 that Antoinette Brown Blackwell
became the first ordained female preacher.[118] Through religious rhetoric
American women found their voice and these women used the anti-slavery
movement as a platform to exercise it.

Angelina and Sarah Grimké, before stepping out as anti-slavery
agitators in the cause of the American Anti-Slavery Society, left the Quaker
church that they had been a part of, no longer relying on pastoral authority to
direct and determine their relationship with God.[119] As the Grimkés' religious
fervor took root, church teachings were not enough for the sisters who
understood women as fully empowered spiritual *and* political beings endowed
with the same rights and abilities as men. The Grimké sisters took advantage
of being on the outside of both spiritual and civil society: if they were not to
be equal to men under man's translation of scripture and laws of civil society,
the Grimké sisters would create a space for women to claim their rights that
relied on a radical re-interpretation of religious doctrine. When the Grimké
sisters began their speaking tours in 1836, they argued that women could and
should speak in the public on issues beyond spiritual ones.[120]

At one such speech at the 1837 Anti-Slavery Convention of American

[117]   Sklar, Women's Rights 21.
[118]   Sklar, Women's Rights 21. Elizabeth Cazden, Antoinette Brown Blackwell: A Biography
(Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist P, 1983) 76.
[119]   Speicher, 18, 23.

Women, Angelina Grimké spoke on the role of women in the abolitionist movement, stating that woman must "move in that sphere which Providence assigned her, and no longer remain satisfied in the circumcised limits which corrupt custom and a perverted application of Scripture have encircled her."[121] The sphere which "Providence" had assigned women, was not the domestic sphere, but another sphere of spiritual and political action that defied both social and clerical opinion. Eliza Wigham, writing about the same 1837 Convention, by contrast, focused on the traditional interpretation of a woman's sphere by quoting a passage from a resolution passed at the Convention that spoke of woman acting as the "daughters, wives, and sisters" of their "fathers, husbands, and brothers."[122] Wigham's language remained within the confines of the British familial structure of social relationships in which women were the "helpers" of men, and acted at sisters, wives, and daughters to men, instead of through identities fostered through interactions with other women.

"Sister" was also used to describe the relationship between African-American and white American women. Angelina Grimké referred to female slaves as "thy sister *in bonds*" to create a relationship between free women and enslaved women on the basis of their shared womanhood. Grimké is particular in identifying with female slaves as sisters and makes the differentiation between female and male slaves by referring to the latter as

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[120]   Sklar, Women's Rights 22.

"our suffering brethren."[123] The idea that female slaves were "sisters" to white women was popular among antislavery women. It was relatively common for white women to refer to female slaves as their "enslaved sisters."[124] The slogan "Am I Not a Woman and a Sister" and accompanying image of a kneeling slave in chains was first introduced in 1828 by British abolitionists.[125] Later images added the extra detail of a white, Justice-like woman standing above the female slave and offering a hand, like the image on the cover of Lydia Maria Child's *Authentic Anecdotes on American Slavery*, published in 1838.[126]

The images of a white woman (Goddess) standing above a kneeling slave woman illustrates the inherent hierarchy and racism in abolitionist language. Just as the language of contract theorists was misleading in their discussions on the equality of the sexes, abolitionists spoke and wrote in a language that promised liberation but not necessarily equality. In her speech at the Woman's Rights Convention at Akron, Ohio in 1851, Sojourner Truth pointed out the "double-oppression" that as a black woman she experienced in the United States.[127] Truth asked "aren't I a woman?" addressing the fact that

[121]   Brown, "Am I Not A Woman," McKivigan, ed., <u>History Of</u> 189-190.
[122]   Wigham, 36.
[123]   Ceplair, 202.
[124]   Smith, "Address," <u>Man Cannot Speak For Her,</u> Campbell,13.
[125]   Phillip Lapsansky, "Graphic Discord: Abolitionist and Antiabolitionist Images," <u>The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America,</u> eds. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca; New York: Cornell UP, 1994) 205.
[126]   Sklar, <u>Women's Rights</u> 18.
[127]   Sojourner Truth, "Speech at the Woman's Rights Convention, Akron, Ohio, 1851," <u>Man Cannot Speak For Her: Key Texts of the Early Feminists Vol II,</u> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (New York; London: Greenwood P, 1989) 99.

so many opponents of women's rights argued that women were fragile and needed to be "helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches" but she had never been shown any such courtesy.[128] Sisternity in many respects was exclusive to white women, though there were examples of white women who were more successful in putting into action their egalitarian ideals, most notably the Grimké sisters and Lucretia Mott.

The language of women as sisters was also employed by early African-American feminists, such as Maria W. Miller Stewart, who described white American women as "ye fairer sisters."[129] Stewart appealed to white American women to take up the responsibility of abolitionism and also to understand that if African-American women "had the opportunity that you had had, to improve our mental faculties, what would have hindered ours from being as bright, and our manners from being as dignified as yours?"[130] Stewart's use of the term "sister" can be seen as an attempt to create community and tolerance between the African-American women and white American women by referring to them all as sisters. Though Stewart was aware of the barriers between white and black communities, she was also able to point out, whether intentionally or not, the hindrance of class between the women "whose hands are never soiled, whose nerves and muscles are never strained" and the lower classes. Issues of classism and racism were problems that would continue to grow in the ensuing years of the women's movement,

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[128] Truth, "Speech," <u>Man Cannot Speak For Her</u>, Campbell, 100**.**

yet early American feminists would continue to attempt to use "sister" as a unifying political identity.

As a unifying political identity "sister" was also used as a common identity between American and British women in the abolitionist movement who formed the Transatlantic Sisterhood. The Transatlantic Sisterhood extended beyond anti-slavery actions into a discussion of women's rights. Initially the Transatlantic Sisterhood was formed as a support network for female abolitionists. British female abolitionists were an important source of support for the early American female anti-slavery movement. American women in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society were inspired by "the example of our British sisters." The Scottish women of the Glasgow Female New Association for the Abolition of Slavery demonstrated their support "to their Christian Sisterhood in the United States of America" in opposing the Fugitive Slave Law.[131] British women like Marion Reid argued for women's rights, and after attending the 1840 Convention she eventually wrote *A Plea For Women* in 1843 that argued for the rights of women who "are possessed of all those noble faculties which constitute man a responsible being."[132] Anne Knight, another British attendee at the Convention, would later write in 1849 about her disappointment and frustration that women were still being excluded from prominent positions in social rights movements as they had

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[129]   Maria Stewart, "Farewell Address," 82.
[130]   Stewart, "Farewell Address," 82.
[131]   Midgley, Women Against Slavery 131-132.
[132]   Marion Reid, A Plea For Woman (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1843) 165.

been at the Convention of 1840. She highlighted the tension of women's

constant "auxiliary" support in social movements that received little to no

recognition for the need for women's rights:

> Let us not be urged to prick our fingers to the
> bone in "sewing circles" for vanity fair, peace
> bazaars, where health and mind equally
> suffer . . . ever toiling, never to see a Right! . . .
> while our poor brother is groping his way in
> darkness without the good sense and clear
> discernment of his sister at his side.[133]

While Pease argued for women's action, Knight found that woman's

action would lend little help to the cause until women were acknowledged as

equal to their "brothers." Knight purposely uses the term "sister" to set up

woman not only as a moral guide to her brother, but as a woman not yet tied

down by marriage or a family. Knight's frustration was not focused on one

reform movement in particular, but the collective efforts of "sisters"

attempting to stand up next to their "brothers."

In the familial and social sense, woman as a sister interacted with her

brother on a moral level.[134] But for Sarah Grimké the role that God gave to

women was as a "moral and intellectual being" and, therefore, women were

fully capable of political life.[135] Abolitionist Maria Weston Chapman warned

women of the "distorted medium" they had been given to understand their

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[133] "Anne Knight, 1786-1862," February 2003
<http://www.pinn.net/~sunshine/whm2003/knight2.html>.
[134] William M. Thayer, <u>The True Woman</u> (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., 188?)
64-65.
[135] Ceplair, 218.

role in society and appealed to women not to accept Scripture handed down to women by men as authority.[136] The descriptions of women that Sarah Grimké, Chapman, Stanton and many other women were using were not describing the traditional idea of woman as sister. Early American feminists were still describing sisters as moral, but also as just as intellectually capable as her brother and possessing strong, self-reflective faculties that allowed her to understand and interpret the world on her own terms. More importantly than looking to their "brothers" for help and guidance, women looked to each other, through means of both a national and transatlantic sisterhood to question and reinterpret scripture.

Feminists in the United States also articulated "sister" as a political identity. Ordained minister and abolitionist Antoinette Brown Blackwell, in a letter to Susan B. Anthony, described the group of women fighting for women's rights as "*our sisternity*."[137] While Blackwell may not have been using the term "sisternity" in a direct reference to the political fraternity women were excluded from, she was thinking in a language that led her to describe the politically active (if dis-empowered) group of women she and Anthony were a part of as something similar to fraternity. Women were aware that the exclusive power of the fraternity was embedded in all areas of public and private life. Connecting women's political rights and sexual rights

[136] Debra Gold Hansen, "The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Limits of Gender Politics," The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America, eds. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horn (Ithaca; London: Cornell UP, 1994) 53.

[137] Ida Husted Harper, Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony: Volume 1 (New York: Arno &

through the identity of sister meant a number of things. First, that there was

(and is) a connection between women's political rights and sexual rights.

Second, that as sisters, women could fight against the "sexual rights" of men

by understanding themselves as part of a community (whether intellectual,

spiritual, or physical) with one another. Acting as a community of sisters,

women demanded that the abuses of the private sphere become a public

matter, because, as discussed earlier in terms of marriage and the separate

spheres, justice was not a feature of private life.

The sisternity between American feminists was a mix of intimate

friendships and a connection to a political identity that was not tied down by

geography.[138] For women involved in various reform movements, including

abolitionism, "sister" was a description of a woman belonging not to a family

group, but an ideological and political community. In one of her thirteen

letters to Catherine Beecher published in *The Liberator*, Angelina Grimké

refers to women in abolition societies who were caught up in the debate over

woman's role in society as "our sisters."[139] Though Beecher may not have

been a radical feminist or friend of Angelina Grimké, Angelina Grimké

identified her, and other women ("our sisters"), as political individuals

(sisters) capable of creating social change. The identity of "sister" and the

community or sisterhood or sisternity formed, was an attempt to expand the

The New York Times, 1969) 142.
[138]   Jean H. Baker, <u>Sisters: The Lives of America's Suffragists</u> (New York: Hill and Wang,
2005) 64.
[139]   Angelina Grimké, "Letter XIII," <u>The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké:</u>

definition of "free and equal individual" to include women. By focusing on

their relationships to one another as sisters, women designed "sister" to give

themselves more freedom to act politically and outside their "appropriate"

sphere more easily than they could as mothers, daughters, and wives. Wives

and mothers are most obviously subjected to the sexual right of men over

women because of the marriage contract while daughters are dependent on

their fathers. Sisters, in both the familial and political sense, have the most

equal relationship to their brothers (and therefore men), even being described

as their brothers' primary moral keepers.[140] Addressing each other as sisters

allowed women to continue to think and write radical letters to each other

because, like Antoinette Brown Blackwell, these women purposely politicized

the term "sister."

In both public and private writings, women involved in the anti-

slavery and women's rights movements referred to each other as sisters.

Referring to other women as "sisters" or to the idea of a "sisterhood" was not

only done in public publications, such as addresses and pamphlets, but in

private letters to one another as well. Some of Sarah Grimké most famous

letters, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, began with "My Dear Sister"

before she laid out her radical argument for women's rights.[141] Angelina

Selected Writings 1835-1839 Larry Ceplair (New York: Columbia UP, 1989) 202.
[140] Thayer, 64.
[141] Sarah Grimké, "'Relation of Husband and Wife': Letter to Mary Parker " and "'Legal Disabilities of Women': Letter to Mary Parker," Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement 1830-1870: A Brief History with Documents, Kathryn K. Sklar (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000).

Grimké also used similar language, ending one of her letters "Thy sister in the

bonds of a common sisterhood."[142] Even in a letter to Queen Victoria, the

Grimké sisters addressed her as their "Sister."[143] The term "sister" was used

to signify affectionate feelings of camaraderie between women, as well, such

as Sarah Grimké referring to Sarah Douglas as her "Beloved Sister."[144]

Angelina Grimké often connected her use of the term sister with her spiritual

beliefs, signing off some of her letters as "Thy Sister in the Lord."[145] Sister

was used in the literal familial sense with Stanton starting her letter to

Angelina and Sarah Grimké "Dear Sisters" and writing "how much I love

you!!! . . . You have no idea what a hold you have on my heart."[146] While

"sister" was used as an affectionate term "sister" was also a political term, in

that it was sometimes employed to rally women to a common cause of

political and social action.

Early American feminists who were a part of the sisternity also used

military language (similar or identical to the language of the political

fraternity) to describe the actions of their women's rights movement. For

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[142] Grimké, "Letter XIII," The Public Years, Ceplair, 203.
[143] Angelina Grimké, "Angelina E. Grimké to Jane Smith," The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké: Selected Writings 1835-1839 ed. Larry Ceplair (New York: Columbia UP, 1989) 296.
[144] Angelina and Sarah Grimké, "Letter to Sarah Douglas: New York City, April 3, 1837," Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement 1830-1870: A Brief History with Documents, Kathryn K. Sklar (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000).
[145] Angelina and Sarah Grimké, "Letter to Sarah Douglas," 97.
[146] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Letter to Sarah Grimké and Angelina Grimké Weld: London, June 25, 1840.," Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement 1830-1870: A Brief History with Documents, Kathryn K. Sklar (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000) 169-170.

example, they conducted "campaigns" and they "marshaled their troops."[147]

When they talked of their "biggest gun" they were referring to Stanton, and

Anthony was known as their "Napoleon."[148] Many times the imagery of Joan

of Arc, a spiritually guided military figure, was invoked not only as a patron,

but as both a model for women and to describe women in the movement. For

example, Abby Kelley, because of her tireless work and her continuous

brushing aside of harsh criticism towards her personal character, was referred

to as a "Joan of Arc."[149] Since "the ultimate act of loyalty and allegiance" and

"the truly exemplary act of citizenship" is to die in the defense of the state in a

fraternal social contract, it is "in the military and on the battlefield that

fraternity finds its most complete expression."[150] Women involved in both the

anti-slavery movement and the abolitionist movement would masculanize

their language by employing military terms to describe their actions. Using

military language to describe their activities and one another both connected

their actions with the duty of moral reform and defined themselves as public

figures involved in a battle for both slave rights and their own rights. Yet, the

battles and campaigns they waged never involved actual violence, as most

female abolitionists were dedicated to non-violence.[151] Also, unlike a

government military, what early American feminists were fighting for was

usually counter to the popular interest of the state. Ultimately, most of these

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[147]   Baker, 64.
[148]   Baker, 64.
[149]   Smith, "Address," Man Cannot Speak For Her, Campbell 12.
[150]   Pateman, The Social Disorder of Women 48-49.

American women would defend their actions as answering to a higher power

than manmade laws (and therefore the laws of the state).

In her first publication, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*,

Angelina Grimké addressed the fear that women may have in taking up the

cause of abolition. To her "Sisters in Christ" Angelina wrote "[b]ut you may

say we are *women*, how can *our* hearts endure persecution?" referring to the

concern of women stepping outside of their proper sphere of duty. Angelina

was aware that many American women who spoke out in public on issues of

abolitionism and women's rights were met with physical threats and violence.

Angelina's response was another question that asked "[h]ave not women stood

up in all the dignity and strength of moral courage to be the leaders of the

people, and to bear a faithful testimony for the truth whenever the providence

of God has called them to do so?"[152] Finally Angelina called for her southern

sisters to take up civil disobedience even if it meant "obeying *God* rather than

man . . . because it is the doctrine of the Bible."[153] In calling for sisters to take

up the anti-slavery cause and at the same time women's rights, Angelina

Grimké denounced both men and the church as being obstacles to both

tasks.[154] The copies of Angelina Grimké's *Appeal to the Christian Women of*

the South were publicly burned by postmasters upon their arrival in

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[151]   Sklar, Woman's Rights 42.
[152]   Angelina Grimké, "Appeal to Christian Women," 88.
[153]   Angelina Grimké, "Appeal to the Christian Women," 86.
[154]   Angelina Grimké, "Angelina Grimké [Weld] Address at Pennsylvania Hall, 1838," Man
Cannot Speak For Her: Key Texts of the Early Feminists Vol II, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell
(New York; London: Greenwood P, 1989) 26.

Charleston, South Carolina and Grimké was threatened with mob violence and arrest if she were to ever venture down South again.[155]

Stepping outside of strict church structure, in order to form a sisternity, did not mean that women abandoned their spiritual identities, but for some women reinforced them. Maria W. Miller Stewart spoke often as if she were a minister giving a sermon when she began to speak to mixed-gender audiences in 1832.[156] Stewart defended the rights of women to speak in public on controversial issues by quoting Scripture and citing instances that God had marked women as able and worthy of speaking. In her farewell address in 1833, Stewart warned her audience to "[n]o longer ridicule [women's] efforts, it will be counted for sin."[157] For many early American feminists it was a sin that women had been placed at the bottom of the gendered hierarchy by supposedly Biblical authority. One of the most popular biblical passages used by opponents of women's rights was Paul's injunction against women:

> Let your women keep silence in the churches:
> for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but
> they are commanded to be under obedience, as
> also saith the law. And if they will learn
> anything, let them ask their husbands at home:
> for it is a shame for women to speak in the
> church.[158]

Mott presented many models of biblical women, such as Deborah who was a

[155]   Sklar, Women's Rights 19.
[156]   Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Man Cannot Speak For Her: A Critical Study of Early Feminist Rhetoric Volume I (New York; London: Greenwood P, 1989) 18.
[157]   Campbell, Man Cannot Speak For Her, Vol. I 19.
[158]   1 Cor. 14:34-35.

judge and military leader, as evidence that women were and are equal to men.[159] But Mott went further, looking at the translations of the Scriptures and arguing that in some cases when women were called "*servants*" they were actually "*ministers.*"[160] Women, Mott argued, "*professing* godliness, should be translated *preaching*" and stated that "[i]t is not Christianity but priestcraft that has subjected women as we find her."[161]   By rejecting the hierarchy of the patriarchal church, women conducted an act similar to the brothers in the story of the fraternal social contract who abandoned and defeated the power of the father in order to create a contract with one another. The rule of the church (patriarchal power) could not survive without the support of the women, now becoming sisters, who had filled churches with their presence.

Through the identification as sisters or as a sisternity, early American feminists developed an awareness that male rights over women needed to be confronted in all levels of society, and they set out to re-examine and re-define women's positions in society. Confronting the marriage contract, which determined women to be ruled by men, was one way that early American feminists challenged the practice of denying women their political, social, and legal individuality. The identification with sisters in a sisternity was "individualizing" because it allowed women to be women without a relationship to men that provided the definition for women. In other words,

[159] Campbell, <u>Man Cannot Speak For Her, Vol. I</u> 41.
[160] Campbell, <u>Man Cannot Speak For Her, Vol. I</u> 40.
[161] Campbell, <u>Man Cannot Speak For Her, Vol. 1</u> 40. Dana Green, <u>Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons,</u> (New York; Toronto: Edwin Mellen P, 1980) 215.

women's relationships to men in society, whether it be daughter, mother, wife, meant that woman was defined as "not male" but only recognized as part of a man and his identity. As sisters, early American feminists had the possibility of seeking self-definition of what it meant to be a woman.

Self-definition was important because women would never be political, social, or legal individuals until "woman" was not defined through male relationships. Stanton found "[t]he individuality of a woman, the little she ever possessed, is obliterated by marriage" when exploring verses that referred to marriage in the Bible.[162] Patriarchal interpretations of the Bible, wrote Stanton, were "teaching the subservience of woman to man, of the wife to the husband, of the queen to the king."[163] Efforts were made to neutralize the marriage contract by many early American feminists. Elizabeth Cady Stanton refused to relinquish her name of "Cady" upon marrying Henry Stanton.[164] Angelina Grimké and her husband, Theodore D. Weld, made a contract with each other that was based on equality between wife and husband. Sarah Grimké would describe the ceremony in a letter to Elizabeth Pease, that Weld "alluded to the unrighteous power vested in a husband by the laws of the United States over the person and property of his wife, and he abjurd all authority, all government" in his vows to Angelina Grimké.[165]

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[162]   Stanton, The Women's Bible 94.
[163]   Stanton, The Women's Bible 9.
[164]   Pateman, The Disorder of Women 121.
[165]   Sarah Grimké, "Sarah M. Grimké to Elizabeth Pease," The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké: Selected Writings 1835-1839 Larry Ceplair (New York: Columbia UP, 1989) 317.

While Angelina Grimké's and Theodore D. Weld's personal contract could define husband and wife on egalitarian terms, the state recognized the institution of marriage as placing the woman (who became a wife) politically and socially beneath her husband.   Transforming the contract of marriage on a legal level is challenging because there is no official "Marriage Contract" that is signed. Marriage is constituted by the "performative utterance" of vows when the man and woman each say "I do" and the act of sexual intercourse in which the marriage is "consummated."[166] Once again the right of men over women is firmly established not only in the sexual right of men over women to consummate marriage through sexual intercourse, but by allowing women to enter into a contract only in an unequal way.

Sarah Grimké, in a letter to Mary Parker, drew connections between how both legislative and ecclesiastical laws "exclud[ed] woman from any participation in forming the discipline by which she is governed. The men frame the laws, and, with few exceptions, claim to execute them on both sexes."[167] What women like Stanton, Mott, and the Grimké sisters did was to challenge the language of male-dominated political, legal, and social society as well as the language of the Bible to transform these doctrines that had promised equality, but only reinforced patriarchal practices. The marriage

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[166]   Pateman, The Disorder of Women 164.

[167]   Sarah Grimké, "'Legal Disabilities of Women': Letter to Mary Parker, September 6, 1837" Women's Rights Emerges within the Antislavery Movement 1830-1870: A Brief History with Documents, Kathryn K. Sklar (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000) 149. Mary Parker was the president of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1837. Sklar, Woman's Rights 145.

contract was not the only oppressive practice that early American feminists

challenged, but the identification with a sisterhood or "sisternity" also meant

that women began to examine male right over woman's bodies. The

beginning of a letter to Friend of Virtue, a New England moral reform

publication, addresses women as sisters who must defend the right over their

bodies from the "baseness of unprincipled man." It is the duty of "sisters" to

"preserve the rights and elevate the standing of [women] in society" for

"[w]oman has erected a standard, and laid down the principle, that man shall

not trample her rights, and on the honor of her sex with impunity." While

acknowledging that men are the "protector, the guardian of our peace, our

happiness, and our honor," the female author of the letter condemns men in

the same sentence as "the worst enemy of our sex."[168]

As women challenged the marriage contract, proclaimed to have the

right to control access to their bodies and critiqued church doctrine, many

early American feminists proved relentless in their fight for women's rights.

Early American feminists continued to be deeply inspired by their religious

and spiritual practices and beliefs that had such an impact on the beginnings

of the woman's rights movement. Some historians, however, like Kathryn

Kish Sklar, who has studied the development of the women's movement in

America and its leaders, do not always acknowledge or recognize the

importance of religion and spirituality for early American feminists. For

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[168] L.T.Y., "Just Treatment of Licentious Men: January 1838," Women's Rights Emerges

example, Sklar argues that Stanton, upon being exposed to Mott's radical religious leanings which were on par to those of the Grimké sisters, was relieved that women's rights did not have to rely upon religious beliefs as a platform of defense and elevation of women's position in society.[169] Sklar argues that Stanton desired to be able to remain a member of respectable society (in which Mott was considered to be a part) and be a advocate of woman's rights, but did not want to become a convert of the Grimké sisters' unconventional lifestyles. Although Sklar promotes the image of Stanton as anti-clerical she refers to Stanton's relief at being exposed to Mott's religious counsel and spiritual ideas.[170] One of the most powerful examples of Stanton's (and many other feminists') strong anti-clerical, but deeply spiritual identity, was *The Woman's Bible.*

The Woman's Bible, which was a project spear-headed by Stanton and created through a committee of feminists, represented a culmination of political and religious thought in the American feminist movement showing that women's contract with each other, or the formation of a sisternity, meant leaving those institutions, such as the church, that oppressed them. Begun in 1886, *The Woman's Bible* took nine years to complete and was published in two parts.[171] Before and after its publication, *The Woman's Bible* was the center of a steady show of controversy. It was "hotly and closely contested"

within the Antislavery Movement 1830-1870: A Brief History with Documents, Kathryn K. Sklar (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000) 188 - 189.
[169]   Sklar, Women's Rights 52-53.
[170]   Sklar, Women's Rights 53.

by many feminists, and the National American Woman Suffrage Association, that Stanton and other members of *The Woman's Bible* committee were part of, passed an amendment refusing to give any support for the text.[172]

The Woman's Bible was a controversial work because it stated that the root of women's oppression was religious and pointed out how these oppressive ideas in the Bible had become deeply ingrained into civil and political society. Women's oppression in religious institutions, privates/public spheres, and the political structure was examined. Stanton wrote, before beginning to work on *The Woman's Bible*, that "the arch enemy to women's freedom skulks behind the altar."[173] One reason *The Woman's Bible* was created through a committee of women, as opposed to just Stanton, because it was to be "a great feature in the general uprising in this nineteenth century."[174] If Stanton had been fighting so long for a "general uprising" of women to gain their rights as free and equal individuals, it was no surprise that she described *The Woman's Bible* as "the culminating work of my life - my crowning achievement."[175]

The beginnings of the controversy surrounding *The Woman's Bible*, and the reason that it represents such an important part of early American feminist thought, was that, as women had been arguing to be seen as women (and sisters) in the public/political sphere, the feminist revision of the Bible

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[171] Kathi Kern, <u>Mrs. Stanton's Bible</u> (Ithaca; London: Cornell UP, 2001) 98-100.
[172] Kern, 189.
[173] Kern, 67.
[174] Kern, 135.

was argued to be seen as for women and about women. Critics, many of whom were clergymen, argued that the new critique of the Bible should not have "Woman" in the title. Reverend T. DeWitt Talmage wrote, "You might as well have a 'Shoemakers' Bible'; the Scriptures apply to women as well as men." Stanton was quick to reply to the criticism, writing in the preface of the second part of *The Woman's Bible* that "[a]s the Bible treats women as of a different class, inferior to man or in subjection to him, which is not the case for shoemakers, Mr. Talmage's criticism has no significance."[176] If *The Woman's Bible* had been seen as anything else than a feminist critique on the scriptures, it would not have had the same effect of identifying the roots of male authority in the Bible and deconstructing them so that, as Stanton would write, "man's headship in the State, the Church, and the Home will be heard of no more."[177]

Divine authority which Stanton, the Grimke sisters, Mott, and many other early American feminists had repeatedly argued rested inside a woman, as opposed to an outside authority, was addressed repeatedly in *The Woman's Bible*. One of the ways that men repeatedly dominated woman in the Bible was through the sexual rights that many contract theorists had argued were the "natural" rights of men. In Deuteronomy, authors of *The Woman's Bible* argue, there is an "utter contempt for all . . . the natural personal rights of

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[175] Baker, 134.

[176] Stanton, The Woman's Bible 2:7.

[177] Mary D. Pellauer, Toward a Tradition of Feminist Theology: The Religious Social Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Anna Howard Shaw (Brooklyn:

women" because women are used "for booty to be given to the priests and soldiers."[178] The doctrine of the Virgin birth was argued as particularly damaging to women because it was "a slur on all the natural motherhood of the world" through its implication that "ordinary motherhood" and birth was dirty and sinful.[179]

The Woman's Bible challenged the ideas of women's "natural" states, by examining the exclusive use of male pronouns in the Bible and civil society. A comparison is made between the exclusive use of male pronouns in the Ten Commandments and in the criminal code:

> In our criminal code to-day the pronouns she, her, and hers are not found, yet we are tried in the courts, imprisoned and hung as "he," "him" and "his," though denied the privileges of citizenship . . . What a hustling there would be among prisoners and genders if laws and constitutions, Scriptures and commandments, played this fast and loose game with the men of any nation.[180]

Here the individual is painfully understood as being seen as solely male and women are seen as only property or part of the male individual in the laws and contracts of institutions like the court system. The understanding of individual as male, as the authors of *The Woman's Bible* claim, began in biblical texts. Because, Stanton argued, "the pronouns 'She,' 'Hers' and 'Her,' are not found in the constitutions" or in the Bible, women are "denied the

Carlson P, 1991) 113.
[178]   Stanton, <u>The Woman's Bible</u> 1:126.
[179]   Stanton, <u>The Woman's Bible</u> 2:114.

highest privileges of citizens.[181]

The institution of marriage and its function of stripping women of any rights or individuality was discussed by Stanton and the Revising Committee. Clara Bewick Colby commented on the translation of the word "obey," which she argues that the "prejudice of education was in some instances stronger than the grammatical context." The result of such prejudice, Colby argues, is that the word translated to mean "obey" in the context of husband and wife, is translated to mean "defer" elsewhere in the New Testament.[182] As Pateman has pointed out, the marriage contract is a mechanism of controlling woman's entrance into the public through a wife's obedience to her husband. Part of a wife's obedience was embedded in the process of her losing her name upon marriage, just as Stanton writes that in many parts of the Bible women "are nameless." Women have no names because scripture determines that "they have no individual life, and why should their personality require a life-long name?"[183] The response to the namelessness of women in the Bible and the prejudiced use of translation of certain words was not only revealed, but commented on. Colby ends her comments on the use of the word "obey" by writing:

> The one instance [that obey is used] states Sarah
> obeyed Abram. . . in both in which she obeyed,
> God had to interfere with a miracle to save them
> from the result of that obedience. . . While

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[180]   Stanton, <u>The Woman's Bible</u> 1:127.
[181]   Stanton, <u>The Woman's Bible</u> 1:74.
[182]   Stanton, <u>The Woman's Bible</u> 1:37.
[183]   Stanton, <u>The Woman's Bible</u> 1:73.

> twice, once by direct command of God, Abram
> obeyed Sarah. You cannot find a direct
> command of God or Christ for the wife to obey
> the husband.[184]

Colby's comments, along with her contemporaries, had an edge of humor to them that reflected how absurd many early American feminists, and especially the ones who were part of the creation of *The Woman's Bible,* found the laws against women to be. They examined the biblical origins of the "natural right" of a husband over a wife and found that it was more often than not that men had written obedience into the Bible, rather than women's obedience being a direct command of God.

As Pateman argues that women are written into a social contract without consent or access to creating the contract, the authors of *The Woman's Bible* asked "[w]hy should women, denied all their political rights, obey laws to which they have never given their consent, either by proxy or in person?"[185] The authors of *The Woman's Bible* argued that if women were denied recognition as individuals in both the church and the government, they must protest against both. Religion, which straddled both the public and the private spheres, was an important institution to critique, as well as, revision because a religion that recognized women as individuals promised rights and justice to women. In a very practical sense, it was, and is, women who fill the congregations of churches and supported the incomes of preachers; for women

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[184]   Stanton, <u>The Woman's Bible</u> 1:37.

to leave the churches literally meant that the moral structure of society would be compromised, if not destroyed [at least the morals as defined by men]. Stanton and other early American feminists re-imagined the moral disposition of women to be a disposition towards rationality. If women understood themselves to be their own spiritual or moral authorities, it was women who determined themselves to be rational rather than relying on the external authority of men. Self-definition, understanding themselves to be a part of a sisternity or similarly gendered political identity, was an essential step for women to enter into the social contract. Entering into the social contract of civil society as women meant that the social contract had to be rewritten to recognize women as individuals.

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[185]   Stanton, The Woman's Bible 1:74.

CONCLUSION

The effort of early American feminists to develop an exclusively gendered political identity for themselves was multi-layered: first, early American feminists had to discover the root of their oppression in male-dominated society or what Carole Pateman describes as the fraternal social contract. First, the root of women's oppression was found by early American feminists in the doctrines of the church or, rather, the patriarchal interpretation of Scripture. Second, a common argument was adopted by many early American feminists, that women are not only capable, but obligated to speak up in public and demand their rights because God has deemed it so, which was changed over the years, but continuously invoked in support of women's rights. For a common political identity to develop, women needed to "defin[e] their life and choices rather than being defined by others." The creation of the sisternity as an exclusively gendered political identity evolved through a vast network of communication, book and letter writing, attending both anti-slavery and woman's rights conferences, and campaigning.

When the relationship between religion and early American feminists is discussed, it is usually in terms of the *moral* importance that religion played. Religion and religious rhetoric, many argue, was the inspiration and tool for many of these women to express themselves and inspire others to the cause of abolitionism and then women's rights. The importance of religion in the development of early feminist political identity cannot be underestimated.

Women like the Grimké sisters, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, developed and argued for an identity of what it meant to be a woman in the public sphere of political life through a channel of religious identity. The identity of early American feminists developed as an attempt to move women outside the confines of strict public and private gender roles by forging a community of sisters held together through a common political ideology as opposed to through familial obligation. The sisternity was a political identity that did not depend on their relationship to men to provide the definition and boundaries of their political, social, and private experiences. American women, as opposed to their sisters in Great Britain, were able to step beyond the boundaries of male-defined social norms, in part, because of the uniquely American atmosphere of spiritual individualism that American women embraced for their own movement.

The sisternity of American feminists became a social force that effectively presented women with a political identity that not only questioned the exclusivity of social contracts created by men, but broke down political and social barriers created through institutionalized oppression. Women were not arguing to become recognized as more male, or even more human, but argued to be seen as women who were both rational and politically capable individuals. By continuously defining each other as sisters in a common sisternity women addressed their inequalities in public and private life, including the discrimination of separate spheres, the oppression of the

marriage contract, and the lack of legal and social control granted to women to govern their own bodies.

Ursula King, author of *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise*, writes that consciousness-raising among women "is intimately linked to the use of story-telling, the sharing of one's own personal story and the life experience of joy and suffering with other women."[186] I believe that early American feminists told the story of their creation and abilities through the language of Scripture and by de-constructing the stories that had been told about them by social contract theorists and church clergy. The religious identity of early American feminists was intimately linked with their political identity because by becoming their own spiritual authorities they were able to become their own political authorities as well. Early American feminists argued that in Christ there was both man and woman and that society did not recognize a gender-neutral individual but was highly structured around the conceptualizations of male and female. The sisternity was an act of self-definition and an important part of the journey of early American feminists in their quest for political identity and rights.

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[186]   Ursula King, Women and Spirituality: Voices of protest and promise, 2nd ed. (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1993) 17.

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