THE FORGOTTEN WOMAN’S BIBLE: KATHARINE BUSHNELL, LEE ANNA
STARR, MADELINE SOUTHARD, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A
WOMAN-CENTERED PROTESTANTISM IN AMERICA, 1870-1930

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Notre Dame
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Kristin Kobes Du Mez, B.A., M.A.

_________________________________
George M. Marsden, Director

Graduate Program in History
Notre Dame, Indiana
September 2004
THE FORGOTTEN WOMAN’S BIBLE: KATHARINE BUSHNELL, LEE ANNA STARR, MADELINE SOUTHARD, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A WOMAN-CENTERED PROTESTANTISM IN AMERICA, 1870-1930

Abstract

by

Kristin Kobes Du Mez

This study examines the woman-centered theologies and social visions of three late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American Protestant women, Katharine C. Bushnell, Lee Anna Starr, and M. Madeline Southard. All three women constructed sophisticated feminist theologies and social commentaries, and through retranslation and reinterpretation created new biblical narratives. As Methodists located between the poles of Protestant liberalism and conservatism, they espoused the authority of the Bible and the literal truth of the scriptures, but they also readily employed the tools of modern scholarship and critical methods to peel away centuries of male bias and uncover what the word of God truly revealed on issues of gender, sexuality, and morality.

Their woman-centered theologies provided the foundation for a new sexual ethic and social order. As participants in social reform movements—particularly in temperance work and in the social purity movement—they had become convinced that faulty religious teachings were at the root of modern social problems, and they turned to theology to expose and subvert what they perceived as the centuries-long manipulation of
the faith by male translators and theologians. In their woman-centered theological reflections, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard rejected Victorian social arrangements, conventional views of women’s virtue, traditional marriage relationships, and the cultural and religious idealization of motherhood. Although they failed to achieve the widespread social and religious reform they had anticipated, they nonetheless provide examples of modern Protestant, woman-centered approaches to issues of gender and morality.

This dissertation brings together the study of Protestantism and feminism in modern American history, investigating the crucial transitional period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And it explores the implications of these historical developments on contemporary American feminism and modern Protestantism, and on twentieth-century American culture.
To my parents,
Wayne and Helen Kobes,

and to Jack
CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ iv

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 1: WORKING FOR THE GOOD:
THE LIVES OF KATHARINE C. BUSHNELL,
LEE ANNA STARR, AND M. MADELINE SOUTHARD ............................................................ 32

CHAPTER 2: LIBERAL CONSERVATIVES:
REDEFINING RELIGIOUS CATEGORIES IN
EARLY-TWENTIETH-CENTURY PROTESTANTISM .......................................................... 111

CHAPTER 3: REREADING EVE:
NEW BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS .................................................................................. 165

CHAPTER 4: VIRTUOUS WOMEN:
GENDERED VIRTUE AND SOCIAL PURITY IN AMERICA .............................................. 212

CHAPTER 5: FAMILY IDOLS:
CHALLENGING THE VICTORIAN FAMILY .................................................................. 259

CHAPTER 6: FROM CRUSADER TO CRANK:
THE CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS MARGINALIZATION
OF BUSHNELL, STARR, AND SOUTHARD .................................................................. 319

CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................... 384

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................................................... 396
Many people have provided valuable support throughout this project. My professors at the University of Notre Dame have been generous with their time and assistance, and it has been a privilege to work with them over the years. Gail Bederman first introduced me to the field of women’s history, and her enthusiasm was contagious. She has been instrumental in shaping the direction of my own work, and has provided encouragement at every step of the way. I am also thankful for her careful critique of the dissertation at several different stages. Doris Bergen has provided friendship and crucial advice throughout my years at Notre Dame, and through her teaching and her writing has challenged me to explore the moral implications of engaging the past. John McGreevy has served as a model teacher and scholar. And my advisor, George Marsden, has been an exemplary mentor, providing prompt and insightful responses to each portion of the dissertation. His own careful scholarship, quick wit, and generous spirit make him the ideal advisor, and it has been a genuine pleasure to work with him.

The University of Notre Dame provided generous research support for this project through the Zahm Research Travel Grant and History Department travel funds, enabling me to track down the scattered sources that would become the foundation of this study. I am grateful to the Kaneb Center Teaching Apprenticeship Program and to Williams College for the opportunity to first explore in the classroom many of the themes addressed in this dissertation. At Williams, Regina Kunzel served as an exceptional mentor, and my students reinvigorated my interest in my research through their
enthusiasm and their thoughtful contributions. I am also grateful to the Five College Women’s Studies Research Center for providing a stimulating atmosphere conducive to writing during a crucial stage of this project. As a Research Associate at the center I had the privilege of presenting a portion of this work, and I am grateful for the insightful comments and encouragement I received. I also wish to thank the Notre Dame Gender Studies Department for providing me with a generous research grant and with the opportunity to present a chapter of my work at their graduate symposium.

I am grateful to all those who assisted in my research, particularly Christopher P. Momany and Noelle C. Keller of Adrian College, Mark Tomlin of Pillar of Fire Press, Gregory Zuck of Southwestern College, Kim Bunner of Parlin-Ingersoll Library, and Virginia Beatty at the Archives of the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. I would also like to thank Bernice Estes, who shared with me her recollections of Euphemia Drysdale.

The support of my family has been critical to the completion of this project. My parents have sustained and encouraged me in countless ways throughout my graduate studies. And Jack Du Mez has assisted in this project on a number of different levels, perhaps none more important than his unwavering faith in the importance of this work, and his encouragement to me to keep listening to the voices of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard.
INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Protestantism and feminism in American history has long engaged historians’ interest. The significance of Protestant beliefs in the development of the nineteenth-century women’s rights movement, for example, is a familiar narrative among students of the early history of American feminism. When attention turns to the twentieth century, however, the role of Protestantism in relation to modern feminism becomes more difficult to discern. Attention to religion often disappears from studies of the twentieth-century women’s movement, reflecting in part the sentiments of a number of prominent feminist leaders throughout the century who explicitly distanced themselves from religious understandings of women’s rights. Not without cause, many modern feminists came to associate Protestantism with conservative views of women—an association strengthened by the strong public reemergence of conservative Protestantism in the latter part of the century. With modern Evangelicals touting a return to “traditional family values” and staunchly rejecting the goals of modern

---

1 In this introduction I use the term “feminism” in a popular sense to connote movements for women’s rights throughout nineteenth- and twentieth-century American history. Throughout the rest of this study, however, I generally reserve the term for the twentieth-century movement that adopted the appellation, preferring other adjectives, such as woman-centered, to differentiate the thought of women such as Katharine Bushnell, Lee Anna Starr, and M. Madeline Southard.

2 As Maureen Fitzgerald points out in “Losing Their Religion: Women, the State, and the Ascension of Secular Discourse, 1890-1930,” in Margaret Lamberts Bendroth and Virginia Lieson Brereton, eds., Women and Twentieth-Century Protestantism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), the lack of attention to religion is particularly apparent in works on American women and the twentieth-century state. And historians of modern feminism, such as Nancy Cott in The Grounding of Modern Feminism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), might give a brief nod to the rejection of Christianity by modern feminists, but generally do not explore the issue to any significant extent.
feminists, it is perhaps not surprising that such animosity could be read back into the relationship between Protestantism and women’s rights at the dawn of the century.

The early twentieth century was a crucial period in the development of modern American Protestantism, as well as in the emergence of modern feminism. But studies of the relationship between the two have often been marred by a lack of historical sensitivity in an examination of both subjects. Among many historians of women, for example, the category of “religion” during this time is frequently construed as a static and rather vague set of Christian beliefs generally associated with conservative views of gender and society.³

At the same time, historians of religion, and particularly historians of women and religion, have committed a similar offense when it comes to the term “feminism.” Responding to their own cultural settings in which Christianity and feminism are often deemed incompatible, many historians of women in American religion—historians of Protestant women in particular—have taken pains to highlight the “feminist” convictions advanced by Protestant women of the past.⁴ Drawing attention to their historical subjects’ egalitarian religious teachings and contributions to women’s rights, such historians have attempted to demonstrate Christianity’s essential compatibility with feminism. In doing so, however, they frequently fail historicize the term “feminism,” and neglect to situate


their subjects within the broader historical context of American feminism. Such histories might establish Protestants’ “feminist” credentials by demonstrating their subjects' support for causes ranging from woman suffrage to women’s right to preach or to become ordained, to control their own organizations, or to achieve equal rights in their denominations, but attention is rarely paid to contemporary developments within American feminism, and particularly to potentially conflicting views of family, sexuality, and society.  

In an attempt to demonstrate the “feminism” of Christian women, then, such histories neglect a critical investigation of the substantial issues that divided religious feminists from many of their secular counterparts, and they consequently fail to engage seriously the historical developments that have given rise to those differences. This oversight lends a certain hollowness to historical “discoveries” of Christian feminism, and fails to create a usable past that both acknowledges and illuminates the tensions that have developed between feminism and Protestantism in modern America.  

---

5 Studies of “evangelical feminism” have been especially prone to neglect to set their subjects against the development of modern secular feminism. Historians demonstrating the existence of “evangelical feminism” have often done so in order to chide present-day Christians for resisting all that is considered “feminist,” and to reveal the historical fallacies behind conservatives’ claims that “traditional” American Protestantism has always held restrictive views on women’s roles. Historians like Janette Hassey, Nancy Hardesty, and Donald Dayton have provided extremely valuable histories for religious communities, as well as for historians of the United States. However, in attempts to more critically explore the compatibility of feminism with American Protestantism, careful attention must be paid to the differences between secular and religious feminisms, as well as to their similarities. And this is particularly the case for the development of both strands in twentieth-century America.  

6 Evidence of this cultural animosity can be seen in the lack of significant cooperation evident even between religious feminists and their secular counterparts. Although many women have worked to develop sophisticated feminist theologies within their specific religious traditions, little meaningful collaboration exists between contemporary feminist theologians and mainstream American feminists. Observers of contemporary American feminism have pointed to this estrangement of religious and secular feminists, and have noted its detrimental effects on both groups. The disjunction has weakened the effectiveness of religious feminists’ critiques of the patriarchal nature of their own traditions, and hindered the development and influence of viable Christian alternatives to “traditional” constructions of gender and family in twentieth-century America. At the same time, it also has inhibited the embrace of feminism.
This dissertation investigates the shifting relationship between Protestantism and feminism in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century United States by examining the lives and work of three Methodist women—Katharine C. Bushnell, Lee Anna Starr, and M. Madeline Southard. These three women worked to negotiate the profound cultural changes taking place with the eclipse of the Victorian moral system. In the context of shifting religious identities, they sought to fashion a woman-centered Protestantism, and to provide new conceptions of morality and new constructions of family in light of their religious faith. Although not representative of their times in the conclusions they drew, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard illustrate the complex and at times surprising interplay between American Protestantism, feminism, and modern constructions of gender, sexuality, and family.

All three women were rooted in the Methodist tradition, and they were in many ways typical of other prominent white, middle-class women reformers of their time. They were all active in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and supporters of woman’s suffrage, and Bushnell and Southard also participated in social purity work. Unlike many among many women whose religious beliefs remain central to their identities, including many poorer women and women of color. For a discussion of these issues, see Sands, “Introduction,” 12. Sands adds that by failing to draw on religious feminisms, secular feminism has been deprived of “a rich source of social visions, because religions, notwithstanding their presumptive patriarchalism, also mandate some version of justice, compassion, and the more equitable distribution of wealth.” As Sands notes, there were certainly “most serious reasons for feminists to break the heavy links that in the nineteenth century came to specially bind women with religion, just as there were the most serious of reasons for breaking the identification of women with sexual and reproductive functions.” Sands recognizes that there is a “deeply rooted tendency of liberal thought to authorize itself precisely as secular, that is, as ‘not religion.’” A result of this “secularist antipathy to religion,” was that “popular liberal rhetoric avoided articulating a social ethic of its own,” allowing conservatives to “win so many political battles simply by framing the issues as moral or ethical” (Ibid., 10-11). Sands concludes that “the particular inaudibility of progressive religion on issues of sexuality and reproduction has a tremendous cost now, when these have become at once the site of religion’s greatest authority and the ideological centerpieces of politics…”(Ibid., 7).
of their contemporaries, however, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard rejected Victorian models of gender, family, and society. They opposed the domestic ideal for women and rejected women’s purported moral superiority, and they also refused to elevate the role of motherhood for the purposes of women’s advancement.

Their rejection of the Victorian moral and social system did not, however, entail a complete abandonment of their Protestant faith. As Methodists, they drew upon a tradition that emphasized the role of liberty in enabling individuals to find spiritual and personal fulfillment, and upon a rich tradition of Methodist women leaders. But they were not content simply to embrace the beliefs handed down by their forefathers, beliefs they considered warped by the male-dominated religious frameworks of Victorian Christianity. Like several other women of their time, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were highly critical of certain aspects of conventional Christianity that supported traditional and often repressive views of women. Persuaded that the barriers to women’s emancipation went far beyond women’s lack of suffrage, they were convinced that fundamental theological revisions were necessary in order to accomplish true liberation. The entire social order, they believed, supported the subordination of women, and in order for a new era for women to be ushered in, they would need to eradicate the religious roots of that order.

Central to their project was a profound reformulation of the depiction of women in traditional Protestant theology. Heartily agreeing with the claims of many modern feminists that Christianity, in its present form, was hostile to women’s rights, they

---

They parted ways, for example, with twentieth-century feminists such as Emma Goldman, Crystal Eastman, Margaret Sanger, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and others who rejected arguments that traditional Christianity would be compatible with modern feminism.
worked to radically reform their faith by going back to the earliest available scriptural
texts, retranslating, as well as reinterpreting, what they found there.

In order to understand the work of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, it is necessary
to situate them within the dynamic context of early-twentieth-century American
Protestantism. Unlike many of their contemporaries, as well as women of later
generations, these women worked within the bounds of a broadly “orthodox” Protestant
theology of their times. They found it increasingly difficult, however, to maneuver
between the drifting poles of conservative and liberal Protestantism. Employing many
modern methods of interpretation in the construction of their revised religious narratives,
they nevertheless also accepted the authority of the Christian scriptures, and remained
committed to the role of theology in determining social values. At the same time, they
rejected the growing influence of “scientific” constructions of morality that found
expression in the hereditarian and eugenic thought increasingly popular among liberal
Protestants and women’s rights activists alike. They worked to offer biblical foundations
for a progressive, woman-centered, religious voice on issues of gender and sexuality, but
the religion that they fashioned had little in common with the Victorian Protestantism of
many nineteenth-century women reformers.

The examples of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard reveal the inadequacies of an
overly simplistic characterization of the shift from a religious to a secular women’s
movement at this time—a characterization common in histories of the movement. In
order to more fully understand their lives and work of these three women, it is necessary
to return in more detail to the dynamic relationship between Protestantism and feminism
around the turn of the last century.
As noted above, historians have long recognized the central role the Protestant faith played in the nineteenth-century agitation for women’s rights in America. Growing out of abolitionism, the early women’s rights movement developed in the context of a general upsurge in social reform activity produced by the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening of the 1830s. Together with, and at times inseparable from, Enlightenment appeals to natural rights, religious arguments based on the Christian scriptures supported nineteenth-century women’s claims to social and political equality.

That Protestantism should have played a central role in the early women’s rights movement is not surprising. Although no longer the established national religion, Protestantism continued to play a powerful role in shaping American culture. A majority of Americans professed some form of Protestant belief, and a number of leading women’s rights reformers personally embraced the faith. Perhaps more significant, however, were the obvious connections between traditional Protestantism and the system of women’s subordination and oppression that reformers hoped to overturn. Whether or not they believed that the Christian Bible contained the true word of God, few reformers could deny the cultural authority the Bible continued to wield, and the central role it played in defining the values and beliefs of the majority of Americans. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton explained, when nineteenth-century women “began to protest against their...

---

8 There were, of course, many nineteenth-century women’s rights activists, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Joslyn Gage, who over the course of their careers came to see traditional Christianity and women’s rights as incompatible. In general, however, a substantial degree of cooperation existed among religious and more “secular” advocates of women’s rights.

civil and political degradation,” they were repeatedly “referred to the Bible for an
answer.”

In Victorian America, understandings of gender, sexuality, and morality were
intricately connected to the Protestant belief system. Although the Victorian sexual and
social arrangements were never as monolithic or as uncontested as nineteenth-century
advocates, twentieth-century detractors, or present-day historians might depict them,
among white, middle-class Americans the Victorian gender system provided a powerful
framework for the ordering of nineteenth-century sexual and social relationships.\(^{11}\)
Religious beliefs helped to sanction and give meaning to constructions of gender and
sexuality that emerged in Victorian America.

The Victorian social system helped people to come to terms with the new
economic realities of the nineteenth century. At a basic level, it served as a way to ensure
the morality of the nascent free market economy. As men pursued their self interest in the
new world of entrepreneurial capitalism, older conceptions of public virtue fell away. A
new model of public virtue assigned women the task of providing the moral base that
would hold together the disparate, individualistic impulses of the market.\(^{12}\) Victorian
constructions of womanhood reflected this change. Deemed passionless and pure, the
middle-class woman could help to preserve and promote social morality through her roles


\(^{11}\) On the contested nature of sexual knowledge in nineteenth-century America, see Helen
Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-

\(^{12}\) See Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835*
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in
Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and Ruth Bloch,
“Republican Virtue: The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America,” (1987), in *Gender and
as sacrificing mother and dutiful wife. Her realm of influence was the home, a sphere set apart from the competitive and often ruthless forces of the public marketplace. The public and the private, the productive and religious, came together in the middle-class family.\(^{13}\)

Changing religious beliefs also facilitated and reflected this shift. As the world of business became an increasingly male sphere of activity, the realm of religion came to be considered the domain of women. Within mainstream Protestantism, women came to be seen as particularly and innately religious. Ministers preached the moral superiority of women, and they celebrated the home as the “God-ordained” sphere for women’s activities. When women’s rights advocates began to challenge the social and political subordination of women, they unfailingly came up against opponents who would appeal to the authority of the Bible to justify and defend the reigning Victorian constructions of gender and society.

From the earliest years of the movement for women’s rights, then, American women identified the Christian Bible as one of the key obstacles to women’s advancement. Accordingly, they pragmatically turned to the pages of the scriptures to defend their demands for greater rights. The biblical exegesis and commentaries of Antoinette Brown and Angelina and Sarah Grimké are well known among historians of

\(^{13}\) In “The Women Have Had Charge of the Church Work Long Enough: The Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911-1912 and the Masculinization of Middle-Class Protestantism,” in Susan Juster and Lisa MacFarlane, eds., A Mighty Baptism: Race, Gender, and the Creation of American Protestantism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 107-140, Gail Bederman writes that “in order to minimize the moral dangers of the open market while maximizing its potential rewards, middle-class Americans used gender to marry morality to productivity—literally”… “Pious women would keep their husbands and sons moral; productive men would work to become successful entrepreneurs in order to provide for their wives and children; and together they would form godly homes, the epitome of Christian progress” (112). See also Katharine Kish Sklar, Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).
women, but other, lesser known works were significant as well. In 1849, for example, Elizabeth Wilson published an extended treatise on biblical views of women, *Scriptural View of Woman’s Rights and Duties*, in which she challenged the Protestant theology and moral philosophies of John Milton and Francis Wayland, and provided alternative translations and interpretations of a number of biblical passages concerning women. Wilson was active in some of the earliest women’s rights conventions in America, and together with Brown’s, her work provided the foundation for many of the arguments advanced by other nineteenth-century women’s rights advocates in the face of religious opposition to their cause. Over the course of that century, theological reflection remained a key component in the battle for women’s rights, and many of the movement’s leaders spoke out of their own religious convictions.

Often speaking out of their own religious convictions, a number of women’s rights leaders worked to demonstrate the compatibility of Christianity with women’s advancement. There was no standard formula for the shape these theological arguments would take; they varied according to the religious traditions drawn upon, the theological

---

14 See, for example, Sarah M. Grimké’s 1838 *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Woman*. Originally Episcopalians, the Grimké sisters were influenced by Presbyterian revivalism, and they eventually embraced Quakerism. However, when it came to advancing women’s rights, they refused to appeal to their Quaker identities, but rather insisted on appealing to “the only firm basis of human rights, the Bible” [Angelina Grimké to Theodore Dwight Weld and John Greenleaf Whittier, 20 August 1837, in Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, eds., *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké*, 1822-44, vol. 1 (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1934; Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 429].

15 Elizabeth Wilson, *A Scriptural View of Woman’s Rights and Duties in all the Important Relations of Life* (Philadelphia: Wm. S. Young, 1849).

16 One of the few historians to acknowledge Wilson’s work is Nancy Isenberg. See her *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). Nancy Hardesty also mentions Wilson in *Women Called to Witness*, and provides numerous other examples of early women’s rights activists who turned to the Bible in defense of their cause.

methods currently in vogue, and the personal situations of individual women. But because of the crucial role Protestant views of gender and society played in upholding the Victorian order, theological critique invariably played a principal role in the nineteenth-century women’s movement, and debates among Protestants over the scriptural sanction of women’s rights regularly engaged ministers and reformers alike.

By the end of the century, however, the nature of these debates had shifted perceptibly. The publication of the two volumes of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *Woman’s Bible* in 1895 and 1898—or, more accurately, the public outcry that followed in the wake of their publication—often stands as a watershed of sorts, separating the nineteenth-century relationship between Protestantism and the women’s movement from that of the twentieth. Stanton had turned her attention to religion because she had become

---

18 The utilization of theological exegesis for the purpose of women’s advancement was not limited to the white, middle-class women’s movement. African American women developed “feminist theologies” to work for the advancement of women in their own communities as well as for the advancement of their race. See, for example, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), as well as Carolyn A. Haynes, *Divine Destiny: Gender and Race in Nineteenth-Century Protestantism* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1998). And as historians have demonstrated, New Thought provided an important if under-recognized role in providing a religious or philosophical framework for women’s rights among a number of the women’s movement’s leaders. See Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom*.

19 In *Women Called to Witness*, Hardesty locates a “turning point” in the movement already in 1852, when Antoinette Brown proposed a resolution at a Syracuse women’s rights convention stating: “Resolved, That the Bible recognizes the rights, duties, and privileges of Woman as a public teacher as every way equal with those of man; that it enjoins upon her no subjection that is not enjoined upon him; and that it truly and practically recognizes neither male nor female in Christ Jesus.” Ernestine Rose, however, a Jewish women’s rights activist, opposed Brown’s proposition. She contended that she saw “no need to appeal to any written authority, particularly when it is so obscure and indefinite as to admit of different interpretations…” Lucretia Mott agreed with Rose. A similar scene unfolded between Brown and Rose the next year at a Cleveland convention, and again the movement’s leaders decided that the women’s rights convention was not the “time to discuss the Bible.” See Elizabeth Cady Stanton, et al., *History of Woman Suffrage* Vol. 1 (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1881), 536-540; and *Proceedings of the National Woman’s Rights Convention, Held at Cleveland, Ohio, on...October 5th, 6th & 7th, 1853* (Cleveland: Gray, Beardsley, Spear, 1854), 164, quoted in Hardesty, 65-66. Although several of the movement’s leaders decided against relying on the Bible as the foundation of their arguments for women’s rights, many women continued to appeal to scriptural arguments to meet those of their opponents, and scriptural justifications remained common throughout the nineteenth century. At the end of the century, Stanton’s *Woman’s Bible* elicited an intentional and resounding shift away from this tactic.
convinced that political rights alone would not bring about the social revolution in women’s status for which she had long labored. Christian theology, she was persuaded, provided the ideological foundations that undergirded the pervasive subordination of women in late-nineteenth-century America. After facing decades of persistent, religiously based opposition to the advancement of women, Stanton decided to approach the issue in a more thorough fashion. Together with a committee of women she had selected, Stanton sought to rewrite the basis of Christian theological tradition, the Bible. Judging the traditional text to be one of the chief obstacles to women’s emancipation, she and her committee members worked to counter the patriarchal nature of the text through a variety of theological methods. Highlighting passages that elevated women’s condition, reinterpreting others to counter traditional anti-woman meanings, and, when that proved too difficult, dismissing entire portions of the original, the women hoped to provide a new starting point from which Christians could approach issues of gender.

The publication of the *Woman’s Bible* has often been portrayed as an important turning point in the history of women and religion in America, though not for the reasons Stanton had hoped. Although Stanton had set out to stir controversy,\(^20\) the heated debate surrounding the work seemed to harm her cause far more than it helped, in part because of the changing religious milieu in America at the time. As one historian has assessed, the modern methods of criticism proved a “gift from heaven” to Stanton and her colleagues.\(^21\) Although they did not follow any uniform theological method, their views on biblical

\(^{20}\) Kern, *Mrs. Stanton’s Bible*, 13. Instead, Stanton was emboldened by her seniority to serve, as she liked to say, as a “free lance,” to needle the suffrage movement for its growing religious conservatism.

\(^{21}\) Kraditor, *Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*, 76. In *Fundamentalism and Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 37, Margaret Lamberts Bendroth also quotes Kraditor on this point.
authority certainly aligned them with modern schools of thought. The confused and piecemeal approach to the biblical texts, and the willingness among many of the contributors, including Stanton, to simply discard or dismiss those passages that could not be suitably reinterpreted, confirmed conservatives’ associations of female biblical interpretation with theological weakness and heresy.  And the provocative and rather misleading title—for the book was actually a collection of commentaries rather than a new “Bible”—further incited conservatives’ fears and confirmed their suspicions of an attack on biblical authority. The uproar surrounding the book’s publication was such that historian Kathi Kern has suggested that it backfired to such an extent that the *Woman’s Bible* “proved to be the most devastating weapon in the antisuffrage arsenal.”

Many of Stanton’s colleagues had been quick to see this danger. Several had refused to participate in the project, and Stanton had complained about her inability to convince women with greater theological sophistication and knowledge of the biblical languages to participate in her project.  Given Stanton’s eclectic approach and unorthodox views on biblical inspiration and authority, it is not surprising that women with decidedly different theological commitments would have wanted to avoid entanglement in Stanton’s project.  After the publication of the *Woman’s Bible*, and much to Stanton’s dismay, a number of her colleagues in the woman’s movement felt it necessary to distance themselves and the movement from Stanton’s unorthodox religious

---

22 As Kern notes, “the collaborators brought very different exegetical practices to their work, differed in their acceptance of non-canonical texts, and, finally, argued for vastly different constructions of gender, particularly evident in their disagreements over the gendered constitution of the soul” (*Mrs. Stanton’s Bible*, 10).

23 Ibid., 5.

24 Although Stanton had excelled at the study of Greek as a child, she was not proficient in biblical Hebrew, and relied on reinterpretation of the biblical text far more than she did on retranslation.

25 Stanton’s religious views became more radical over the course of her career.
views. Many believed that Stanton’s attack on traditional religion would do more damage to their cause than the traditional beliefs she had been trying to undo. Carrie Chapman Catt, Rachel Foster Avery, Laura Clay, and Anna Howard Shaw, leaders in the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), brought their concerns to the association’s convention, and after a long and heated debate, they convinced their colleagues in the NAWSA to officially denounce Stanton’s book. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the largest organization of American women at the time, followed suit, officially denouncing the work at its 1896 annual convention.26

Although in the immediate aftermath of the Woman’s Bible controversy it appeared as if the book had in fact done more harm than good, the longer historical legacy of the dispute is more difficult to discern, and has in fact received little careful attention from historians. On the one hand, the controversy is thought to have effected a certain “secularization” of the women’s movement, in the sense that the subject of religion receded into the background, finding its way only occasionally into subsequent public discourse. Having learned their lesson from the fierce opposition to women’s rights provoked by Stanton’s heterodox religious views, a younger generation of leaders came to doubt the wisdom of using religious arguments publicly to advance their cause.27

Discussions of the Bible did not disappear entirely from early-twentieth-century

26 Kern, Mrs. Stanton’s Bible, 171, 184, 207. A few women, such as Matilda Joslyn Gage and Susan B. Anthony, did attempt to provide some support for Stanton, but they were in the minority.

27 See Kraditor, Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 93-95.
suffragist literature and speeches, but such rationales appeared less frequently and played a more marginal role in the movement following the *Woman’s Bible* controversy.  

“Secularization” is a problematic term, however, and two important caveats should be considered. It is first essential to note that Stanton and other likeminded women who rejected traditional Christianity, and its role in defining American values, cannot accurately be described as “secular.” Stanton herself did not wholly reject religion; instead, she worked to replace traditional beliefs with new theologies and religious frameworks. Most of the women working for suffrage and active in the women’s rights movement continued to hold religious convictions across a broad spectrum, ranging from conventional Christianity to more radical New Thought or individually crafted beliefs. Because of the absence of an ongoing, public critique of Christianity, however, the power of traditional Christian beliefs often went unchallenged.

A second and related caveat concerns the “secularization” of the women’s movement in general. In the sense that explicit discussions of religion disappeared from many public debates about the women’s movement, a limited type of secularization did indeed take place. But during the early twentieth century, the substance of the “secular” was itself undergoing a significant shift. If we define the secular as simply “not religious,” we are likely to neglect “the substantive content of the secular,” which, in

---

28 Ibid., 93. According to Kraditor, several reasons were given for the diminishing use of religious arguments to support women’s rights. Alice Stone Blackwell, for example, felt that the scriptural argument was “not now the practical obstacle in the minds of most people.” Many women’s rights leaders felt that the clergy largely supported their quest for suffrage, according to Kraditor, and both suffragists and antisuffragists “preferred other battlegrounds” (Ibid., 94-95).

29 Here I am indebted to Kern’s discussion of “secular” with regard to the women’s movement. See especially *Mrs. Stanton’s Bible*, 11-12, 104, 144. Kern’s project is “to restore the political context to Stanton’s theology and to restore the religious impulse to her secularism.” She reminds her readers that “the majority of women in the movement, even those who called for a secular government, were passionately religious.” See also Mark Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority,” *Social Forces* 72 (March 1994): 749-774.
early-twentieth-century America, was closely related to mainstream liberal Protestantism. At a time when liberal Protestants were embracing the authority of modern science and the tools of social work, they were in effect redefining what constituted religion. By focusing increasingly on social structures rather than on individual conversion experiences, and by locating the word of God in the teachings of modern science as much as, if not more than, in the Christian scriptures, liberal Protestants blurred the lines between the secular and the religious. In a sense, this was a continuation of the “immanentization” that had been taking place throughout nineteenth-century Protestantism. Rather than looking ahead to an otherworldly afterlife, a growing number of Protestants viewed this world itself as the locus of salvation, and the religious and the secular gradually became indistinguishable. This is not to suggest that liberal Protestants abandoned entirely their religious faith for secular ways of knowing. Rather, by redefining the religious in terms of the secular, they played an important role in shaping the content of secular thought. Liberal Protestantism was such a dominant force in early-twentieth-century America in part because it was so accommodating, merging faith and reason, religion and science, into a powerful secular-religious world view.

“Secularization” describes this process only inasmuch as it is acknowledged that

---

30 My discussion of the relationship between liberal Protestantism and the secular is drawn from Fitzgerald’s excellent article, “Losing Their Religion,” 280-303. As Fitzgerald notes, in Fundamentalism and Gender Bendroth argues that “it was precisely the perfectionist strain in social science thinking and the state that so alarmed Protestant Christian fundamentalists in the early twentieth century” (“Losing their Religion,” 287). See also George M. Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

“religious institutions and authorities played an indispensable part in promoting the secular cultures.”32

This blending of liberal Protestant and secular thought is apparent in the rise of the social hygiene movement and in the growing popularity of eugenics among liberal Protestants in the early decades of the twentieth century, and is also evident in early-twentieth-century women’s reform work. A younger generation of reformers drew upon liberal Protestant adaptations of nineteenth-century perfectionist thought in their social scientific approaches to public welfare and in the practical realm of casework, and they looked to new constructions of morality that privileged modern scientific knowledge over explicitly religious convictions.

One of the consequences of this merging of the secular and religious was the obscuring of the persistence of religious impulses within and beneath secular discourse. The shrouded religious content of secular discourse contributed to a tendency among historians of American women to identify a “sharp break” in women’s public activism from religious in nineteenth-century America to an abruptly secular sort in the twentieth.33 But the new configurations of the secular and religious in twentieth-century

32 Ibid., 646.

America—constructed around of the rising authority of modern science—would also affect the fate of a particularly woman-centered approach to issues of sexuality and morality in twentieth-century America.

Both the persistence of religious impulses in secular discourse, and the absence of a sustained public critique of religion within the women’s movement, can help to explain an otherwise paradoxical assessment of the early-twentieth-century women’s movement. For while a certain secularization of movement’s public discourse occurred in the wake of the Woman’s Bible controversy, historians have also identified, and often lamented, a conservative turn in the movement at that time.

Among those women to sign the Bible Resolution denouncing Stanton’s book were Carrie Chapman Catt, Rachel Foster Avery, and Laura Clay, who, along with other women of their generation, were to shepherd the movement in a new direction. More practical than visionary, this younger generation of leaders chose a pragmatic strategy


34 As Kraditor writes, “During the 1890s the old, mainly abolitionist, pioneers who had begun the suffrage agitation in the 1840s and 1850s died or retired, and a younger group rose to leadership. In ideology most of the leaders of this second stage were more conservative, and in methods more systematic.” Anna Howard Shaw also denounced Stanton’s Woman’s Bible and was a leader in the movement, but she did not embrace the expediency argument as enthusiastically as others, and she continued to some extent to emphasize religion (Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, xi).
focusing principally on suffrage.\textsuperscript{35} In order to create a platform on which a large number of women could unite, the movement’s leaders worked to circumscribe women’s emancipation to a more narrowly defined political sense. In doing so they largely abandoned, or marginalized, definitions of women’s emancipation that involved more thoroughgoing, fundamental reorganizations of society. Sweeping revisions of traditional family arrangements, social and sexual relations, and the religious underpinnings of American society were deemed too disruptive or insignificant to the primary cause at hand: achieving the vote for women.

After decades of agitation, this political goal finally seemed within reach. By narrowing the focus of the women’s movement, its leaders were able to unite disparate ideological strands, appealing to women advocating equal rights, as well as to the growing number of women who sought the vote as a necessary tool for women to exercise publicly their social and moral differences from men.\textsuperscript{36} By the end of the nineteenth century, suffrage had become a respectable cause appealing to a broad base of women, and arguments for suffrage based on expediency had begun to take the place of an earlier generation’s appeal to justice.\textsuperscript{37} This appeal to expediency was not a new development; women had long argued for the necessity of political power for the purposes of self protection, and many women had also come to argue for women’s political power as a means to social reform for which women were particularly suited,

\textsuperscript{35} Kern, \textit{Mrs. Stanton’s Bible}, 193.

\textsuperscript{36} As Nancy Cott points out, “advocates who conjoined women’s rights to the agenda of Progressive social reform frequently weighted the end of the see-saw stressing women’s gender differences from men, women’s need to protect their established interests, women’s duties owed and services to be offered to society. Arguments for women’s advance based on natural rights had less purchase by that time, in part because exclusionary barriers in education and employment, and the legal disabilities of married women, had already been successfully challenged” (\textit{Grounding of Modern Feminism}, 21).

\textsuperscript{37} Kraditor, \textit{Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement}, 85-86.
rather than as an end in itself. But by the beginning of the twentieth century, the balance had shifted discernibly from more individualistic, equal rights-based rationale to arguments emphasizing women’s special duties and needs arising from their fundamental differences from men. Many reformers found powerful justifications for increasing women’s authority based on women’s alleged moral superiority or their maternal responsibilities.

The narrowing of the agenda of the women’s movement that accompanied the shift from justice-based to expediency-based petitions for women rights was precisely what Stanton had been trying to avoid.38 She had feared the growing influence of the young, conservative members of the movement, and was distressed by the narrowing scope of the movement’s vision, and the loss of a comprehensive approach to women’s liberation that included a critique of church and family.39 Part of her motivation in writing the Woman’s Bible was her belief that “all reforms are interdependent, and that whatever is done to establish one principle on a solid basis, strengthens all.” Reformers who continually compromised for pragmatic purposes, she contended, failed to realize that “truth is the only safe ground to stand upon.” 40 Even Stanton’s longtime friend and colleague Susan B. Anthony, however, participated in the trend to restrict the energy of the movement to the cause of suffrage, and the controversy surrounding the Woman’s

38 This more holistic approach of Stanton was one of the causes of the division of the women’s movement into two factions in 1869, with Lucy Stone and Henry and Alice Stone Blackwell leading the American Woman Suffrage Association, and focusing on a suffrage amendment, and Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton forming the National Woman Suffrage Association, and pursuing a broader approach to women’s social and political emancipation. In 1890 the two groups merged.

39 Kern, Mrs. Stanton’s Bible, 206. As Kern notes, “Historians have associated the emergence of this more conservative leadership with the “mainstreaming” of the suffrage movement—the simultaneous broadening of the constituency and narrowing of the political agenda.”

40 Stanton, Woman’s Bible, 11.
Bible was influential in this decision. Anthony regretted that Stanton had “brought to the front the ‘bible’ question, making it take precedence of woman’s enfranchisement in the public mind.”

By focusing primarily on achieving suffrage, the younger generation of women’s movement leaders was often content to work within present social structures to advance their cause. Rather than challenging women’s identification with traditional domestic tasks, for example, many women found that this domestic ideal the authority to expand women’s opportunities. For example, by appealing to women’s roles as guardians of the home, a number of women worked to expand the definitions of that role far beyond the walls of the home, arguing that in order to safeguard their homes they needed to participate in “municipal housekeeping” in the public sphere. By working within existing frameworks of family or religion, reformers were able to accomplish much, and ultimately achieved their goal of suffrage. In doing so, however, they often failed to challenge underlying ideologies that contributed to women’s social inequalities.

Historians writing from the vantage point of “second-wave” feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s frequently cited this failure to engage in a fundamental critique of the traditional middle-class family as one of the key reasons for the apparent collapse of feminism in the 1920s. Although the women’s movement achieved their goal of suffrage, they failed to successfully address the domestic ideology and pervasive economic

41 Anthony to Stanton, 24 July 1895, Anthony Family Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California, quoted in Kern, Mrs. Stanton’s Bible, 193.

42 As Cott describes, “the vote harmonized the two strands in foregoing woman’s rights advocacy: it was an equal rights goal that enabled women to make special contributions…” She adds that “although the gender differences marked out were conventional—defining women as mothers, housekeepers, and caregivers—turning these stereotypes to serve goals of equal access and equal rights minimized their constraints.…” (Grounding of Modern Feminism, 30).
inequalities that continued to oppress women even in a culture that was quickly shedding other aspects of its Victorian past.\textsuperscript{43}

By the end of the nineteenth century, the economic and religious underpinnings of the Victorian system had begun to evolve, creating a space for the contestation of its social and moral ideals. With the rise of a new corporate, consumer-oriented order, the era of entrepreneurial capitalism was coming to an end, rendering obsolete the social values that had accompanied it.\textsuperscript{44} Other developments both reflected and hastened the dissolution of the old order. Women’s greater educational opportunities, their growing participation in the labor force, and their increasing claim to the public sphere through reform work helped to further disrupt the gender divisions that underlay the Victorian

\textsuperscript{43} In doing so they created a limited space for white, middle-class women, but abandoned poorer women and women of color for whom the ballot did little to emancipate. A useful article that discusses these historiographical developments is Margaret Lamberts Bendroth’s “Religion, Feminism, and the American Family: 1865-1920” in Anne Carr and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, eds., Religion, Feminism, and the Family (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996). For scholars who condemn the narrowness of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century women’s movement, see, for example, William L. O’Neill’s Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism in America (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), and Gerda Lerner’s The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 34. O’Neill, for example, characterizes nineteenth-century feminism as “ruthlessly self-centered,” and argued that it “prevented women from coming to grips with conditions that made their emancipation necessary, that is, with the domestic system itself” (Everyone Was Brave, 352). Lerner describes turn-of-the-century feminist leadership as “nativist, racist, and generally indifferent to the needs of working-class women” (Majority Finds Its Past, 34). Bendroth contrasts the views of O’Neill and Lerner, as well as the perspective of Aileen Kraditor—which mirror the “individualist feminist agenda of the 1970s,” equating feminine liberation with personal autonomy— with the view of Daniel Scott Smith and others, who, influenced by the “communitarian ethic of feminists in the late 1970s and 1980s, emphasized women’s ability to create and define community within their own domestic sphere” (“Religion, Feminism, and the American Family”, 184-5). See, for example, Smith’s “Family Limitation, Sexual Control, and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America,” in Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner, eds., Clio’s Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). Smith coined the term “domestic feminism,” and was followed by historians such as Ruth Bordin, in Women and Temperance: The Quest for Power and Liberty, 1873-1900 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

order. As the Victorian gender system began to break down, nineteenth-century constructions of sexuality, morality, and religion no longer seemed “natural” or inevitable.

As the cultural power of these constructions diminished, a “new morality” began to emerge that rejected nineteenth-century gender constructions depicting women as pure and passionless. Informed by modern science, new constructions of sexuality, desire, marriage, and motherhood began to challenge the older sexual and moral arrangements. Informed by these social changes, and influenced by the new discipline of sexology, a new generation of women’s leaders began to critique the residual social and moral conservatism apparent among a majority of suffragists and women’s rights activists. These women, who came to be known as Feminists, would soon introduce a more sweeping and more thorough form of secularization, throwing off the bonds of conventional religion and morality. But during this time “conventional” religion was itself undergoing fundamental changes. Those Americans who did not abandon the Protestant faith negotiated the social transformations elicited by the dismantling of the Victorian social system in the context of their own changing religious frameworks.

One consequence of the weakening of Victorianism was that the association of religion with femininity began to break down. As a result, many Protestant men worked

---

45 Kathy Peiss, in *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), and Christine Stansell, in *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), describe how working women contested the Victorian order. Stansell’s work is an important reminder that, even during the height of the Victorian social order, a significant number of women either rejected, or were incapable of achieving, its ideals for womanhood.
to masculinize their faith and rallied to “take back” religion from women. But this attempt to re-gender religious belief was not the only change affecting American Protestantism. To understand more fully the relationship between gender and Protestantism in early-twentieth-century America, a closer examination of the shifting religious landscape is essential. Mounting tensions between “modernists” and “fundamentalists” came to a head in the 1910s and 1920s, and Protestant denominations were plagued by theological controversies. The differences between the opposing camps were multifaceted. Public controversy often erupted around doctrinal issues such as the virgin birth, the divinity of Christ, and the historicity of Genesis creation account. Underlying these doctrinal flashpoints were conflicting understandings of the authority of the Bible and methods of biblical interpretation, and, more generally, diverging attitudes toward the modern world.

As theological differences were worked out at a practical level, Protestant liberals and conservatives developed substantially different views of their respective social roles. Conservatives tended to focus on the religious conversion of the individual as the key to social change, drawing sharp distinctions between the religious and the “secular,” whereas liberals emphasized the need to reshape society over the salvation of individuals, often aligning with “secular” impulses or modern, scientific teachings. Each aspect of these developing divisions between Protestant liberals and conservatives would play a


47 The differing views on the modern world were particularly evident in the respective approaches of liberals and conservatives to the methods and teachings of modern science in both religion and society.
role in the reorientation of Protestantism, gender, and sexuality in twentieth-century America.

Although liberals and conservatives responded to the changing world around them in contrasting ways, they nevertheless shared a significant common ground in their reassessments of gender and family arrangements in the new century. For although the larger Victorian social and moral system had begun to crumble by the early twentieth century, among both conservative and liberal Protestants the dominant nineteenth-century alignment of Protestantism with the conventional Victorian family structure and gender roles persisted well into the new century. The desires of “reactionary” Protestant conservatives to return to Victorian gender and family arrangements are familiar to historians, but the more subtle but equally powerful persistence of this ideology among liberal Protestants has often been overlooked.

The reasons for the persistence of Victorian gender and family ideals among liberal Protestants are complex, but can be traced in part, somewhat paradoxically, to their widespread embrace of the “secular.” Their enthusiastic endorsement of modern scientific and social theories was accompanied by a corresponding “waning of theology” among liberal Protestants. 48 This general decline of theology was apparent already in the nineteenth century, as prominent liberals like David Swing and Henry Ward Beecher had begun to reject formal doctrine in favor of “deep feeling and vital sentiment.” By the

twentieth century, a clear disregard for theology was discernable among a number of leading Protestant liberals.\textsuperscript{49}

One result of this waning of theology was the increasing inefficacy of women’s biblical and theological critiques of their own political, social, and religious subordination. This is a significant development since, even as the theological structures of an earlier faith were abandoned, certain religious convictions—particularly values concerning gender and family—proved to have an impressive staying power.\textsuperscript{50} In some ways such residual values could be more insidious than explicit theological doctrines, because unlike traditional doctrinal claims based on scriptural interpretations, they could not be directly refuted. The persistence of these conventional values was bolstered by the liberal Protestant embrace of modern scientific theories that found expression in the social hygiene movement and the discourse of eugenics. In these forms, modern science could provide new justifications for largely conventional or conservative understandings of gender and morality, and contribute to the persistence of conservative or oppressive social and sexual arrangements.

The abatement of a thoroughgoing public critique of Christian theology within the women’s movement, then, discouraged the development of widespread, sophisticated

\textsuperscript{49} Fox, “The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism,” 642. See also R.A.R. Edwards, “Jane Addams, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Dorothy Day: A Comparative Study of Settlement Theology,” in Edwards and De Swarte Gifford, eds., \textit{Gender and the Social Gospel}. Edwards notes that Henry Ward Beecher is the “usual whipping boy” in narratives detailing the development of an “a-theological Christianity” such as the religious vocabulary employed by Jane Addams after she “remov[ed] the theological content from Christianity” (154).

\textsuperscript{50} Among liberal Protestant Social Gospel leaders, for example, advocacy of “traditional” gender roles frequently accompanied their otherwise progressive social visions.
critiques of traditional beliefs.\textsuperscript{51} And the rise of scientific authority and the general waning of theology within liberal Protestantism impeded the ability of women who did persist in formulating such critiques to effect significant change. In turn, the Protestant failure to adopt, or even to consider, revisionist, woman-centered theologies would contribute to the persistence of Victorian constructions of gender and family within American Protestantism even after the eclipse of the Victorian social order.

Katharine C. Bushnell, Lee Anna Starr, and M. Madeline Southard found themselves in the middle of these complex renegotiations of religion, gender, and sexuality in the early decades of the twentieth century. Although they did not work together in a committee to produce a new document titled \textit{The Woman's Bible}, they shared many goals, if not methods, with Stanton and her co-authors in their theological revisionism. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard sought to produce woman-centered versions and interpretations of the biblical text, and taken together, their work offers a fascinating glimpse at continuing twentieth-century Protestant efforts to provide a more viable Bible for women.

Their examples demonstrate that not all women were content to drop the public critique of religion in the interest of the women’s movement, nor were they willing to abandon religion to uncritically embrace modern scientific constructions of a new morality. Their revised, woman-centered theologies offered alternatives to the traditional

\textsuperscript{51} The emergence of an explicitly anti-religious strand of women’s rights activism in the form of early-twentieth-century feminism further inhibited the thoughtful reassessment of Christian teachings among progressive Protestants by associating all Christianity with conservative gender and moral structures, while provoking reactionary denouncements of all things associated with the new feminism among conservatives.
religious narratives of their own time, and also provided foundations for a new and potentially progressive social framework that rejected Victorian constructions of gender, sexuality, and family. In many ways Bushnell, Starr, and Southard elude easy classification within existing narratives of feminism and religion in American history, and their narratives complicate existing frameworks of sexuality, gender, and religion in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America.

The lives and work of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard not only reveal the complexities and paradoxes in the relationship between Protestantism and feminism in early-twentieth-century America, but they also provide fascinating alternatives to conservative Protestant constructions of gender and society encapsulated in the “family values” discourse that has emerged as a powerful ideological and political force in recent decades. Although Bushnell, Starr, and Southard failed in their own times to accomplish many of the goals they had envisioned, subsequent historical developments have attested to the validity of at least some of their chief contentions. The reemergence of conservative Protestantism, with its resounding mantra of family values, has demonstrated that religion has indeed remained a crucial factor in determining many people’s views of gender, sexuality, and family. And in this context the biblically-based, woman-centered theological and social critique of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard may still find receptive audiences. Perhaps their voices can reveal a lost middle ground between

---

52 Advocating a return to “traditional” configurations of gender, morality, and religion, proponents of family values frequently clash with secularists and feminists on various fronts in the “culture wars” that have come to define modern America. Conservative Protestants have been among the most vocal proponents of family values, and the battles waged over contemporary values often pit religious interests against secular aims. See Kathleen M. Sands, “Introduction,” in Sands, ed., *God Forbid: Religion and Sex in American Public Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and Don S. Browning, et al., *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).
the seemingly insurmountable ideological impasses between conservative religionists and secular liberals. Or, at the very least, their examples can better illuminate and explain the historical development of these intractable differences.

Chapter One, “Working for the Good: The Lives of Katharine C. Bushnell, Lee Anna Starr, and M. Madeline Southard,” provides brief biographical narratives of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard. Very little has been published on the lives of these women, but their life experiences provide the crucial context for their theological and social thought. Their work in temperance, social purity, and other reforms convinced them that the subordination of women was deeply entrenched in Western culture, and inspired them to search for the religious roots of this oppression.

The second chapter, “Liberal Conservatives: Redefining Religious Categories in Early-Twentieth-Century Protestantism,” places Bushnell, Starr, and Southard in the religious and theological context of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American Protestantism. A close examination of their work positions them directly between the increasingly distant camps of conservatives and liberals. Their woman-centered perspective gave them a critical perspective on both strands of Protestant thought. They upheld the authority of the Christian scriptures, but insisted that the modern English Bible was the product of centuries of male-biased mistranslations. They turned to the original biblical languages and employed modern scholarly methods in order to uncover what the word of God actually revealed about women and men.
Chapter Three, “Rereading Eve: New Biblical Foundations,” introduces the theological writings of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, focusing primarily on the revised Genesis narrative offered by Bushnell and Starr. This chapter gives examples of their theological methods, and also describes the scriptural foundations for the woman-centered faith they worked to construct. The fourth chapter, “Virtuous Women: Gendered Virtue and Social Purity in America,” examines in greater detail religious and cultural ideas of women’s virtue in nineteenth-century America. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard opposed Victorian constructions of womanhood, and central to those constructions was the idea of special feminine virtue. This chapter situates the women in the context of the social purity movement and discusses the development of widespread opposition to the double standard of morality that characterized the Victorian order.

Chapter Five, “Family Idols: Challenging the Victorian Family,” describes Bushnell’s, Starr’s, and Southard’s wide-ranging critiques of the Victorian family ideal. It explores their opposition to both the theological and the scientific foundations of that ideal, tracing their rejection of a sociocultural evolutionary understanding of society and morality. The chapter reveals their opposition to traditional Christian marriages, as well as to the ideal of motherhood prominent in Victorian thought.

The final chapter, “From Crusader to Crank: The Cultural and Religious Marginalization of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard,” provides three contexts for understanding the reception of their work. It examines the rise of the social hygiene movement in the United States, and its effect on women reformers in the social purity tradition. It also explores the emergence of a new framework of sexuality with the rise of twentieth-century Feminism and the implications of this transition for the broader
women’s movement. And it considers the persistence of Victorian models of gender and family among American Protestants, conservatives and liberals alike, in early twentieth-century America. Finally, the conclusion suggests ways in which the lives of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard can reshape our understanding of religion, sexuality, and gender in twentieth-century American culture.
Throughout their lives, Katharine Bushnell, Lee Anna Starr, and Madeline Southard remained committed both to the advancement of women and to their deeply held Protestant beliefs. In the nineteenth century such commitments were not unusual, and the three women rose to prominence in various female reform causes. Born in mid- and late-Victorian America, they were in many ways typical “New Women” of their time. Benefiting from the increasing availability of higher education for women, each of these women attended college and pursued post-graduate education.\(^1\) Bushnell graduated from medical school, Starr from theological seminary, and Southard attained a master’s degree in theological studies. Like many of their female college classmates, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard never married.\(^2\) In a society structured around the ideal of the close-knit, woman-centered Victorian family, these single young women occupied a liminal social position upon their graduation from college. Finding no existing roles save the “spinster aunt” or the “poorly paid and unmarried schoolteacher,” the first generation of

---

\(^1\) In 1870 over eleven thousand women were enrolled in higher education in America, and by 1880 that number grew to over forty thousand, or thirty-two percent of all students. See statistical table “Higher Education, 1870-1980” in Peter Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America*, 2d ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 238.

New Women set about to create new institutions and careers for themselves.³ It was in the name of social reform that many of these women were able to carve out a place for themselves.⁴ By founding settlement homes and rescue homes for “fallen women,” and in crusading against alcohol and for “social purity,” a growing number of nineteenth-century women were able to sustain a relatively independent existence.

As Methodist women, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were particularly suited to careers in social reform. Nineteenth-century Methodists had rediscovered the perfectionist impulse of its founder John Wesley, and the renewed emphasis on personal holiness also entailed a zealous commitment to social reform. Their pursuit of “social holiness” led a number of Methodists to attempt to address the pressing social concerns of their day, working to assist the urban poor or establish rescue homes for “fallen women.”⁵ Middle-class Methodist women were at the forefront of nineteenth-century social reform, and provided dedicated support for such causes as temperance and social purity. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard continued this tradition of Methodist women’s social engagement. Like the prominent nineteenth-century Methodist reformer Frances Willard, all three women were active in the temperance crusade early in their careers. Bushnell and Southard also participated in the social purity movement, and spent time as

³ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870-1936,” in Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, 1986). Smith-Rosenberg describes the New Woman as “a perennially liminal figure—a figure always outside of the existing social structures and with no way of coming in.”


⁵ On Methodist involvement in nineteenth-century social reform, see, for example, Dayton, Discovering an Evangelical Heritage.
foreign missionaries as well. All three actively preached, lectured, or crusaded across the nation, and, in the case of Bushnell and Southard, throughout the world.

Their experiences in reform work actively shaped their theological and social visions, instilling in them the conviction that women’s condition was affected by more than political or legal inequalities. Over time they developed strong commitments to women’s rights, piecing together an expansive assessment of women’s oppression that recognized the interplay between religious teachings, moral ideals, and constructions of sexuality and gender.

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, however, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard became increasingly distanced from the centers of power in both American Protestantism and American feminism. Unlike many other early-twentieth-century women they refused to abandon Christianity, but they also refused to abandon a critical assessment of Christianity. They also persisted in seeing a dynamic relationship between social conditions and religious belief. Even as many American women and many Protestants turned increasingly to scientific solutions to social problems, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard maintained the centrality of religious convictions in shaping personal and social behavior. They accordingly identified the root of social problems in theology and religious belief. In order to reform society, then, they not only urged personal conversion to Christianity, but they also advocated a rigorous reevaluation of Christian tradition. This constellation of commitments set Bushnell, Starr, and Southard apart from many of their contemporaries, but it also enabled them to form impressive and far-reaching woman-centered critiques of American social patterns and religious traditions.
Katharine C. Bushnell (1855-1945)

The seventh of nine children, Katherine C. Bushnell was born in 1855 in the small town of Peru, Illinois, to William Francis Bushnell and Mary Fowler McKean Bushnell. A distant relative of the renowned nineteenth-century theologian Horace Bushnell, she grew up in a religious household where all nine children were said to exhibit “a robust, religious character, and more than ordinary intellect.” In 1871 her family moved to Evanston, Illinois, where her father worked as a government contractor in the construction of lighthouses. Bushnell attended public schools throughout her childhood, before entering Northwestern University. There she studied classics for two years before switching to the study of medicine. For a time she had studied privately under the direction of Dr. James S. Jewell, a specialist in nerve diseases, and then she entered The Woman’s Hospital Medical College, which was purchased by Northwestern soon after her graduation. She completed her residency at the Hospital for Women and Children,

6 Katharine Bushnell was born Caroline Sophia, and later changed her name to Katharine (which is frequently shortened to Kate or misspelled as Katherine in historical documents). The details of Bushnell’s life can be found in Dana Hardwick, Oh Thou Woman That Bringest Good Tidings: The Life and Work of Katharine C. Bushnell (Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing, published for Christians for Biblical Equality, 1995). Hardwick provides an extremely useful biography of Bushnell, tracing her many journeys in great detail, and includes a valuable bibliography of sources written by Bushnell. On Bushnell’s name change, Hardwick notes that “census records indicate that Katharine C. and Caroline Sophia are the same person,” and that a note in Bushnell’s handwriting in the family Bible is signed “Katharine C. Bushnell (baptized Caroline Sophia).” Hardwick also notes that Bushnell’s birth date of 5 February 1855 is supported by family records and the 1860 census, as well as by her autobiography, where Bushnell gives her age as twenty-four in October 1879. In A Woman of the Century (Buffalo, NY: Moolton, 1893), however, Frances Willard gives her date of birth as 1856.

7 Frances Willard, “Dr. Kate Bushnell. A Sketch,” Union Signal, 20 November 1890. Willard noted that Bushnell was a relative of Horace Bushnell; both traced their ancestry back to John Rogers, “the Smithfield martyr.”

8 On her father’s work constructing lighthouses, see Viola Couch Reeling, Evanston: Its Land and Its People (Evanston: Daughters of the American Revolution, Evanston Chapter, 1928), 434, and various city directories available at the Evanston Historical Society, Evanston, IL.
and immediately upon her graduation in 1879, the Women’s Board of the Methodist Episcopal Church sponsored her on a mission to China. Bushnell had been converted at the age of seventeen and had joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, and she saw her medical work as a means to Christian service. Although she would have preferred further post-graduate study and additional clinical work, she complied with the wishes of her church’s Women’s Board, and embarked on a journey half-way around the world. Over fifty years later she reflected that, had she not believed that “All things work together for good to them that love God,” she would consider this choice “the mistake of [her] life.”

In 1879 the well-educated but inexperienced twenty-four-year-old arrived at Kiukiang, China. The summer heat was oppressive, and the missionaries and the local Chinese alike suffered from remittent fever, various pests, and the “intense, sickly heat.” Bushnell herself frequently fell ill during her summers in China, times she later recalled “with horror,” but she was compelled to keep active and to care for those worse off than

---


10 Elizabeth Blackwell wrote that she was “proud of my brave medical sister, Dr. Bushnell,” for the way in which she approached her medical career. “The only disappointment which comes to me now as I draw towards the close of a life full of joy and gratitude,” Blackwell wrote, “is the surprise with which I recognize that our women physicians do not all and always see the glorious moral mission, which as women physicians they are called to fulfil [sic]. It is not by simply following the lead of male physicians, and imitating their methods and practices, that any new and vitalizing force will be brought into the profession. It is by recognizing the inseparable connection of the double elements of human nature, i.e., the soul and the body…(This) furnishes to women physicians their especial raison d’être and necessary place as co-workers in a progressive society. In other words, it is the moral aspect of the physician’s noble work that we (women) are called on to develop in this age” [“Katharine C. Bushnell, M.D.”, Medical Woman’s Journal (November, 1944): 29].

11 Bushnell, Dr. Katharine C. Bushnell: A Brief Sketch of Her Life Work (Hertford: Rose & Sons, 1932), 3-4. Bushnell first wrote Brief Sketch in 1930, responding to a request from the editor of the Biblical Recorder of Australasia that she provide a “sketch of [her] life services” (Ibid., 3). An additional chapter was added before the British publication.

12 On the work of the Methodist Episcopal Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society in Kiu-Kiang and elsewhere, see Annie Ryder Gracey, Medical Work of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society, Methodist Episcopal Church (Dansville, NY: A. O. Bunnell, printer: 1881).
herself. Her work in China was strenuous. “We had no nurses of any sort in those days,” she recalled, “and when I not infrequently needed to perform a surgical operation, I [had to] give the anaesthetic and do all the nursing that the patient had, besides.”

Bushnell’s medical practice drew large numbers of Chinese, due in part to one particularly memorable event. On a hot, July evening, thieves broke into the mission, killing—or so they thought—the gateman. As the thieves were prying open Bushnell’s door, the gateman revived, and ran screaming towards the thieves, crying “I am already killed!” The man’s “unusual courage,” and the fact that he had apparently come back to life, frightened away the robbers. Bushnell then took the “horribly cut up” man inside, as servants and neighbors crowded in after him. As Bushnell dressed his wounds, she and others took his testimony as to what had happened, thinking he might not live the night. This questioning was interrupted several times, as the gateman would faint and then again come to. In the end he recovered, and a rumor soon went around the city and surrounding country that the man had actually died seven times during that night, and that Bushnell had administered medicine each time that brought him to life again.

This story understandably swelled her practice, but Bushnell and her fellow missionaries feared that this sudden notoriety might prove dangerous, as she would inevitably fail to live up to her reputation of one who could raise the dead. It was decided that she be removed from Kiukiang to the mountains for a time, until things quieted down. Athletic by nature, Bushnell was thrilled to be “let loose” in the beautiful, cool mountain air. But on one of her outings she injured her spine, bringing her missionary

---

14 Ibid., 4-5.
career to an end after her third year on the mission field. She returned to the United States in 1882, accompanying her ailing friend and coworker, Ella Gilchrist, to Gilchrist’s hometown of Denver.¹⁵

When Bushnell returned to the United States to practice medicine, she took with her many lessons she had learned during her missionary work in China. Having witnessed the plight of Chinese women, she had developed a heightened sense of the oppression and suffering unique to women’s condition, and she had also begun to think more seriously about the relation between people’s religious beliefs and their views and treatment of women. And, most importantly for her future career, Bushnell’s eyes had been opened to the culpability of traditional Christianity in establishing and supporting structures and ideas that subordinated and oppressed women throughout history.

Although Bushnell had been both a committed Christian and an adventurous young woman when she set off for China as a medical missionary, she was hardly a radical when it came to women’s roles in Christianity. Despite the fact that she had become well acquainted with Frances Willard, the president of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union and a champion of women’s ecclesiastical rights, during her time in Evanston, Bushnell’s views on women and religion were quite conventional. Looking back, Bushnell recalled that while aboard the ship sailing to China she had confidently asserted that “it was neither desirable nor necessary for women to preach the Gospel; it was unbecoming.” Only later did she realize the irony in this proclamation, since she had, after all, gone against the same prejudices to study medicine in those days.

¹⁵ In Brief Sketch Bushnell does not mention Gilchrist’s illness as her reason for returning home, but, as Hardwick points out, Willard attributed her return to the weakness of Bushnell’s friend and former classmate.
Only a few weeks after her arrival in China, however, her opinions “as to woman’s part in the Gospel” began to change. The catalyst for this was a Chinese translation of the Bible, which she discovered to be “a sex-biased translation.” When she asked a male missionary about the biased translation, he replied that “undoubtedly it was so rendered because of pagan prejudice against the ministry of women.” For Bushnell, this was a shocking revelation. It “had never before entered [her] mind that such a thing could be.” She subsequently began to compare both her Chinese and English Bibles to her Greek Testament, and there she found additional signs “that pointed in the same direction.” “Could it be possible,” she asked herself, “that men allowed prejudice to colour Scripture translation?”

As Bushnell continued her mission work and her travels, she devoted herself to a more careful and critical study of the Greek New Testament. She soon turned to the Greek Old Testament as well, and then added the study of Hebrew in order to investigate in more depth the Old Testament scriptures. In her spare moments, aboard ships and on trains, she pursued her Bible studies, meticulously examining the Greek and Hebrew texts to expose instances of male bias that had found their way into the English Bible.

But textual critique was not to be the only, or even the most powerful, motivation for Bushnell’s theological work. To understand its other sources, we must return with Bushnell to the United States, where her sensitivities to women’s conditions and her awareness of the apparent connection between religious beliefs and the treatment of women developed further. Arriving in Denver with Gilchrist, her ill friend who soon

---


17 Ibid. Bushnell noted that “fortunately my early training in a home crowded with nine children and little privacy had developed powers of detachment from surroundings, allowing mental concentration,” enabling her to pursue her biblical studies regardless of the circumstances.
died, Bushnell set up a medical practice, and, more importantly for her future path, she began to work with the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. The WCTU was already a thriving organization that, under the direction of Frances Willard’s “do everything” policy, had branched out into numerous causes besides temperance, including prison reform, social purity work, dress and health reform, woman’s suffrage, improving the conditions of working women, and advancing world peace. By the end of the decade it would become the largest women’s organization of its time. 18 Because of her familiarity with China, Bushnell became involved in the Department for Advancement of Social Purity, heading up the Chinese Departments of the West. 19 In Denver she also began her activities working to reform the city’s prostitutes. 20

Eventually Bushnell concluded that she was no longer content in her medical work, finding herself “too weak nervously” for such duties, and determining that she “had not studied medicine for its own sake, but as a help in Christian work.” 21 When Willard, her former teacher and neighbor, asked her to help as an “evangelist” of the Purity Department of the WCTU, she consented. Accompanied by Bertha Lyons, a “reformed fallen woman” who had been converted at Gilchrist’s deathbed, Bushnell

---

18 Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, “‘The Woman’s Cause Is Man’s’? Frances Willard and the Social Gospel,” in Edwards and Gifford, eds., Gender and the Social Gospel, 26. “At the close of the nineteenth century,” Gifford writes, “the WCTU was one of the most powerful vehicles in the United States for addressing women’s issues and producing strong, independent women, who entered the public world, determined to change it.”

19 Women’s Medical School: Northwestern University (Women’s Medical College of Chicago) Class Histories 1870-1890 (Chicago: H. G. Butler, 1896), 137; Minutes of National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union Convention (1884), xlv, xliv, cited in Hardwick, O Thou Woman, 19.

20 See Union Signal, 4 March 1886. While in Denver she also established a newsletter for Denver’s WCTU, The Challenge. See editorial in The Challenge, 2 September 1886, cited in Hardwick, O Thou Woman, 19.

21 Bushnell, Brief Sketch, 5.
arrived in Chicago in 1886. There the two women did a variety of purity work, establishing “reading rooms,” for women, working in city missions, and establishing the Anchorage Mission, a rescue mission for women that served more than five thousand women a year. During this time she traveled the country for the WCTU, giving purity talks and instructing local WCTU chapters on how to set up reading rooms in their own communities.

While in Chicago, Bushnell had often heard rumors of a “white slave trade” in northern Wisconsin and Michigan. The iron mines and abundant forests of the region brought in crowds of laborers, which in turn reputedly encouraged the establishment of a “criminal industry” luring young women and girls northward under promises of lucrative work. Bushnell decided to investigate the conditions for herself, and in the summer of 1888 she set out on an expedition to gather reliable facts on “the condition of degraded women” in Northern Wisconsin, with the financial backing of the National and Wisconsin Woman’s Christian Temperance Unions. Bushnell’s primary goal was to collect evidence on the circumstances of women in Wisconsin brothels in order that the WCTU could better address the situation, and sort fact from fiction in the daily newspaper stories that had been circulated about the “atrocities” being committed in the lumber camps. Bushnell’s planned one-month investigation extended into four months as she visited fifty-nine “vice dens” “(not nearly all of them to be sure)”, and interviewed

---

23 See Union Signal, 22 April 1886; see Hardwick, O Thou Woman, 21.
24 See also Bushnell, God’s Word to Women (1923; repr., Mossville, IL: God’s Word to Women Publishers, n.d.), paragraphs 616-44. In God’s Word to Women (hereafter abbreviated GWTW) Bushnell numbered each paragraph or section, and all citations in this work refer to Bushnell’s paragraph numbers rather to page numbers.
25 A complete copy of Bushnell’s report is included in the Wisconsin WCTU State News of November 1888.
“some 575 degraded women.”26 Her experience working with city prostitutes had helped prepare her for the best methods to use in procuring information, and she received support from a number of Christian ministers and members of the YMCA in various Wisconsin towns.

In her report Bushnell began by describing the various “dance houses” and dens that housed the prostitutes. The brothels were frequently “surrounded by a close, high fence or stockade,” and inhabited by male and female managers, bar-tenders, musicians, watchmen, and “bull dogs”, in addition to the women who plied their trade there.27 The owners of the dens, Bushnell reported, “having amassed a fortune,” had gained significant influence over “a certain class of newspapers” who white-washed their accounts of the dens, as well as over local officials, businessmen, and regular townspeople. As Bushnell described, local sentiment was often in support of the brothels. Businessmen generally felt that the brothels were good for the local economy, and, much to Bushnell’s dismay, she recorded how physicians frequently not only tolerated but even encouraged “the spread of this iniquity” because of the business it brought them.28

26 Wisconsin WCTU State News (November 1888): 2. Bushnell made clear that she gathered “no information from newspaper clippings, but have gained personal evidence always.” She took pains to describe her methods. She generally proceeded by following up “a story that was being passed about from mouth to mouth, and then ferret out the real facts upon which it rested. That meant in many cases a futile search, as you may be sure. But unless I found reliable persons having some personal knowledge of the incident, it was rejected, excepting in such cases as I was able to get strong corroborative testimony of some other sort.” In any case where the evidence was based only upon the testimony of a “degraded woman” or a “degraded man,” it was so stated.

27 “The men who run these dens are all either foreigners or of foreign extraction,” Bushnell wrote, playing upon the nativist fears common in that era. “But the victims of den keepers and frequenters are largely young American girls who, if in times previous guilty, are of a higher grade of civilization” (Ibid., 3).

28 Ibid., 3-4. Here Bushnell noted the adoption of local “Contagious Diseases Acts” modeled on the British acts that required “all degraded women to be examined either at their own or public expense,” and subsequently given a physicians certificate signed by a medical doctor and, in one instance, by the local mayor himself. Bushnell refrained from reprinting the certificates, which contained “wording too indecent
Perhaps most disturbing, Bushnell reported that not infrequently upstanding members of the community, including many “respectable” women, defended the public necessity of the brothels. “Virtuous” women “(God forbid the misnomer!” exclaimed Bushnell, demanded that “the degradation of young girls” was necessary for their own virtue to be protected. Bushnell recounted the opinion of “one minister of the Gospel,” who feared that “the majority of the women members of his church openly advocate the protection of their virtue by the maintainance [sic] of the white-slave.” Such beliefs were tenable because of a prevailing gender system that divided women into two groups: pure, virtuous (white) women, and fallen women. Only chaste, virtuous women deserved protection, according to this arrangement.

Bushnell, however, worked to counter this unrealistic and harmful dichotomy of womanhood. While she included stories of innocent girls who had been allegedly duped into a life of prostitution, she repeatedly argued for sympathy for those girls who were not of “previous chaste character.” According to the “previous chaste character” statute, men or women who procured a girl of questionable chastity were held guiltless not only in the procurement, even if done under false pretenses, but also of any injustices that they committed against the girl once she had been brought to a brothel, such as withholding pay or physical beatings. Procurers, then, were allowed to defend themselves against charges of fraud or cruelty by “proving a past sin in the victim.” In her investigations

for public print,” but suggested that they were for the purposes of assuring the male associates of the inmates of dens “that they may sin, with all immunity from physical danger.”

29 Ibid., 7. “Judging from my own personal experience,” Bushnell added, “I should say that in some villages of the north, a Social Purity member is as much a subject of hatred, even on the part of many professing Christianity, as is an abolitionist in the South.”
Bushnell uncovered much evidence to support her claim that the law failed to protect a
girl who had at any time previously been guilty of breaking the seventh commandment.\textsuperscript{30}

Either “as a matter of revenue or a source of protection,” then, Bushnell
encountered both men and women who “boldly assert[ed] their belief in the utility of the
den of infamy.”\textsuperscript{31} In fact, it was the social perceptions pertaining to prostitution that
entrapped girls in the trade far more than did stockades or guard dogs, Bushnell
contended. Although some girls were, in fact, tricked into a life of prostitution and held
against their will, Bushnell was glad to report that “that sensational picture of a den with
a stockade as high as its roof, a whole pack of trained hounds and an armed
doorkeeper,—is an exaggeration.” But she countered that there were “more formidable
obstructions to a girl’s escape from a life of shame” than these things. The real obstacles
girls faced were the “total lack of sympathy” on the part of “men, women, and officers of
the law,” together with a common belief in the “necessity” of the dens for public order
and the protection of other women’s virtue.\textsuperscript{32}

Newspaper accounts of Bushnell’s investigations, however, generally failed to
appreciate this point. Instead, newspapers across the state of Wisconsin, and, soon,
around the country, printed articles either decrying the lurid details of young girls held
against their will in stockaded vice dens, or lambasting Bushnell for fabricating such
stories. For a time stories of the Wisconsin vice dens, and Bushnell’s work in revealing

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 7.
their horrors to the world, filled newspapers across the country, and Bushnell became a celebrity of sorts.\textsuperscript{33}

The notoriety Bushnell gained through her exposé of the Wisconsin lumber camps somewhat ironically limited her effectiveness as a public speaker. Wherever she went, she later recalled, audiences were no longer content with a general purity speech, “listening impatiently to plain moral instruction in the principles of purity,” and clamoring to hear more about the “sensational stories” of Northern Wisconsin. The extent to which Bushnell employed sensational stories for her own purposes is not entirely clear; the steady income that her popular talks brought in was likely not lost on Bushnell. However, the sensationalism soon threatened to discredit her work. A woman publicly speaking writing on such disreputable subjects was not immune to slander, or to indirect associations with the subjects of her investigation. No true “lady,” it seemed to some observers, would put herself in such locations or dedicate her life to such an unseemly preoccupation.\textsuperscript{34}

Likely as a result of Bushnell’s notoriety, Frances Willard chose to leave Bushnell off the program of the National Convention of the WCTU the following year. Her

\textsuperscript{33} Bushnell often found the need to defend the accuracy of her revelations, particularly to government officials. At times Christian ministers testified in her defense. See, for example, a letter from C. C. McCabe to Governor Hoard, 2 February 1889. “Northern Wisconsin ‘Slave’ Investigation, 1882-1889,” State Historical Society of Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. McCabe, writing on Methodist Episcopal Church stationery, informed the governor of Wisconsin that he was “receiving letters from our preachers of Wisconsin assuring me that the statements made by Dr. Bushnell, concerning the outrages upon defenseless girls committed in Northern Wisconsin, are true.” See also McCabe to Governor Hoard, 17 April 1889, “Northern Wisconsin ‘Slave’ Investigation, 1882-1889,” State Historical Society of Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh.

\textsuperscript{34} Such aspersions were not uncommon for women who chose this type of reform work. Bushnell would encounter similar sentiment in response to her work in India as well. Lady Henry Somerset, for example, felt that purity work should be done by those “who had a taste for it,” and, part of her problem with Bushnell and Andrew was that they “did have a taste for it.” See E. Moberly Bell, \textit{Josephine Butler: Flame of Fire} (London: Constable and Co., Ltd., 1963), 288, and Hardwick, \textit{O Thou Woman}, 61.
reasons for this decision are not entirely clear, but it probably had to do with the fact that
the “whole country was agitated on the White slave question,” in a large part because of
Bushnell’s disclosures. Bushnell conceded that Willard’s decision was “reasonable
enough,” as “the main object of the Union was Temperance, and its interests must not be
diverted.” Bushnell agreed that it was best that she keep a low profile, and concluded her
involvement in the lumber camps of Northern Wisconsin. 35 She claimed that she had no
desire “to keep an unhealthy sensation alive,” especially because the necessary
legislation—known popularly as the “Kate Bushnell Bill”—had been secured. 36

While casting about for a new purpose, Bushnell turned to prayer. In an account
of her life written several years later, Bushnell recorded how she was guided by a dream
to set off for England, in order to ask Josephine Butler, the world’s leading social purity
activist and the head of the Social Purity Department in England’s WCTU, what she
should do next. 37 Butler had gained prominence in England and America through her
campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. The Acts had been introduced
in Britain in 1864, and strengthened in 1866 and 1869, for the purposes of controlling the
spread of venereal diseases among men serving in the army and navy. The laws required
the compulsory examination or imprisonment of any woman suspected of prostitution. In

35 Bushnell, Brief Sketch, 8. Bushnell’s dedication to her work, and her strong convictions with
regard to the injustices of the double standard of virtue particularly for “fallen women,” suggest that she
may have campaigned more aggressively and, perhaps, with less tact than her later reflections suggest.

36 The “Kate Bushnell Law” (No. 46, S., Chapter 214, Laws of Wisconsin; photocopy received
from The State of Wisconsin Legislative Reference Bureau) was published 28 April 1887. Titled “An act
for the prevention of crime, and to prevent the abducting of unmarried women,” the law stipulated penalties
for the abduction of any “unmarried woman of previous chaste character,” but it also criminalized the
detention of any woman “by force and against her will at a house of ill fame or assignation.” The law also
criminalized the employment as prostitutes of “idiot or imbecile” women, and of any woman under the age
of twenty-one.

37 For a brief description of Butler’s contribution to social purity, see Bushnell’s article “Mrs.
Josephine Butler,” Union Signal, 26 December 1889, 10.
Butler’s eyes, the Contagious Diseases Acts were concrete examples of the double standard of sexuality and of men’s absolute control over women, and they became the focal point of her campaign for women’s rights.38

While still in Illinois, Bushnell wrote a letter to Butler describing her work and depicting the dream. Butler’s first impulse had been to put the letter aside with only a casual glance. But then it occurred to Butler that Bushnell might be particularly suited to conduct an investigation in India similar to the work she had accomplished in Wisconsin. British male commissioners had run into opposition on their fact-finding missions to India, and Butler felt that American women might be better able to go about their work without arousing suspicion. She reasoned further that a woman physician might have special opportunities to visit hospitals in order to gain information that previous male commissioners had failed to glean.39 This suggestion appealed to Bushnell, and it coincided nicely with her plans to travel around the world for the WCTU.40

38 Butler was also a proponent of women’s suffrage, and women’s educational and economic equality, although her primary focus remained for most of her life on the sexual inequalities facing women. For a useful article on Butler’s thought, see Jenny Uglow’s “Josephine Butler: From Sympathy to Theory,” in Dale Spender, ed., Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Key Women Thinkers (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983). Uglow, however, tends to dismiss or regret the religious motivations behind Butler’s activism. “It is extraordinary (but typical of Butler’s ‘blind spots’) that such an intelligent observer of hypocrisy should have remained so uncritical of the paternalistic aspects of the Christian religion, reserving her attack only for its institutions…” For a helpful balance to this perspective that highlights the “radical feminist theology” that Butler worked to develop, see Helen Mathers, “The Evangelical Spirituality of a Victorian Feminist: Josephine Butler, 1828-1906,” Journal of Ecclesiastical History 52, no. 3 (April 2001): 282. On Butler’s life and work, see also Arthur Stanley George Butler, Portrait of Josephine Butler (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1954); Millicent G. Fawcett and E.M. Turner, Josephine Butler: Her Work and Principles, and Their Meaning for the Twentieth Century (London: The Association for Moral & Social Hygiene, 1927); and Barbara Caine, Victorian Feminists (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

39 Bushnell, Brief Sketch, 11.

40 Bushnell explained that Frances Willard had earlier suggested this world tour for the WCTU. Bushnell noted that “it did not occur to me at the time” that Willard had likely proposed a trip around the world since she herself felt “that it would be better for me to pursue my purity activities where it could be done with less sensation because of the Wisconsin episode,” since “the newspapers of the whole country had been stirred up” (Ibid., 9).
Bushnell had found a new task to pursue with moral fervor, but she needed to come up with the financial resources to enable her to embark on her next crusade. As with many female reform workers, Bushnell found it necessary to fund her own work, but Bushnell had no independent source of income or wealth on which to draw. “All my lifetime I have been poor,” Bushnell recalled, “and had I waited for money and time to do what I saw was needed, what God has accomplished through me would never have come to pass.” Bushnell’s “life motto” was a verse from the Bible, “I can do all things THROUGH CHRIST, who strengtheneth me.” Over the course of her career, Bushnell found that “it is He and His strengthening that are needed, and the time and money is supplied to those who will go out with faith and courage.”

It took both faith and courage for Bushnell to set out nearly empty-handed from Illinois to New York City, earning along the way barely enough to reach New York, with nothing left for her voyage to England. But upon her arrival in New York, money “from several unexpected sources” awaited her, convincing her of the divine purpose of her voyage and reassuring her of God’s provision for her life.

It was arranged for Bushnell to conduct her work in India together with Elizabeth Wheeler Andrew, another American woman who had formerly co-edited the WCTU’s Union Signal. Wheeler proved a faithful companion who accompanied Bushnell on this trip and many others over the next several years. After meeting up with Andrew in England, the two women went to talk with Butler in London. Butler had a profound effect

---

41 Ibid., 9-10.

42 Andrew was a fellow Methodist, the widow of a Methodist minister.
on Bushnell, and she was to be extremely influential in Bushnell’s own work.\textsuperscript{43} “I shall not forget the sacred influences of that interview till we meet again in the other world,” Bushnell wrote later about her first meeting with Butler. “Her presence, her manner, her open Bible on the desk before her, all betokened that we had had the privilege of an interview with one who lived near to God, in holy converse with Him.” As Bushnell and Andrew drove away from that first meeting with Butler, they “uttered not a syllable to each other, to break the sense of the Divine Presence that we had brought away from her,” and set off with firm in the knowledge that they “were sent for the purpose.”\textsuperscript{44}

The task before Bushnell and Andrew in 1891 was to investigate the circumstances of the “Queen’s women,” young Indian girls who had been procured for the pleasure of English soldiers stationed in India. Bushnell and Andrew were directed to “enter the country as quietly as possible,” to hold no public meetings, and to undertake their “investigations as cautiously as possible,” in order that they might obtain proof of the policies in effect. Butler’s committee overseeing their investigation had given them the name of a man in Calcutta who could quietly direct them once they arrived. He sent them to “a certain missionary” who could be trusted, and who would give them advice on how to begin. When Bushnell and Andrew met with this missionary, they noted that he “could not hide his impatience at two women who would undertake (to his mind) so unseemly a task.” He attempted to dissuade them of their mission, arguing that it was “only fit work for men, and anyway was a ‘wild goose chase.’” This, however, moved

\textsuperscript{43} Not only would Butler influence Bushnell’s views on social purity and contagious diseases legislation, but she would also encourage her to pursue her theological studies.

\textsuperscript{44} Bushnell, \textit{Brief Sketch}, 11.
Bushnell to “righteous indignation,” and she retorted that, since he was not disposed to help them, she had nothing more to say to him, except that “what pagan women had to suffer at the hands of men from a Christian country” was certainly appropriate for Christian women to investigate, and that God would help them in their cause if he would not. On their own they secured the help of an interpreter, and went on to visit ten cantonments, some two or three times. They managed to find ways to slip past guards and talk with around five-hundred of the girls who were being kept in the British brothels.

After they had completed their investigations, they sent their reports back to London and continued on their world tour to Australia and New Zealand, holding public meetings and lecturing on temperance and purity. Soon, however, they received a call to return to England. Butler had circulated their reports among government officials, and Bushnell and Andrew had been called to give their evidence in person before a Government Departmental Committee “appointed in the name of Lord Kimberly, but in reality by Mr. Gladstone, who expressed himself as ‘simply horrified’” after reading their report. Lord Roberts, the commander of the British troops in India, had denied the women’s report, and he too came before the Committee. Bushnell and Andrew, however, had ample evidence to support their claims, and soon “his effort to refute [their] statements broke down.” Lord Roberts apologized to the Committee for having denied their statements, and asked that his apology be included in the report being sent to Parliament. “This apology made a sensational ripple around the whole world,” Bushnell remembered. After their victory over Lord Roberts, Bushnell and Andrew continued on their world tour. In 1899 they published a book on her experiences, The Queen’s

Daughters in India, which had an estimated circulation of around thirty-five thousand copies.\textsuperscript{46}

It was not long, however, before Bushnell and Andrew were approached by an anti-opium organization and asked to conduct a private investigation on the effects of opium in the Orient. A Royal Commission had been appointed to examine the opium trade between China and India, and many high officials were in favor of the trade. Bushnell and Andrew investigated the “opium dens and dens of vice where opium was used” during two trips to the Orient, “securing much testimony from the victims themselves, as to the destruction of character wrought upon them by its use.” They got an “abundance of evidence that opium fed the social vice, and that the two went hand in hand.” Bushnell and Andrew then returned to England to continue to agitate against the opium trade. Later, they conducted an investigation on behalf of the Marquis of Ripon, the Colonial Secretary, of the “slave trade in Chinese girls for immoral purposes” in Singapore and Hong Kong, in order to strengthen laws protecting women and girls in those regions. As a result of their work, one high official “was retired” and “went into business in London more in keeping with his station—he opened a cigar stand.” Although pleased with the legislation she had shaped in America, England, India, Singapore, and Hong Kong, Bushnell contended that, by itself, changes in the laws “would have accomplished little.” It was instead “the dragging into the light of public intelligence the details of the wrongs committed, and the demand that such wrongs should cease; and the

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 13-14. Also see Bushnell and Andrew, \textit{The Queen’s Daughters in India} (London: Morgan & Scott, 1899).
education of people in an unselfish interest in the welfare of their helpless fellow-beings, that did good.”

While Bushnell was engaged in her investigative work around the globe, she continued to work on her biblical studies. “Nearly every moment of my many sea voyages and railway journeys was spent in these studies,” she recalled. And her studies and experiences were closely intertwined. As she pursued her investigative work, she repeatedly confronted one question: “How can officials of high standing as Christian gentlemen, be so indifferent to the wrongs of women and girls, and so complacent in dealing with the sensuality of men; so ready to condone their offences against decency?” Again and again, Bushnell was left to grapple with how Christian men could lead such unchristian lives with respect to women. Even Lord Roberts, Bushnell noted, in spite of his “noble record in other regards,” had “sent out his orders to under-officials to secure ‘younger and more attractive girls’” for British soldiers, in order to contain their sexual activities to the regulated cantonments. In another instance, Sir John Bowring, the writer of beautiful and well-known Christian hymns like “In the Cross of Christ I Glory,” had been responsible for an ordinance “making it punishable for any Chinese girl to go anywhere else to live but with her owner, who kept her for immoral purposes.” Bushnell remembered another case where a “white haired old gentleman” known for his “saintly character and liberal support of missions,” did nothing in his role as an officer at the “Protectorate” for Chinese girls to rescue “little Chinese slave girls” from lives of prostitution in “dens of vice.” “That certain men should do such things is bad enough,”

47 Bushnell, Brief Sketch, 18-19.
Bushnell wrote, “but that such a man, after we had thoroughly exposed his tactics, and his conduct had become known and was believed, could yet be given public recognition as a Christian brother . . . this is what puzzled one.” Her repeated encounters with Christian men undermining her cause instilled in her a deep distrust of men in general, and of Christian men in particular—a distrust that would enable her to radically challenge the theology handed down to her by generations of men.

By the end of the 1890s, circumstances coalesced that encouraged Bushnell to devote herself more completely to her biblical studies. Bushnell’s crusading spirit, her unwillingness to compromise, and her courage in the face of adversity suited her well for the controversial investigations she had led. However, these attributes could also create difficulties in her relationship with other individuals or organizations that saw more shades of gray, perhaps, than Bushnell’s black-and-white worldview allowed, or that saw the occasional wisdom in compromise.

Already in 1895 there were signs of tension between Bushnell and Andrew, on the one hand, and the WCTU on the other. That summer Bushnell and Andrew were recuperating in Switzerland following another round of investigations, and Josephine Butler, who was vacationing nearby, came daily to meet with them. Bushnell recalled the time as a wonderful and prayerful respite, where they gathered around Butler, as children around a “great Mother,” and “listened in sacred quiet while she told us the deep things

---

48 Ibid., 21-22. Bushnell later had an argument over this man with one of the men missionaries who had accompanied her on her investigations and “knew the facts, and even he contended that the reception was only a due acknowledgment of what the Christian gentleman had done of good in the Colony.” Bushnell was sure to distinguish between their personal habits, which she did not mean to imply might be vicious, and their official acts—“acts which cannot but sweep hundreds, perhaps thousands of girls into prostitution.”
God had taught her in her eventful life." Butler, by that time, had started to become discouraged with the ambivalent views regarding government regulation among certain members of the WCTU, including Frances Willard and Lady Henry Somerset, the president of the British Women’s Temperance Association and vice president of the World WCTU. Butler had written a “Letter of Warning” arguing that there were “no two sides to this issue,” and she thoroughly convinced Bushnell and Andrew of the rightness of her position. This letter persuaded Bushnell and Andrew to “give their lives” to Butler’s work, which proved a “great encouragement” to Butler. There were so many women willing to take up temperance work, Butler reflected, but “few so fitted for repeal work as they are.” She described Bushnell and Andrew as “really valuable women,” and she hoped that they would receive permission from their “Chief,” Willard, since “they do nothing without her word of command.” For several weeks Bushnell and Andrew prepared for future work in the European purity movement, spending time in prayer and study, and conferring regularly with Butler.

Apparently Bushnell and Andrew were not only looking for Willard’s consent, but were also hoping for an official position in the Purity Cause of the WCTU that would provide financial support for their work. Later that summer, however, they were shocked to find out that Willard had instead appointed another woman, a Mrs. Ackerman, to the position. Butler, too, was at a loss to explain this unexpected act. “Lady H. Somerset and Miss Willard have done a thing which I cannot explain except that they were under some

49 Ibid., 17-18.
51 Butler to [?], 26 July 1895, Josephine Butler Correspondence, Women’s Library, London, England.
bad spiritual influences,” Butler wrote. They appointed “a lady to be their representative and worker on the Continent of Europe for what they call the ‘Purity Cause’—a lady who knows nothing of our federation work, and is not even a Christian woman, nor clear headed, but a clever, pushing, ambitious woman.” By appointing Ackerman, Butler felt that “they have overlooked and . . . shamefully slighted our good Mrs. Andrew and Dr. Bushnell,” who had believed that it was intended to appoint them as Butler’s “special fellow workers,” and had been preparing for this work all summer long, and were “fully qualified and fully equipped.” The two women, Butler reported, “feel this slight bitterly.”

Bushnell and Andrew did indeed feel the slight bitterly, but for the present they did not express their feelings of discontent publicly. The following fall Butler wrote a second “Letter of Appeal and Warning” against regulation. “Perhaps some people will think it a little stern,” Butler wrote, “but Dr. Kate Bushnell and others have told me how evil men are, in so many parts of the world,” and how such men could gather groups of women, acting in ignorance, to their side. By the next summer, Bushnell and Andrew could no longer keep their dissatisfaction to themselves, taking the dramatic step of resigning from the World WCTU, convinced that “the high standard of the early days of

---

52 Butler to Mary Priestman, 26 July 1895, Josephine Butler Correspondence, Women’s Library, London, England.

53 Perhaps this lingering bitterness shaped Bushnell’s actions later that fall, as she removed herself from the Executive Committee (her name having been proposed after she complained about the scarcity of Americans on the committee) to protest the fact that Andrew’s name had not been proposed at the same time. In considering her “dear American friends” Butler suggested that “their noble characters are marred by a certain self assertion, and a little jealousy,” and recommended that Mary Priestman be aware of these “little infirmities of the American workers” in order to avoid offending them, “while we rejoice in their good work.” Butler to Mary Priestman, 2 October 1895, Josephine Butler Correspondence, Women’s Library, London, England.

54 Butler to Miss Mary [?], 10 August 10 1895, Josephine Butler Correspondence, Women’s Library, London, England.
the Womens’ CTU, as it took its rise in America are [sic] not being maintained.” Willard regretted their decision, but repudiated their allegations, declaring “we do not admit . . . that the standards of total abstinence and prohibition have been lowered.”55 Bushnell and Andrew planned to take their complaints public, and began work on a leaflet criticizing the WCTU, titled “Lowering the Standards.”56

For Bushnell and Andrew, concerns that the WCTU might be lowering their standards were confirmed in a shocking turn of events beginning in April of 1897. Lady Henry, a consistent supporter of Bushnell’s and Andrew’s investigative work, suddenly reversed her position on the Contagious Diseases Acts, announcing her change of heart in an article in the *Times*.57 WCTU and social purity reformers like Bushnell, Andrew, Butler, and Willard had long opposed legislation that ordered mandatory exams and forced hospitalization for prostitutes in the name of battling sexually transmitted diseases. They saw such laws as the state sanctioning of prostitution, and as yet another example of the unequal standards applied to men and women. Lady Henry instead proposed the compulsory examination of both men and women (much to the horror of many men).58 but many women reformers saw this as a horrific betrayal of their cause. To make matters worse, an element of doubt lingered as to the commitment of Lady Henry to the absolute evils of alcohol.

55 See *The Shield*, January 1898, and the *Times*, November 23, 1897.
56 Andrew to Miss F., 10 March 1898, Josephine Butler Correspondence, Women’s Library, London, England.
58 Lady Henry suggested “that identities of the infected soldiers were to be made public, and promotion tied to morality,” quoted from Fitzpatrick, *Lady Henry Somerset*, 200. One of her opponents described this as “a peculiarly offensive form of Regulation.”
Lady Henry’s about face on the issue of social purity unleashed a furor on the part of women in the WCTU on both sides of the Atlantic. 59 Bushnell and Andrew, for whom this betrayal was particularly bitter, were among the most vocal of Lady Henry’s detractors. They felt betrayed as well by Willard, who, though she did not support Lady Henry’s decision, refused to condemn the activities of the British in Britain. 60 This response infuriated Bushnell and Andrew, who saw their life’s work crumbling before their eyes. They prayed “daily, hourly,” in faith that God would hear their prayers, trusting that it would not be long before “that miserable woman’s public career will be ended.” “Do you think God holds you guiltless for this silence?” Bushnell demanded of Willard. Bushnell was convinced that neither God nor the American women would hold Willard guiltless. 61

Even Bushnell’s and Andrew’s ally, Butler, who shared their condemnation of Lady Henry’s regulationist turn, found their bitterness excessive. Butler had gone so far as to resign from her position as superintendent of the purity department of the World WCTU “on account of the ‘wavering or undecided’ position of the leaders in reference to Regulation.” 62 But after Lady Henry once again reversed her decision and denounced regulation in February of 1898, Butler was willing to forgive past differences and look to the future. Bushnell and Andrew, however, were not so eager to forgive. In America, Willard was relieved and happy with Lady Henry’s abandonment of regulation, but the

59 Sixty-one thousand women signed a petition to bring Butler out of retirement given the circumstances.
60 See Hardwick, O Thou Woman, 65.
62 From Wilson, Rough Record, no. 940, quoted in Hardwick, 67.
battles waged over Lady Henry’s leadership had already taken their toll on Willard, and two weeks after Lady Henry’s retraction, Willard died.\textsuperscript{63} Bushnell and Andrew, who saw in Lady Henry’s retraction only a conspiracy to undercut the overwhelming opposition rising up against her, rejoiced not at the retraction, but instead at Willard’s death.\textsuperscript{64} Upon hearing of Willard’s death, Andrew wrote that she and Bushnell could not help but feel immense relief, “for she who was once so great a blessing, has of late wrought only injury to the many causes which she had laboured so many years to build up.” They saw “the hand of God” in her timely death, but grieved over “a once glorious life crowded with noble activities, gone out in eclipse!”\textsuperscript{65} Willard’s death, however, meant that Lady Henry assumed the presidency of the World WCTU, a fact that stirred Bushnell and Andrew to action, circulating letters and press releases calumniating Lady

\textsuperscript{63} See Fitzpatrick, \textit{Lady Henry Somerset}, 207, and Hardwick, \textit{O Thou Woman}, 68. Hardwick notes that on the same day Sir James Stanfeld, an “ardent supporter of Bushnell, Andrew, and Butler,” also died.

\textsuperscript{64} In a letter from Andrew to Miss Forsaith dated 18 February 1898 [Josephine Butler Correspondence, Women’s Library, London, England], before they had received word of Willard’s death the previous day, Andrew wrote how Canadian women had been preparing a 15,000 leaflets outlining Lady Henry’s support of the Contagious Disease Acts and Butler’s subsequent resignation to be sent throughout the Dominion. But Lady Henry’s retraction would “knock them senseless” and put an end to their propaganda. “Perhaps we feel this thing more than we ought,” Andrew wrote, “but Miss Willard’s trickery turns us sick—we feel fairly poisoned.” Bushnell and Andrew were disgusted with “how triumphantly Miss Willard says ‘I told you so,’” justifying her silence on the matter, and they pointed out how Willard’s letter accompanying Lady Henry’s recantation was dated a day before the recantation was made public, betraying a collusion between the two.

\textsuperscript{65} Andrew to Forsaith, 19 February 1898. Josephine Butler Correspondence, Women’s Library, London, England. “God showed us it might be so, last summer, when we were impelled by the \textit{Spirit of Truth} to write her that earnest warning. We grieve in no ordinary way for her and for all she once was to us, but we thank our God for the immense relief (how terrible that I, who loved her so, for twenty years should have to say it!) that we feel in looking over the field, with her ceaseless and misleading influence removed! For she who was once as great a blessing of late wrought only injury to the very causes which she had believed so many years to build up. I write our inmost thoughts and feeling for you, dear friend, and for Mrs. Butler—if you will kindly send this on to her—for it is too great a pain to repeat, so let one utterance suffice.
Henry. Butler strongly disapproved of Bushnell and Andrew’s extended resentment, and “freely scolded” them for their bitterness, writing “a very serious and solemn letter to [them], showing them they could not have real blessing on their work unless they could to the bottom of their hearts forgive Lady Henry, and love her.” Butler had been “bothered out of [her] life” by those who had been unable to put to rest “this unlucky Lady H. Somerset affair, which is so long drawn out and nonsensical.” Butler believed her letter was “rather a bitter pill,” but Bushnell and Andrew “answered [her] humbly,” and since the letter she had heard no more of their bitterness towards Lady Henry.67

Butler had expressed a grace that Bushnell and Andrew found hard to muster. Although they obediently refrained from their vitriolic public attacks on the new president of the World WCTU, they found that they were no longer as enthusiastically received in British temperance and social purity circles as they had been before the Lady Henry affair. In March of 1898, while they were working on a draft of their “Lowering the Standards” article, Bushnell referred to difficulties she was experiencing in securing speaking appointments. She and Andrew gathered from members of the British Women’s Temperance Association that it was “not convenient” to arrange a meeting for them the following month, and “we had no desire to press the matter,” Bushnell added.68

66 Bushnell to Forsaith, 21 February 1898 and 22 February 1898. Josephine Butler Correspondence, Women’s Library, London, England. They hoped to “stir up the American women” against Lady Henry retaining the presidency of the World WCTU.

67 Butler to Mrs. Spence Watson, 15 March 1898. Josephine Butler Correspondence, Women’s Library, London, England. Butler noted that Bushnell and Andrew were not alone in their bitterness toward Lady Henry, and that a number of women in the BWTA shared this resentment and “horrid spirit.” Butler wrote of Lady Henry, “I had to separate myself sharply and publicly from her expressed opinion, but I never had any thought of her except of pity and kindness.”

68 Letter from Bushnell to “My Dear Friend” [likely Forsaith], 10 March 1898. Josephine Butler Correspondence, Women’s Library, London, England. They “could not help feeling, more and more, that the BWTA’s of both [Sunderland] and Newcastle do not greatly desire our presence at this crucial time.
It was around this time that Butler called Bushnell and Andrew to her in London, to “share a message from God” for them. She told Bushnell that the time had come for her to stop her purity addresses, since “the public will keep you on them forever,” while they were “wearing out your nerves.” She recommended that Bushnell “turn away from the painful details of [her] Oriental investigations, and refuse to talk of them.” She advised Bushnell instead to “hold some Christian meetings of a general sort,” knowing that Bushnell was “well equipped for such work by your Bible studies.” Butler counseled Bushnell not to think of this shift as an abandonment of purity work, but simply as a turn in a different direction.69

This was more than simply an attempt to remove the potentially divisive Bushnell and Andrew from the still tender British world of social purity work, though it may well have served that purpose. While it provided the American women with an opportunity for a graceful exit, Butler’s suggestion that Bushnell pursue her biblical studies reflected Butler’s own commitment to the importance of theology.70 And, as Butler suggested, this shift in purpose was not, in fact, an abandonment of her purity work. As Bushnell had often contemplated, one of the conundrums of social purity work was understanding how “Christian” men could act in such unchristian ways. An examination of the religion that supported such hypocritical values would be crucial to the cause.71

They would rather have us, if at all, in the autumn—after all Lady H’s matters are settled,” Bushnell explained.

70 See Mathers, “The Evangelical Spirituality of a Victorian Feminist.”
71 Bushnell noted that, with respect to Christian men treating women in a decidedly unchristian manner, she “had reached [her] own conclusion about the matter, and it was fully corroborated in the course
Bushnell recounted that she was “unable to describe with what joy [she] welcomed this advice.” Already after her northern Wisconsin and Michigan investigations Bushnell had begun publishing her critiques of conventional Christian theology, pointing out how a male commentator could, “by sheer masculine force, keep the verses plumb to his ideas of womanly uprightness,” and she was eager to continue the work in greater detail.\(^72\) She “opened [her] heart freely to Mrs. Butler,” sharing with her how she had longed to “give Bible instruction on the lines of purity, and to show the importance of the freedom of women for the purification of society.” Bushnell described how Butler “entered most heartily into the plan, and after long discussion and prayer over the matter,” Bushnell, Andrew, and Butler found they were all “fully agreed that the social evil would never be got rid of so long as the subordination of woman to man was taught within the body of Christians.” They further agreed that the purity crusade could not succeed “until men—Christian men—came to understand that a woman is of as much value as a man; and they will not believe this until they see it plainly taught in the Bible.”\(^73\)

Feeling like “a bird set free from long imprisonment,” Bushnell finished her few remaining public meetings against vice, and in 1901 returned with Andrew to America, to

---

72 This example is taken from her discussion of I Corinthians 14 in a *Union Signal* article (September 12, 1889), quoted in Catherine Clark Kroeger, “The Legacy of Katherine Bushnell: A Hermeneutic for Women of Faith,” *Priscilla Papers* 9, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 1.

plunge into Bible study. They settled in Oakland, California, and although they initially continued their purity work, investigating the traffic in Chinese women between the California cities of Sacramento, Fresno, Bakersfield, Stockton, San Jose, and others, and the British colonies in Asia, Bushnell increasingly focused her attention on her biblical studies. She spent seven years in this study, later returning to England to visit several libraries, including the British Museum and the Gladstone Library at Hawarden, Wales, to have access to Biblical literature.

In 1908, while Bushnell was studying in Britain, she began a correspondence course for women, issuing lessons in mimeograph sheets “at periodic intervals.” Though she was urged to publish her findings, she insisted that the time had not yet come. Two years later, she published *God’s Word to Women: 101 Questions Answered*, which previewed some of her findings, but was not the first edition of her later book, *God’s

---

74 The feeling of imprisonment could well be due in a large part to the controversy surrounding Lady Henry, and Bushnell and Andrew’s harsh criticism of her and ensuing bitterness. In a letter written in March of 1898, Andrew wrote to Forsaith asking for prayers that “the heavy cloud may be lifted from my spirit.” Without being able to define it exactly, “save as a very real and awful oppression of the enemy,” Andrew “groaned under” its oppression. Andrew to Forsaith, 22 March 1898. Josephine Butler Correspondence, Women’s Library, London, England.


76 On Bushnell’s studies in England and Wales, see Madeline Southard’s article “Studies of Dr. Bushnell,” *Woman’s Pulpit* 3, no. 2 (September-October 1926): 3. The Gladstone collection, which was housed at St. Deiniel’s Library in Hawarden, was under the supervision of Warden Canon Joyce. Canon Joyce was “exceedingly courteous and helpful, ready and eager to help with a Syriac or other unintelligible word,” and he “hunted up things for Dr. Bushnell and loaned her books from his personal library.” Southard added that “As the good Canon was a high churchman one wonders if he knew just what was to be done with all this erudition. But we gather from Dr. Bushnell’s words that she did not fully know herself the use she would make of this, only she was determined to know what the Bible really said about women.”

Word to Women.\textsuperscript{78} The earliest form of that book appeared in London in 1911, under the name \textit{Woman’s Correspondence Bible Class}.\textsuperscript{79} This work was revised and expanded over the course of nearly two decades, with the last edition published in 1930. All of these studies were published by Bushnell herself, and it is not clear if she ever sought outside publication. As self-published works, each of these studies bore the unmistakable imprint of Bushnell’s style; they were fairly unorganized collections of densely argued propositions, supported by frequent references to the Hebrew and Greek and various citations of both biblical and secular scholars. Untouched by an editor’s hand, Bushnell’s engaging, and at times even sharp or sarcastic voice came through. But even the final editions of \textit{God’s Word to Women} read like the compilation of rather disparate lessons that they were.\textsuperscript{80}

The reception of Bushnell’s work was undoubtedly limited not only by the disordered presentation of her materials, but also by her own lack of clarity as to who her audience actually was. She wrote most obviously to other Christian women, but at the same time her engagement with the scholarly literature and her extensive digressions on

\textsuperscript{78} Later editions of \textit{God’s Word to Women: 101 Questions Answered} were published in 1912 and 1914. I am greatly indebted to Dana Hardwick, who has worked out the publication history of Bushnell’s Bible studies in detail (see Hardwick, \textit{O Thou Woman}, 86-87).

\textsuperscript{79} According to Hardwick’s research in the \textit{British Museum General Catalogue of Printed Books to 1955}, vol. 4, compact ed. (New York: Readex Microprint Corporation, 1967), 984, this edition was “a series of Bible lessons ‘reproduced from typewriting’” (Hardwick, 86). In her “Magna Charta,” Penn-Lewis describes these lessons as “mimeographed.” Hardwick writes that the first American edition of the correspondence lessons was published in 1916, called \textit{God’s Word to Women: Forty-eight Bible Lessons of the Women’s Correspondence Bible Class}. In 1918, two volumes of forty-eight lessons were published together in a clothbound edition, which Bushnell subsequently called the first edition. See Bushnell, \textit{The Supreme Virtue: Loyalty to God’s Anointed King} (Oakland, CA: privately printed, 1924), 58. In 1923 another edition was issued, possibly from England, with one hundred lessons, and the final title: \textit{God’s Word to Women: One Hundred Bible Studies on Woman’s Place in the Divine Economy}. The final edition came out in 1930 from China, with a new preface. See Hardwick, \textit{O Thou Woman}, 86-87.

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{God’s Word to Women} received favorable reviews and notices in the \textit{Australian Biblical Recorder} (April 1924), \textit{The Christian} (London, May 15, 1924), and \textit{The Baptist} (1924-1925), and a less favorable review from Griffith Thomas in the \textit{Sunday School Times} (March 22, 1924). See Clark Kroeger, “The Legacy of Katherine Bushnell,” 3.
the nature of biblical Hebrew and Greek and the original meanings of words, while
constituting the very basis of her work, undeniably affected the popularity of the work. 

*God’s Word to Women* was not a book that could be read easily from cover to cover, nor
was it a work that could be quickly grasped or effectively summarized. It required from
the reader a diligent commitment to plod through detailed analyses of obscure passages
from the Old Testament and New, and a patience to follow the several themes Bushnell
developed, dropped, and picked up again throughout the book.\(^{81}\)

When Bushnell returned to Oakland, she continued to revise and expand *God’s
Word to Women*, and she published several other shorter pieces on related topics.
Convinced that Christian beliefs supported the sexual and social oppression of women,
she considered her biblical research and theological writings “vital to the advancement of
purity.” She was confident that, because of her work, the next version of the Bible would
not contain the faulty translations of the past. Although she was aware that few
theologians would themselves devote years of labor to consider the injustices perpetuated
by erroneous translations of the scriptures, she believed that “theologians of our day are
generally not so narrow on the ‘woman question’ as in the past,” and was optimistic that
they “would welcome work of this sort of which they can take advantage.”\(^ {82}\)

---

\(^{81}\) Recognizing the relative inaccessibility of Bushnell’s work, Jessie Penn-Lewis published her
“*Magna Charta*” 1919, with Bushnell’s blessing, a shorter summary of many of Bushnell’s main points.
Penn-Lewis was a prominent Keswick revivalist and had played a central in the Welsh revival of 1904.
While she affirmed the value of the complete *God’s Word to Women*, Penn-Lewis explained her
abridgement by stating that “(1) the complete edition is so full of deep, solid information that many women
who need its truths may not have the foundational knowledge for grasping at this time, and (2) the book has
had to be issued at a price which is prohibitive to widespread circulation while the need for knowledge of
the truths it contains is urgent” (18).

\(^{82}\) Bushnell to Dummer, 20 May 1921. Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.
Bushnell wrote that she had “had much encouragement from some of them in my work; real scholars of
undoubted standing.”
Bushnell “begrudged the time” she was “forced to lose” from her biblical research, but in 1918 she found it necessary to put aside her work for a time to “sound a warning in a great emergency.”

The source of her alarm was a new government policy on the containment of venereal diseases. Known as the “American Plan,” new measures were introduced to protect soldiers from disease as they were waiting to travel overseas in the First World War. To Bushnell’s dismay, the measures received widespread public support, and she felt it her duty to raise awareness of the injustices to women that were being perpetuated in the name of national defense. To Bushnell, the state policies were clearly reminiscent of the government regulationism she had opposed in India, China, and Britain, and in the woods of northern Wisconsin and Michigan. They punished any woman suspected of being a prostitute with forced hospitalization or imprisonment, and subjected her to compulsory physical examinations, while men were free to do as they pleased. Unlike her earlier crusades, however, Bushnell was unable to convince the public of the righteousness of her cause. She created a small stir, but ultimately failed to affect United States policy.

Following the war she returned to her biblical studies. She joined the Association of Women Preachers soon after its organization in 1919, and contributed frequent articles to its journal, the Woman’s Pulpit. She also maintained ties with some of her British friends, although Butler’s death in 1906 had been a great loss to her, and she served for

83 Ibid.
84 A copy of her pamphlet “What’s Going On” was sent to William Healy, author of The Individual Delinquent, Katharine Anthony, author of Feminism in Germany and Scandinavia, and to Jane Addams, “who tried to interest some Chicago women in the unwisdom of the lock-hospital, and to others whom will be interested,” by prominent social reformer Ethel Dummer (Dummer to Bushnell, 13 March 1920. Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute). Several thousand copies of the pamphlet rallied the British public to oppose similar measures in their own country, but Bushnell was unable to sway many Americans.
several years on the International Executive Committee of the British Moral and Social Hygiene Association, continuing on as honorary vice-president of the association into the 1920s. This information comes from a letter written by Bushnell to Dummer, 15 March 1920. Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

86 In 1929 Bushnell returned again for an extended visit to China. See Woman’s Pulpit 5, no. 2 (March-April 1930), and a letter Bushnell wrote from Shanghai (Bushnell to Dummer, 7 October 1929. Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute).

87 Already in 1926, a Woman’s Pulpit article reported that Bushnell’s “life has been a long and fruitful one, and her declining years are being spent in her home Sunnyside…” (“God’s Word to Women,” Woman’s Pulpit 3, no. 1 (July 1926): 6]. See Bushnell’s extended obituary in the Oakland Tribune, February 10, 1946, and “Dr. Kate Bushnell Competes Her Work,” Union Signal, April 6, 1946.

88 Taken from Ruth Hoppin, “Legacy of Katharine Bushnell,” Update: Newsletter of the Evangelical Women’s Caucus 11 (Winter 1987-88): 5-6. Bushnell’s pastor, K. Fillmore Gray, had also written an article about Bushnell four years before her death, which was published in The Christian Advocate, January 8, 1942.

89 In addition to Jessie Penn-Lewis’s abridgement of Bushnell’s work, the “Magna Charta”, published in 1919, Bushnell’s work also influenced Starr’s Bible Status of Woman, and as Hardwick notes in Oh Thou Woman, L.E. Maxwell also drew on Bushnell’s work in his Women in Ministry [introduction by Ruth C. Dearing] (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1987), as did Russell Prohl in The Ministry of Women (1956), according to Catherine Clark Kroeger in “The Legacy of Katherine Bushnell,” 3. It is also likely that Helen Barrett Montgomery was influenced by Bushnell’s writings in her Centenary Translation of the New Testament (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1924), although, as Hardwick notes, she does not cite Bushnell. On Montgomery’s Centenary Translation, see Sharyn Dowd, “Helen Barrett
Lee Anna Starr (1853-1937)

Lee Anna Starr was born in West Virginia in 1853 to Sarah J. Harper Starr and Dr. David Lee Starr. Her father was a minister and a medical doctor, and her mother was a progressive woman, a former college classmate and personal friend of Lucy Webb Hayes, the wife of President Rutherford B. Hayes, and a “zealous champion” of “every worthwhile reform.” When Lee Anna Starr was young her family moved near Pittsburgh, finally settling in Bellevue, Pennsylvania. In both her dedication to women’s rights and her commitment to religious reform to achieve those rights, Starr was very much her mother’s daughter. Sarah J. Harper had been a sixteen-year-old college student looking ahead to a life of foreign missionary service when she met David Starr, a young physician who also hoped to enter the mission field. The two decided to marry, but Sarah refused to allow the word “obey” to be used in the ceremony. A Reverend Maxwell Gladdis, the assistant pastor of Morris chapel in Cincinnati, agreed to eliminate the word from the marriage vows, and the two young people were happily married on May 22, 1849. A few inconsiderate friends, however, claimed that their marriage could not be


valid without the clause. The controversy eventually reached the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Cincinnati, where “the clergyman who had omitted the word was ‘churched.’” Eventually, however, the phrase “serve and obey” “was ordered stricken out of the matrimonial ritual of the discipline of the Methodist church.”

Starr noted that, though as a prospective bride her mother “resolved not to take the vow of obedience at the hymeneal altar,” “through all the subsequent years she was a most devoted wife and mother.” Sarah left a lasting influence on her daughter, and Starr dedicated her book *The Bible Status of Woman* to her memory. Borrowing the words of Henrietta G. Moore, a prominent Unitarian minister and fellow WCTU worker, Starr wrote, “Of all women to be immortalized, of all women to whom an after-age should bring gratitude, are the women who had the personality and the greatness to rise above the ignorance and superstition evidenced in custom, and the oppression defined in law.” “Such a woman,” added Starr, “was my mother.”

Growing up in a household apparently not governed by “custom,” Starr was “a spirited girl.” “When she knew she was doing the right thing,” her sister recalled, “she stuck to her decision.” This sense of courageous conviction frequently embroiled Starr

---

91 “First American Bride to Object to Serve and Obey,” *Elyria Chronicle* (Ohio), December 7, 1905. I have been unable to locate an reference to the Starrs’ wedding vow dilemma in the records of the Methodist Episcopal Church, although that denomination was, in 1864, the first of the Wesleyan churches to remove the stipulation that a wife serve and obey her husband, though no official explanations were given. On the history of Methodist marriage rites, see the chapter Karen B. Westerfield Tucker’s chapter “The Solemnization of Christian Marriage” in her *American Methodist Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Tucker suggests that the change was “undoubtedly in response to evolving perceptions about women in church and society, but also perhaps because of the spiritual constraints that might be imposed upon a wife whose husband was at odds with the mission and ministry of the church.” This was particularly a factor, Tucker suggests, in an era when a woman’s abolitionist commitments could have been restrained by an unsympathetic husband.


93 June Greene, “First Woman,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, July 31, 1939. This account is written from the memory of Starr’s sister, Angie Starr Martin.
in controversy. She was one of the founding members of the Allegheny county Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. The group achieved notoriety with a temperance “crusade” in 1874. Starr, her two sisters, and a group of around thirty women were arrested when they refused to cease their demonstration in front of a saloon. The women marched two by two into the jail, singing defiantly, “Am I a soldier of the Cross, A follower of the Lamb, And shall I fear to own His cause, Or blush to speak His name…”\textsuperscript{94} While awaiting their hearing, the women, unable to sit in the filthy prison room, continued to march and sing “songs of triumph like Paul and Silas of old.” Crowds turned out to witness the events, and several Pittsburgh ministers supported the women in their violation of the law. Against the acting mayor who had ordered the women arrested, the three presiding judges sided with the women, declaring that “singing and praying on the street is not disorderly conduct.” They also ordered that the city return the fines collected from the women. As the women exited the courthouse they were greeted with cheers from the crowd that had gathered, and all marched to the Methodist Episcopal Church where a service of singing, prayer, and thanksgiving was hastily organized. From that point on, “the crusade was pursued faithfully…without any interference from the City authorities.”\textsuperscript{95}

The crusade continued for nearly a year, and, along with other Midwestern crusades, served to stir up women to form local temperance organizations. Word of the

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{History of the Woman’s Temperance Crusade and Allegheny County Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, 1874-1930} (n.p., n.d.), 16-17.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 19-20. The author [perhaps one of Starr’s sisters] concluded her report of the crusade by noting that the “true character” of the acting mayor who had ordered the arrest of the Crusaders “was afterwards brought to light, he being convicted and sentenced to seven years in the penitentiary, for the double crime of adultery and abortion which resulted in the death” of both the child and the mother, a young girl brought to ruin by the man (Ibid., 20). The temperance women had been fined the day before they were arrested, and fined 10 dollars each. The fines had been paid, against their wishes, by a man who believed in their cause (see Greene, “First Woman”).
Allegheny women’s activities reached Frances Willard, a schoolteacher at the time, and while in Pittsburgh visiting old friends at the Female College, Willard asked to be taken to witness the crusaders. At the crusade headquarters she was “warmly welcomed,” and soon found herself accompanying a young woman to Sheffner’s Saloon. There the women “arranged themselves along the curbstone,” careful not to obstruct passers-by, and “a sweet voiced young girl,” Starr’s younger sister Angie, began to sing. “I think it was the most novel spectacle that I recall,” Willard later recounted. “A sorrowful old lady, whose only son had gone to ruin through that very death-trap knelt on the cold, moist pavement and offered a broken-hearted prayer, while all our heads were bowed.”

The group then moved on to another saloon, where they were permitted to enter. “I had no more idea of the inward appearance of a saloon than if there had been no such place on earth,” Willard remembered, taking in the barrels of alcohol, glittering decanters, sawdust floors, and “abundant fumes.” The women sang “Rock of Ages” as Willard had never heard it sung before, and then they asked Willard if she would pray. “It was strange, perhaps,” she recalled, “but I felt not the least reluctance as I knelt on the sawdust floor, with a group of earnest hearts around me, and behind them, filling every corner and extending out into the street, a crowd of unwashed, unkempt, hard-looking men.” She prayed “as truly” as she ever had in her life, save perhaps at her sister’s deathbed. “This,” she recollected, “was my Crusade baptism.” The next day she left Pittsburgh, and “within a week had been made president of the Chicago W.C.T.U.” Five years later, Willard became the president of the national organization. 96

96 Temperance Crusade, 21-23. See also Ruth Bordin’s Frances Willard: A Biography (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), along with Bordin’s Woman and Temperance, as well as
In addition to the education in social activism Starr received through her involvement in the Allegheny County WCTU, she also received a solid education of the more conventional sort. Although she developed an interest in biblical studies, she apparently had no intention of pursuing the ministry as a young woman. While studying Hebrew at a summer session in Chautauqua, New York, however, she was “induced” by her professor to attend seminary. “With great reluctance,” she entered Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, of the United Presbyterian Church, though it was not formally open to women and no woman had ever studied there.

Starr worked diligently at her studies, returning home each evening and “studying to the early morning hours,” dunking her face in a basin of cold water to keep awake until she completed her lessons. One man who attended classes with Starr later recalled how the other men were often hesitant to translate their Greek and Hebrew when Starr was present, since her translations were “so accurate and smooth,” compared to their own “jerky” renditions.

At the beginning of her second year Starr inquired into the likelihood of her receiving a diploma upon completion of her course, and was told that her chances were small. With a stubbornness reminiscent of her mother’s, she insisted that she would not accept a certificate in the place of a diploma. She was eventually brought before the examining board of thirty-six representatives of five synods, who voted unanimously to


97 According to the Encyclopedia of World Methodism (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), Starr “was educated in the public schools at Athens, Ohio, and did further study at the University of Chicago, Augustana Theological Seminary, and Northwestern University.”

98 Starr attended the College of Liberal Arts and School of Sacred Literature in Chautauqua, New York.

99 Greene, “First Woman.”
grant her a diploma, and in that act officially opened up the seminary to women.\textsuperscript{100} Graduation, however, presented another difficulty. It was customary for graduating students to read their theses from the pulpit at commencement. Allowing a woman to stand in the pulpit, however, seemed a far more serious matter than admitting her to classes had been. This time the faculty came together to debate the “serious step” at hand. Starr’s “excellent scholastic record” was cited in defense of her right to present her thesis and “take her place beside the men,” but such a step seemed too radical to some. After several hours the faculty reached a compromise, deciding that Starr would indeed receive her diploma, but that a young man would read her thesis for her.\textsuperscript{101}

“Everything was satisfactory,” a newspaper reported, “until they informed Miss Starr of the decision.” She “instantly refused,” stating in a determined voice, “I wrote the paper and I am entitled to read my work along with the men in the class.” Starr held her position and could not be persuaded to back down. Another meeting was called, and it was finally decided that no student would read his or her thesis at commencement. Satisfied with equal treatment, Starr graduated from the seminary in 1893, becoming the Reverend Lee Anna Starr.\textsuperscript{102} She was then ordained in the Northern Illinois Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church.\textsuperscript{103} Upon her ordination Starr did not relinquish her zeal for women’s rights. A year after she graduated from seminary, a passionate article written by Starr appeared in the \textit{Union Signal}, the journal of the WCTU. In it, Starr

\textsuperscript{100} This account is drawn from Frances Drewry McMullen, “Women in the Pulpit,” \textit{Woman Citizen}, (February 21, 1925): 12-13, 27-28.
\textsuperscript{101} Greene, “First Woman.”
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} The first woman to be ordained in the Methodist Protestant Church was Anna Howard Shaw, in 1880, after she had been refused ordination in the Methodist Episcopal Church.
argued that a woman should keep her own name as a hyphenated middle name when she married, for legal, religious, and social reasons. And a married woman “should, under no circumstance, tolerate such address as Mrs. Charles Smith, Mrs. Robert Williams.” Such customs, Starr contended, “originated in the desire to sink woman’s personality in that of her husband.” She noted that “it may be proper for a dog to wear a collar with his master’s name thereon, but our soul enters protest when the wife wears the collar.” The custom indicates in emphatic terms the husband’s proprietorship in his wife.104

In 1895 Starr was appointed pastor of Essex Church of the Wyoming Circuit of the Northern Illinois Conference of her denomination. It was not long before she encountered difficulties at her first church, where “many of the people thought it was outrageous that a woman was allowed to occupy and preach Sunday sermons.” One woman in the congregation in particular “made several scenes and was very unpleasant at first.” A few months later she was appointed to start new churches in Essex and Wyoming, Illinois, and over the next years she served a succession of churches in Illinois and Ohio at two- and five-year intervals. Starr had a reputation for raising funds and keeping her churches in good repair, and was known as “a keen conversationalist and brilliant pulpit speaker.”105 At each new church she found the need to reestablish herself as a capable female preacher. A newspaper report described in detail her inaugural sermon at the South Park Methodist Protestant Church in Canton, Ohio, in 1900. The “black-gowned, dark-haired, bright-eyed, earnest-faced young lady, small and slender, almost girlish in appearance,” rose from her seat at the beginning of the service to

104 Starr, “Maiden Name the Middle Name,” Union Signal, 27 September 1884, 6.
105 Greene, “First Woman.”
announce the opening hymn. Although she appeared “self-possessed” and “self-unconscious,” and though she gave “a first impression of zealousness and concentration and absorbedness in her work,” she “looked for all that, hardly like the one to fill a strong man’s place,” and hardly like the one to fill her male successor’s shoes. As Starr began her sermon on a passage in First Corinthians—“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize”—the reporter anticipated a discourse “that would be pedantic, pretty in its way, and practically pointless and purposeless.” But this was not the case. Starr proceeded to sketch “with such particularity” the historical context of the passage, describing athletic races in biblical times, in a way that “could not otherwise have been so well accomplished.” The reporter was soon satisfied that “no bit of word-painting” was purely ornamental, but each sentence she uttered “was shortly seen to have its bearing.” 106

“The sermon was a strong one,” the reporter concluded, “and effective. It was such a discourse as a man six feet in height, 200 pounds in weight and half a lifetime in the gospel ministry need not have been ashamed of preaching, nor of acknowledging had taken him a week to write.” The community could rest secure in knowing that “the pulpit of the South Park church will not lose prestige while its incumbent is the Rev. Miss Lee Anna Starr.” 107

---

106 “South Park Pastor: Rev. Miss Lee Anna Starr, First Woman at the Head of Any Canton Church,” Canton Weekly Register (Illinois), October 11, 1900. For a brief account of the history of the South Park Methodist Protestant Church, see Edward R. Lewis, Jr., Reflections of Canton in a Pharmacist’s Show Globe: A Comprehensive History of Canton, Illinois and the Important Events in Fulton County, 1967. I am grateful to Kim Bunner of Parlin-Ingersoll Library in Canton, IL, for providing me with these materials.

Before her ordination Starr had been president of the Allegheny County Young Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, and she continued her affiliation with the national organization while working as a pastor. She occasionally penned articles on women’s rights in the Union Signal, the journal of the WCTU, and she regularly spoke on woman’s suffrage for the organization. Over the years Starr “made a distinguished name for herself on the lecture platform under the auspices of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” appearing “in almost every state in the union.”

She also continued the struggle for ecclesiastical equality for women that she had begun while in seminary. On a practical level, defending the right for women to preach the gospel became a primary concern. In 1900 she published a booklet titled The Ministry of Woman, a careful, scholarly work that used passages from the Old Testament and the New to support women’s right to preach. Drawing on theological works like A. A. Hodge’s Outlines of Theology, Cunningham Geike’s Life and Words of Christ (1883), and A.J. Gordon’s important 1896 article “The Ministry of Women,” Starr worked to establish a solid biblical precedent for female preaching. Convinced that the Bible supported women in the ministry, she was confident that “no Presbytery, Synod nor General Assembly; no Annual nor General Conference; no ecclesiastical Convention can forever keep woman out of the pulpit,” since “the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”

---

108 See “Maiden Name the Middle Name,” Union Signal, 27 September 1894, 6; and Union Signal, 9 May 1895, on Starr speaking at a woman’s suffrage symposium.


112 Starr, Ministry of Women, 7.
With arguments similar in many ways to Katharine Bushnell’s, Starr discussed “unwarrantable and inexcusable” emendations of Scripture, which demonstrated “to what length even Christian men can go when their minds are warped by prejudice.”\textsuperscript{113} She pointed out several instances of “the unfair treatment that woman has received at the hands of King James’ translators,” and concluded that, “when the question of the ministry of women is at issue,” the Authorized Version proved unreliable.\textsuperscript{114}

That same year she served as a ministerial delegate to the General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church—only the second woman to do so—and she preached before that body.\textsuperscript{115} Over the course of her career, Starr served several local congregations throughout the Midwest. In the early 1900s, she received some media attention for her staunch opposition to divorce, which she saw as a “growing evil” that contradicted Jesus’ command in the New Testament that what “God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.”\textsuperscript{116} Starr, at the time a minister in Paris, Illinois, had more than once refused to marry a couple if “one of the contracting parties was a divorcée.” Only in one instance, reported an Iowa newspaper in 1905, had Starr “deviated from her rule not to marry a person who has been absolved from a marriage contract by legal action.” In that case, “the ceremony had practically commenced” before Starr learned that the bride-to-be was divorced. “She immediately caused the proceedings to be postponed until she learned that the divorce had been obtained on the ground of desertion, and that the wife

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 15. In this particular instance she was referring to the translators of the Authorized Version of the scriptures, who reversed the order of the names Priscilla and Aquila in order to lessen suggestions of Priscilla’s leadership. I have not been able to discover if Starr and Bushnell were aware of each other’s work at this point in time, although it is doubtful.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 16-17.

\textsuperscript{115} Starr was the second woman to serve as a delegate to the General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church.

\textsuperscript{116} Matthew 19:6.
had been unable to secure trace of the husband who had wronged her.” Such conditions constituted scriptural grounds for divorce, Starr decided, and proceeded with the wedding.117

For several years Starr was the pastor of the Plymouth Church in Adrian, Michigan, which served as the college church for Adrian College, and Starr became involved in the life of the school.118 In 1909 she decided to leave Adrian, accepting an assignment to Casselton, Ohio. The Quarterly Conference expressed their regret at Starr’s decision to leave, commending her for her services to the church, for her “able, helpful sermons,” and her “capable management of the various interests of the church.” They declared that the church had been “strengthened in all of its departments” during her pastorate,” and wished her well as she continued on her way.119

Throughout the 1910s Starr continued to serve as pastor of local churches throughout the Midwest, returning to Adrian on occasion to speak at the college.120 Starr also continued to lecture on woman’s suffrage under the auspices of the WCTU. She frequently gave an address titled “Woman’s Suffrage from a Biblical Standpoint, Objections to the Enfranchisement of Women Answered.” In this talk she raised many issues she would later elaborate in her book The Bible Status of Woman. In order to

117 Nashua Reporter (Iowa), June 22, 1905.

118 Starr apparently lived in one of the dorms, South Hall, for at least part of her time at Plymouth. See Douglas MacNaughton, A History of Adrian College (Adrian, MI: Adrian College, 1994). I am grateful to Noelle Keller, librarian at Adrian College, who provided me with this source. Starr was the first woman pastor at Plymouth. During her years at Adrian she was able to take a trip to the Holy Land, an inspirational time where she was “on the same ground and at the same places that our Savior had been nineteen hundred years ago” [“Lecture,” The College World, Adrian, Michigan (April 1908): 163-4]. Chris Momany, Chaplain of Adrian College, generously provided me with information on Starr’s work at Adrian College.

119 Plymouth Chapel Quarterly Conference Reports, July 1885-April 1926. Minutes of November 1, 1909, p. 179.

120 She also served Avalon Park Church in Chicago, and apparently returned in 1915 to South Park Church in Canton, Illinois (See Gettysburg Compiler, August 21, 1915).
ground her advocacy of woman’s suffrage in the scriptures, Starr began her address by examining Genesis and establishing the original equality of men and women. But, she argued, generations of men had subjected women so that they were “lowered to the estate of a slave” until they “counted for less than a cow.” Jesus Christ came as “the emancipator of women,” teaching the equality of women and the end to her degradation.121

Starr advocated the need for women themselves to study the scriptures, in order to bring to light the true liberation outlined there. She again took issue with the King James Version of the Bible, arguing that that translation was “highly colored by the ideas that prevailed at that time.” That translation reflected a long tradition of men who had “subverted divine authority,” and translated the scripture “according to their understanding and desire.” But a new, woman-centered understanding of the scripture provided a biblical, God-ordained basis for the equality of women, and a religious foundation for women’s political and social equality.122

Soon after its founding in 1919 by Madeline Southard, Starr joined the Association of Women Preachers. It was around this time that Starr retired from the pastorate to concentrate on writing her book, and the group provided her with new opportunities to share her teachings. In 1922 she spoke at the association’s annual convention, holding “her audience in absorbed attention as she told of some of the early opposition which women met in preaching and in public speaking.”123 Starr was

121 Star Sentinel (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania), August 21, 1915, and Gettysburg Compiler, August 21, 1915.
122 Ibid.
123 Woman’s Pulpit 1, no. 1 (1922): 2.
appointed to head up a committee on Biblical and Historical research for the association, and she regularly spoke on themes drawn from her research for the book she was working on, which was nearing completion.\textsuperscript{124} Over the next several years Starr became well-known in the association for her engaging, scholarly lectures and her “blackboard talks.” “With her blackboard and crayon Dr. Starr makes plain the hidden things of original texts,” an article in the \textit{Woman’s Pulpit} described. Starr used a blackboard to demonstrate to her colleagues the intricacies of her Hebrew and Greek translations, pointing out the errors that had persisted through centuries of Christian tradition to the detriment of women. Correcting these mistranslations was central to achieving women’s ecclesiastical and social rights, Starr contended. “When she has finished,” one woman wrote after hearing one of Starr’s presentations, “Paul seems a very considerate and generous co-worker with godly women rather than the curt and rather rude woman-hater that some have made him to appear. Starr’s lessons helped to “make many things seem different; clear up many puzzles for those who do not understand the original languages.”\textsuperscript{125}

Starr’s book containing many of these lessons, \textit{The Bible Status of Women}, was published in 1926. A reviewer in the \textit{Pittsburg Christian Advocate} considered it “probably the most comprehensive, fair, and competent presentation of this theme available.” In her treatment of the Old Testament in particular, Starr drew many of the same conclusions as had Bushnell, and on occasion Starr quoted Bushnell at length. Starr’s book was more polished and accessible, however, and although it was a weighty

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Woman’s Pulpit} 1, no. 2 (September 1922): 1.

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Woman’s Pulpit} 3, no. 3 (November-December 1926): 1. The author of this article was likely M. Madeline Southard, the editor of the journal. See also \textit{Woman’s Pulpit} 1, no. 12 (December 1924): 2, on Starr’s addresses to the Chicago Assembly meeting, where she demonstrated “the unfair treatment women have received at the hands of translators.”
volume of painstaking textual criticism, it was better suited to general audiences than was Bushnell’s. 126 Starr wrote extensively on views of women in the Old Testament and the New, including a chapter on Jesus’ attitude towards women, and four chapters on the teachings of the Apostle Paul. Her book also made clear that her views on divorce had changed considerably since her days as a pastor in Paris, Illinois. She no longer viewed divorce as unscriptural, but, through her experiences working with a number of oppressed and abused wives, came to see it as a necessary tool for women’s protection and liberation. 127

During the 1920s Starr also worked for women’s rights in the Methodist Protestant denomination. She wrote an open letter to her church’s General Conference calling attention to the inequalities confronting women in the denomination. In her “vigorous article” she drew notice to the fact that over the course of the denomination’s history nearly four-thousand men had served as delegates at the General Conference, while only nine women had been selected to do so, in spite of the much larger proportion of women who were church members. Starr also raised the issue of “detached service” workers. The Methodist Protestant Church routinely ordained men who worked in humanitarian or reform work as “detached service” workers. The countless women who were actually engaging in the same kind of “detached service” work did so without recognition from the church, Starr asserted. If women were not given more power in the

126 Woman’s Pulpit 3, no. 2 (September-October 1926): 5. “This book will never be listed as ‘summer reading,’ noted Lucy T. Ayers in the Woman’s Pulpit, “it is much too profound for that.” “All the members of the International Association of Women Preachers, every progressive woman and scholar who desires thought producing literature on this most vital subject of the age, should possess this book,” added Ayers. [See also Pittsburgh Christian Advocate, July 29, 1926]. Starr’s book would be republished in 1955 by Pillar of Fire in Zarephath, New Jersey, with permission from Starr’s one surviving brother, David Starr. Alma White, the founder of the Pillar of Fire movement, was “an admirer of Lee Anna Starr,” and was influenced by Starr’s views on the role of women in Christianity.

127 Starr, Bible Status, 373-4. For more details on Starr’s view of divorce, see chapter 5.
church or permitted to minister on equal terms with men, Starr warned, then the churches would soon be facing an exodus of women from the churches.\textsuperscript{128}

She also labored throughout the 1920s on behalf of women’s power in Methodist Protestant foreign missions. She energetically opposed the merging of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society with the men’s Board of Foreign Missions, and helped to raise women’s awareness of the consequences of this merger. She realized that such a move would strip the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of any real authority, and concluded that if this were to take place there would be “nothing left for the women to do but secure new members, pay dues, and be thankful,” and she suggested that they willingly surrender these remaining “privileges” as well.\textsuperscript{129}

Lyman E. Davis, editor of the \textit{Methodist Recorder} and author of a 1921 survey of the Methodist Protestant Church in America, measured Starr’s importance among the women of the church second only to that of Anna Howard Shaw.\textsuperscript{130} In appreciation for her scholarly contributions and her services to the church, Starr was given an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Adrian College in the summer of 1924, and she also received an honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity from Kansas City University.\textsuperscript{131} While

\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Woman’s Pulpit} 1, no. 11 (September 1924): 3.

\textsuperscript{129} Ethel W. Born, \textit{By My Spirit: The Story of Methodist Protestant Women in Mission} (Cincinnati, OH: Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries, 1990), 70.


\textsuperscript{131} Quoting from “a Pennsylvania paper of last June,” a \textit{Woman’s Pulpit} [1, no. 12 (December 1924): 4] article reported that “Rev. Lee Anna Starr, D.D., of Bellevue, Pa, returned home Friday from Adrian, Michigan, where she received the degree of Doctor of Laws from Adrian College at the commencement exercises. The distinction is of unusual importance in as much as only two other women have been so honored as far as is known. They are, Miss Frances E. Willard in the US, and Dr. Amelia Edwards, the Egyptologist of England. Dr. Starr was recommended for the L.L.D. degree by judges from three states, Kentucky, Illinois, and Pennsylvania, and she was nominated by four of the leading clergymen of her denomination, the Methodist Protestant. Dr. Starr is a graduate of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.”
Starr’s name has become far less familiar to historians than Anna Howard Shaw’s, her scholarly contributions to women’s ecclesiastical rights and to a religious foundation for women’s rights in general have endured.

Four years after Starr’s death in 1937, Madeline Southard sent a copy of Starr’s *Bible Status of Woman* to the American Standard Bible translation committee, in order that the new translation not “perpetuate certain injustices to women.” Southard hoped that “scholars in the middle of the twentieth century may be open-minded enough” to give an unbiased translation of words regardless of the gender of the person to which they referred. Luther Weigle, the chair of the translation committee, claimed that he, along with James Moffatt, Millar Burrows, and several other members of the committee, had found Starr’s book to be “of real value,” and assured Southard that they were “doing [their] best to guard against the sort of unfairness of which she writes.” Starr’s work also influenced Alma White, the first female bishop of any Christian denomination. White, a holiness Methodist, started the Pillar of Fire denomination in 1901 after encountering opposition to female preaching in the Methodist Episcopal Church. A women’s rights activist and supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment, White embraced Starr’s teachings, and her Pillar of Fire denomination republished Starr’s *Bible Status of Woman*.

*The Woman’s Pulpit* article added that “as Dr. Starr is chairman of our Biblical Research Committee, we especially appreciate this honor conferred upon her, marking her standing in the world of scholarship and the esteem of her own denomination.”

132 See Southard to Weigle, 18 October 1940; and Weigle to Southard, 25 July 1941, Papers of the Standard Bible Committee, Yale Divinity School Library. The enthusiasm with which Weigle took Starr’s work under consideration is not entirely clear, however. See further discussion of Starr’s work and the Standard Bible Committee in the following chapter. Weigle and Burrows were currently professors at Yale University, and Moffatt at Union Theological Seminary.

133 White (1862-1946) first called her group the Pentecostal Union, and later changed its name to the Pillar of Fire. She was consecrated as a bishop in 1918.
**Woman in 1955.** Although a few people continued to keep Starr’s legacy alive, memory of her work eventually faded in much the same way as had Bushnell’s.

**M. Madeline Southard (1877-1967)**

Mabel Madeline Southard was born in Winfield, Kansas, in 1877. Her mother, Mabel Rogers Southard, had been widowed shortly before Madeline’s birth, and the expectant mother and her young daughter, LaVerne, left Michigan to return to Mabel’s native Kansas. Mabel moved back to a farm in rural Argentine, near Winfield, to live with her own widowed mother, and there she gave birth to Madeline. As Southard grew up on the Kansas plains, her surroundings left a lasting impression on her. Late-nineteenth-century Kansas was one of the hotbeds of American Populism, and Southard absorbed and embraced populist convictions already at the age of ten. Times were difficult for her family, and money was always in short supply. Her mother was frequently sick, and Southard helped out at home with milking and other chores. She was a bright girl, and attended an academy at Winfield, Kansas. At the age of fourteen she began keeping a journal, which she would continue throughout her life. As a schoolgirl

---

134 See “Publisher’s Note” in Starr, *Bible Status*. On White’s admiration of Starr, see Susie Cunningham Stanley, *Feminist Pillar of Fire*.


136 For a careful examination of Southard’s Kansas background, see Kendra Weddle Irons’ *Preaching on the Plains: Methodist Women Preachers in Kansas, 1920-1956* (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2001). On Southard’s embracing populism, see *Woman’s Pulpit* 4, no. 3 (July-August 1928): 2. Southard’s populist bent is evident in the journal that she began keeping as a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl.
with an independent spirit she wrote about how she chafed against the restrictions placed upon her as a woman, and complained about needing to wear a corset.\textsuperscript{137}

Kansas was not only one of the centers of Populism in late-nineteenth-century America, but it was also one of the strongholds of American Methodism. The Methodist itinerant ministry was particularly effective on the vast plains of Kansas, and Methodism took deep root in the state. The faith of the Wesleys had been reinvigorated by the Holiness movement that had made inroads in American Methodism by the 1880s, and was a strong presence in late-nineteenth-century Kansas. Although there was no local church near her home, Southard was exposed at an early age to holiness teachings and to the Methodist faith in her rural Kansas milieu. At the age of fifteen she was converted, and it was not long before Southard found herself behind a pulpit. She began her preaching career at the age of sixteen in a country school house five miles from where she was born, and the following year she held a four-week “Evangelistic Service” in the school.\textsuperscript{138}

By the time she began college at Southwest Kansas College (later Southwestern College) in nearby Winfield, she was already an experienced public speaker. There she pursued the study of oratory and was a member of the college’s successful intercollegiate debate team.\textsuperscript{139} She was also the single female member of the Ministerial Association of

\textsuperscript{137} See Journal, 1892-1893, 17. Southard Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

\textsuperscript{138} Ayers, “The Rev. M. Madeline Southard,” 2. This account is somewhat different than the account given in Mansfield’s “I Remember Madeline,” which follows a formula common among women preachers, suggesting that Southard was “pushed into it.” Mansfield recounts how Southard’s mother stated that she would no longer have the community go on “not knowing God.” When Southard asked “Where will we get a preacher?” her mother replied, “You, Madeline, my dear. You are going to have the church service and preach to us. All the neighbors are coming. Everything is already arranged” (1, 4).

\textsuperscript{139} See The Southwestern 1: 94. The School of Oratory at Southwest Kansas College worked to prepare its students “in Elocution, Oratory, Vocal Culture, Rhetoric, and English Literature that they may
Southwest Kansas College. Southard graduated in 1899 at the age of twenty-one with a degree in sociology, and with the equivalent of a major in Bible as well.

Southard excelled in her studies, but her college years were tumultuous ones for her. The new teachings she encountered in her courses, particularly the scientific theories of evolution, radically challenged her faith. At first she had eagerly embraced the current scientific theories, but eventually she realized that her “enthusiasm for evolution in all things” was subtly undermining her belief in the Bible. Like so many other college students of her era, she found the intellectual world of college incompatible with her religious commitments as she understood them. Wrestling with these conflicting beliefs, she eventually came to resolve her crisis of faith by combining her populist convictions with her religious beliefs and turning her back on the alluring world of academics and intellectual life that she had only begun to taste. To save her crumbling faith, she felt it necessary to sacrifice her “ambition to have a place with the choice spirits in the world’s work.” Abandoning “the world of culture” and scholarship, she cast in her lot with “the demonstrative religion folk,” the common Christians whose enthusiasm and holiness teachings seemed to present a clear contrast to the sophisticated teachings of her college life. In doing so, she explicitly renounced “all earthly honors and achievements.”

---

140 The Southard Folders at the Schlesinger Library contain a picture of the “Ministerial Association Southwest Kas. College” dated Dec 18, 1896. Southard, at age nineteen, is the only woman pictured.

141 Journal, 1 June 1919. Southard’s decision likely reflects the influence of holiness teachings, which urged a clear separation of the believer from the world.
Soon after she had been converted, Southard had taken a verse from the New Testament as her “life motto,” Philippians 3:13-14: “…Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Throughout her life, Southard would refer back to this passage, and it did indeed prove to be an apt motto for her life. The goal toward which she was striving was not always clear to her, however, and although she frequently tried to forget what was behind and strain toward what was ahead, she would never be fully able, nor entirely willing, to forget that which she left behind in her Kansas youth.

Not long after graduating from college, Southard crossed paths with one of Kansas’ most infamous women, Carry A. Nation. Southard first heard of Nation in January of 1901, while she was visiting the state president of the WCTU at her home in Hutchinson, Kansas, during the height of Nation’s crusades. The WCTU was “besieged by letters” about Nation’s activities on behalf of temperance, particularly concerning her habit of “smashing” saloons, swinging her ax and destroying all of the windows, mirrors, and liquor bottles she could find in whichever saloon she entered. At first Southard was ambivalent about Nation’s aggressive tactics, although she firmly agreed with her purposes. “I say ‘Amen,’” she wrote in her journal upon hearing reports of Nation’s

142 Journal, 1 January 1924. This renunciation is typical of nineteenth-century holiness Christians, who sought a greater holiness than the faith evidenced by conventional middle-class Christians.

143 Southard referred to the verse many times throughout her life. See, for example, her journal entry from 1 January 1923.
The next month Southard was staying at the Topeka home of another WCTU member while attending a state temperance convention, when Nation, too, was invited to stay at the home. Southard spent several days with Nation, and was surprised to find the woman so cultured. “She quotes Bible and Shakespeare,” Southard noted, though she conceded that at times Nation seemed “slightly insane.” It was, however, “a good kind of insanity.” Soon Southard herself was swept up in this “insanity.” She had been listening to Nation speak at a meeting of the Home Defenders at the United Presbyterian Church, when, at the close of the talk, someone suggested, “Why not go smash them now?” Nation concurred, and a group of women left the church and set off for the Sixth Street Saloon. The crowd became so turbulent that Southard was separated from Nation, who was arrested and brought to the jail. Southard and a few other women went to the jail and asked to go in, but they were refused. “I was pretty well aroused,” Southard noted in her journal, describing how she angrily challenged the officers.
Southard continued her escapades with Carry Nation for several days. She described how Nation came over early one morning in her “wrecking dress.” Southard, too, put on an old dress and at a little past five in the morning they set off for downtown Topeka, trudging through the snow. They joined up with two other women before arriving at “a joint.” The barkeeper promptly hurled them out and shut the door, so they continued on their way. Some men joined their group, and for a while they wandered around, not knowing where to go next, until someone directed them to the Senate, “a prominent joint” in town. Nation “led the way and had a tussle with the bartender. He got her hatchet and struck her on the head.” The bartender let Nation go, firing two shots in the air, which inadvertently alerted some of the men who had come to support Nation. When they arrived the bartender fled, leaving Nation free to smash the joint. Nation “turned over two large slot machines and smashed the glass in front of each. She soon made a wreck of the large refrigerator, and after that turned her attention to the liquor and fixtures behind the bar,” and hacked open a keg of beer. “Things were badly disfigured when a policeman came,” Southard recounted. Nation was again arrested, and this time Southard accompanied her to jail. Southard, Nation, and two other women were eventually given “a most angry and threatening oration” by the District Court judge, who bound them over to keep the peace until the next term of the court. Nation and Southard, however, refused bond, and were sent to the county jail. Upon their release several

147 Ibid.
148 Reno Evening Gazette (Nevada), February 5, 1901
149 Journal, 6 February 1901.
150 Journal, 19 February 1901. See also Fort Wayne Journal Gazette (Indiana), February 19, 1901, which describes the “scathing address” the judge gave Southard and her two companions. “He expressed
days later Nation continued on her crusade while Southard remained behind.\(^{151}\) Although they would not meet again, from her encounter with Nation Southard took with her a heightened commitment to social action, a concern for the socially oppressed, and a conviction that “power returns to the hands of the people” when the proper authorities fail to act.\(^{152}\)

Like many other women of her time, Southard’s activities in temperance soon led her to an interest in social purity work. She used some of the same tactics she had learned from Nation in the early years of her purity work, organizing protests around a “carnival and ‘immoral show’ for men only,” and invading it.\(^{153}\) Most of her activities, however, took the form of private conversations rather than public spectacles. While working with the WCTU in Coffeyville in 1904 Southard found herself in the position of informing a woman that the woman had contracted syphilis from her husband.\(^{154}\) She met with prostitutes to learn of their conditions, and became acquainted with young girls in rescue homes. One of the girls in the rescue home had given birth to a baby with a gonorrhea infection in its eyes, while another girl, who was pregnant, was suffering from syphilis. Southard listened to their tales and helped them receive proper medical attention.\(^{155}\)

\(^{151}\) Colorful accounts of Nation’s activities, and Southard’s participation in them, appeared in newspapers across the country. See, for example, *Reno Evening Gazette* (Nevada), February 5, 1901; *New Oxford Item* (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania), February 22, 1901; and *Daily Northwestern* (Oshkosh, Wisconsin), February 20, 1901.

\(^{152}\) Journal, 26 February 1901. “They may call me an anarchist if they like” Southard reflected on her experiences with Nation, “but I believe that power returns to the hands of the people when officers fail to act, and sure these have failed.”

\(^{153}\) Journal, 24 September 1904.

\(^{154}\) Ibid.

\(^{155}\) See, for example, Journal, 23 November 1904.
The stories Southard heard from women like these opened her eyes to the sexual double standard that existed for men and women, and convinced her of the detrimental effects of that double standard on women’s lives. Reflecting on a particularly disturbing case of a minister’s repeated infidelity to his wife, she lamented the all too common misbehavior of men, even those deemed respectable. “Oh it is disgusting,” she remarked in her journal, “I can see how some women really informed, do become man-haters.”\textsuperscript{156}

She began speaking publicly on issues of sexuality, condemning the double standard and working to elevate the purity of men. At public lectures she faced down “giggling boys” who went into convulsions upon hearing her read “male and female” from the Bible, quieting them with her serious words on the subject.\textsuperscript{157} Frequently she found her audiences anxious to hear what she had to say. “I had perfect attention while I spoke on some of the most delicate matters,” she wrote after a lecture she had given at a town hall. “God was there, and all felt his presence I am sure.” She was particularly pleased that night that so many of the boys who attended her first lecture had returned for her second.\textsuperscript{158} She spoke to adults and young people in mixed audiences or to men and women alone. In 1914 she published many of her lectures on sexual purity in the book \textit{The White Slave Traffic versus the American Home}.\textsuperscript{159}

For the two decades after she graduated from college, Southard combined her interests in the social causes of temperance and, particularly, social purity, with her

\textsuperscript{156} This statement is taken from her reflections on the subject years later. See her Journal, 3 November 1922.

\textsuperscript{157} Journal, 10 April 1918.

\textsuperscript{158} Journal, 24 September 1910.

vocation as a preacher, fashioning a sort of itinerant ministry in which she traveled the country preaching in churches, leading revivals, and speaking on suffrage, sex, and women’s rights. Southard was never ordained, and she did not undertake a serious study of theology until she was nearly forty years old, but she was in steady demand as a preacher throughout the Midwest. It was not until 1920 that she realized that the preaching she had been doing was in fact against Methodist discipline. In response to Anna Howard Shaw’s request for ordination after her graduation from Boston Theological Seminary in 1878, the Church had stated that no woman should be ordained, nor should she be licensed to preach, while the section of the discipline on local preachers stated that “no member of the Methodist Church should preach without a license.” “I was a member, I had no license,” she recalled, “yet for years and years I preached. I did not know it was actually against Methodist law.” “I thought they ignored us but did not forbid us. And I am glad I did not know,” she confessed. Although her preaching proved to be irregular according to Methodist discipline, she reflected that under certain circumstances “it seemed religious to be a little irregular.”

160 Journal, 27 December 1923. Both Anna Howard Shaw and Anna Oliver, recent graduates of Boston University School of Theology, applied for ordination to the New England Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1880. They were already licensed to preach as Local Preachers, but they wanted permission to administer the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. They both successfully passed the required examination, but Bishop Edward G. Andrews rejected their request for ordination, arguing that the Church did not permit the ordination of women. Shaw and Oliver, then, brought the issue before the General Conference, which decided that “the law of the Church does not authorize the ordination of women to the Ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church.” The General Conference also declared that women should not have been granted licenses as Local Preachers, and ordered that the practice should be discontinued. [See Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (1924): 316, 353-4, as well as Kenneth E. Rowe, “The Ordination of Women: Round One; Anna Oliver and the General Conference of 1880,” Methodist History 12, no. 3 (April 1974): 60-72; and Ralph W. Spencer, “Anna Howard Shaw,” Methodist History 12, no. 2 (January, 1975): 40-41]. This account of women’s ordination in the Methodist Episcopal Church is drawn from Donald K. Gorrell’s “Ecclesiastical Equality for Women,” 1978, unpublished paper in Southard Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

161 Journal, 27 December 1923.
Between her itinerant preaching and her speaking schedule, Southard was able to support herself and often help out with the financial needs of her sister, who had been widowed with several young children. She rarely had much money to spare, but there always seemed enough to take her to her next engagement. Unlike many Protestant women reformers of her day, she did not work extremely closely with any national woman’s organization, though she had connections to several. Although her training and her interests made her an ideal member for organizations like the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA,) the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS), and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), she resisted affiliating too closely with any of these.

In Southard’s mind, these national organizations were too pretentious for her. The Kansas populist in her reviled the wealth and privilege exhibited by the leaders of such organizations, and despite her education and her oratorical skills, she felt uncomfortable in their presence. Additionally, ever since she had resolved her crisis of faith in her college years, she had associated a rough-edged, plain-spoken style with true Christianity. She resisted the sophisticated world of the higher classes for both cultural and religious reasons. A Mrs. Hutchinson, the national treasurer of the WCTU, recognized this tendency in Southard. “You have ‘hid out’ from society and from people that to my mind you ought to keep in touch with,” she wrote to Southard. Hutchinson argued that God could keep her, “even among people.” “With your education and gifts it seems to me that the Lord could use you among people that so greatly need you and the help you could

---

162 “How literally I have lived the unpractical parts of Jesus’ teaching ‘Take no thought for tomorrow...’” Southard reflected in her journal (20 March 1918).

163 With the exception, of course, of her International Association of Women Ministers that she would found in 1919.
give. I don’t believe he came only to save those in the slums and in the streets. You know the need of good homes and how many you could help to live better lives and to make better homes. Then too, dearie, you can preach. There are just as many and I believe more hungry people in the churches than you will find else where. I wonder if you really would if God would not send you to a different class of really hungry people.”

A few days later Southard had the opportunity to attempt to move into this world. She traveled to La Crosse, Wisconsin, to attend the YWCA state convention. The president of the Wisconsin YWCA sent “her lovely carriage with colored driver” for Southard. Southard attended the convention, thinking “it might be a good chance to get in touch with this other class of people,” as Mrs. Hutchinson had suggested. “But it won’t work,” she concluded. “I am not at home with them.” Considering this situation, she reflected that “it is not so much because of something I lack as because of something I possess.” She observed how “the state president has one finger covered to the first joint with beautiful rings—real gems, I think,” and noted that the address given was on Robert Louis Stevenson. It was a very good address, she reflected, “but no word of the Christ.” Again, it seemed to her as if sophistication and sanctification were mutually exclusive. A couple of weeks later she wrote back to Mrs. Hutchinson and told of her experience with the YWCA, and informed her that she feared she “was not equal to respectable stunts.”

---

164 Southard copied this portion of Hutchinson’s letter to her in her journal (20 October 1910).
165 Journal, 23 October 1910. As a part of the convention she attended a vesper service at an Episcopal Church, which “completely wore [her] out.” “The chorus of men and women marched in singing,” she described, “all with nice white chemise (in appearance) outside their clothes…” “Some would think me irreverent but I’m not,” she added. I revere God and what He ordains. I don’t have to revere a lot of aesthetic stuff gotten up by man.”
166 Journal, 2 November 1910.
Southard had similar feelings toward some of the WCTU leadership as well. Although she felt more comfortable with the WCTU than she did with the YWCA, she nevertheless resisted working for the social purity wing of the WCTU. While in Minnesota, the district WCTU president had sent for Southard, wanting to put her to work for the purity committees. Southard, however, doubted that the plans would come through, adding that she did not really want them to. To work for the WCTU purity department would mean “meeting with club women and various kind of folk.” “I don’t mind the purity work,” she wrote, “but I shrink from” mixing with “unspiritual people.”167 YMCA, settlement workers, “woman’s club, and such people,” she wrote, were “fine, bright folk,” and she would have “enjoyed them before [she] was sanctified.” But as she was, she feared that she would disappoint them, and was quite certain they would disappoint her. In her journals, she considered whether her “great shrinking from putting [herself] forward” might be keeping her from accomplishing great things.168

Another organization with which Southard associated from time to time was the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Church. Although she thought the WFMS was a “great organization,” and very much enjoyed the company of its members, she recognized that as a preacher she had a different profession than did the women of the WFMS. She did work, however, to gain the support of WFMS members for her movement for equal ecclesiastical rights for women.169 She was encouraged to find that

---

167 Journal, 8 November 1910; November 18, 1910.
168 Journal, 18 November 1910. That morning she had gone to hear [Mrs. Barrett?], National President of the Florence Crittenden work, speak to the Women’s Clubs. “And if I can’t speak as well as she can, I have greatly over-rated myself, at least judged by her address this morning,” Southard noted.
169 Southard attended the National Executive of the WFMS in Wichita, and remarked that she wished she were more closely affiliated with the organization. But “being a woman preacher does not leave
those members she spoke with “believe in full suffrage for women in everything.”
However, they felt it would be “most inadvisable for them to jeopardize their work throughout the world by taking an attitude that would antagonize the male controllers of all our church work.” Southard felt she understood the situation perfectly, and noted that from her independent position she had the freedom to stir up antagonism against herself without hurting any important part of the kingdom.170 And yet she understood that she paid a price for her independence. In 1922 she reflected in her journal that she missed “the comradeship of other women.” “How strange it seems that I could not have fit into something like [the WFMS] or the WCTU or YWCA, something already organized and at work, instead of this lonely job of being a woman preacher.” She was deeply committed to these causes, but she concluded that her work was different. “One pays a heavy price for being a pioneer in anything,” she concluded.171

Southard defined herself vocationally as a preacher, but her interest in women’s rights was always central to her work. When reflecting in 1919 on all of the “public questions, national and international” that captivated her attention, she concluded that the “woman question,” in all of its varied forms, made the strongest appeal to her, and she was thrilled to be on the eve of woman suffrage.172 To understand Southard’s life, it is important to grasp how interconnected her interest in women’s rights was with her religious commitments. She believed that Christ was “woman’s only emancipation.” It

---

170 Journal, 16 August 1919.
171 Journal, 10 October 1922.
172 Journal, 30 July 1919.
was “only the idealism of Jesus reaching large numbers of men,” she insisted, that “could make a world where women dare be free.”\textsuperscript{173} After hearing Katharine Bushnell speak on the mistranslations that abounded in modern translations of the scriptures, Southard’s conviction on the interconnections between religious belief and women’s rights only deepened.\textsuperscript{174} But Southard lived during a time in which constructions of gender and understandings of Protestantism were in flux, and for Southard, both her religious beliefs and her ideas of womanhood were ridden with conflict.

Southard was an ardent supporter of women’s rights, and publicly she advocated and exemplified alternatives to women’s traditional roles of wife and mother. She was well educated, supported herself through her public speaking engagements, and worked as a preacher when preaching was still a predominantly male profession. Southard relished her freedom from women’s traditional tasks, and she worked to envision new family arrangements that would free women from the burdens of housework. She was particularly interested in examples of women who worked outside the home while raising a family.\textsuperscript{175} Freeing women from their burdensome domestic responsibilities was one of the central purposes of “woman’s rights,” Southard believed. “The franchise, industrial

\textsuperscript{173} Journal, 2 October 1922. She gave an address on this subject to a group of “business and professional women” in Hutchinson, Kansas.

\textsuperscript{174} Woman’s Pulpit 1, no. 3 (December 1922): 3. “A number of years ago I heard Dr. Katherine Bushnell plead for women to enter the field of theology,” Southard recalled, “and have scarcely heard a word about it since, except what I myself have spoken until this address by Miss [A. Maude] Royden.” It is unclear when and where Southard first encountered Bushnell, but it was likely around 1915.

\textsuperscript{175} Journal, 11 July 1921. In an issue of the Woman’s Pulpit [1, no. 2 (September 1922): 2], Southard wrote that the “old theory that the home was entirely the woman’s sphere makes some women petty tyrants there, while some careless men shift all responsibility except that of the pay-check.” She advocated instead that men share childrearing responsibilities with women, few of whom could “stand the steady drain of child care twenty-four hours a day the year round.”
independence, even education,” she reasoned, were but instruments in women’s hands to achieve the broader social equality between men and women, the equal division of domestic, moral, religious, and vocational opportunities.  

Privately, however, Southard yearned to experience the love of a husband and the “joys of motherhood.” In her youth she had turned down suitors because she felt she did not love them with the depth of love necessary for a true marriage. She was “too absorbed in intellectual and spiritual life, in public service,” to consider marriage at that time, and she likely “would have chafed under its sacrifices.” She wanted “to be great (and have the right to do great things) as man is great.” As she became older, however, her longing for some of the traditional “glories of womanhood” intensified, conflicting with her call to public service. These irreconcilable tensions ultimately lead to a breakdown in 1910, during which time she temporarily ceased her public activities.

In her journals during this time she tells of a “dull pain” that was always with her, a longing for a home, a husband, and children. Her pain was intensified by her belief that God had “gently whispered” to her that she would have “this gift, this glory of motherhood.” “My soul cries out again, almost in anguish, that I too may share in this

---

176 Woman’s Pulpit 1, no. 2 (September 1922): 3; Southard also recognized that one of the primary grounds of opposition to women preaching was that “woman was made for the home, and everything goes to smash when she gives energy to anything else [Woman’s Pulpit 1, no. 5 (July 1923): 3].

177 Southard commented on this desire frequently in her journals. See, for example, 20 July 1919, and 1 January 1924.

178 Journal, 4 July 1910. In a moment of despair, Southard questioned her desire for the greatness available to men. “I could not then see the greatness of a woman’s life, as God planned it, she wrote. Although this sentiment is rarely expressed by Southard, it demonstrates the deep tensions that complicated her work for a construction of womanhood that departed from the traditional Victorian gender roles. Looking back on her youthful ideals in 1919, Southard thought she might be “getting back some of the spirit of sacrifice” of her youth, “only then I did not know what it meant,” as she had come to understand. She hoped that her “most fearful conflicts over finishing my woman life loveless and childless are perhaps over,” and she hoped that she would be willing to live out her years for the benefit of others, “as one of those most pitiable humans an old, old maid” (18 August 1914).
most wonderful gift,” she wrote. As the years went by, however, she struggled to keep faith. “Sometimes I have been joyously confident,” she reflected, “other times as of late, I fight for this faith, as dying people fight for breath.” She knew she could marry if she chose, but marriage would be “a living death” to her “without deep and delicate love.”

Throughout her career she struggled to reconcile the choices she had made to pursue an unconventional woman’s life, and her religious convictions of God’s will for her life, with the inner longings that she fought to keep at bay.

Although less painful than her personal struggles to come to terms with her role as a woman in a changing world, Southard’s religious beliefs were also a source of tension throughout her life. At a time when American Protestantism seemed to be polarizing into opposing camps of conservatives and modernists, individualists and Social Gospelers, revivalists and intellectuals, Southard attempted to hold together these competing poles in her own faith. “When I was in a camp meeting,” Southard told a Methodist bishop, “I wanted to bring in the seminary and when in the seminary I longed to introduce the camp meeting.” She found that she agreed with some of the teachings of fundamentalists like William Bell Riley, the famous Baptist pastor from Minneapolis, but she found the

---

179 Journal, 4 July 1910. This crisis was brought about in part by her unrequited love for a man who seemed to approach her ideal. She knew that the love she was holding out for was “a thing all too rare, when youth has many to choose from—nothing but a miracle could give to a woman of my years what I must have if I have anything.” This breakdown was a period in her life to which she often returned in her journals, measuring her present contentment by comparing it to her lowest point. See, for example, her journal entries from 18 August 1914 and 20 July 1919.

180 As Southard’s earlier journals reveal, her longings for husband and home began in her youth. Already in 1899 she reflected, “Yet my heart is very hungry sometimes for that something that is deeper than the frank fellowship I have with the men I know. In spite of the opinion of a good many people that I do not care for men as other girls do, I believe there are few women who long more for a real, pure love of a strong man than I. If I could meet that man whom I could respect, reverence, and love, I could give myself to him absolutely without reservations.” But, as in later years, Southard recognized that she was “not easily satisfied...Perhaps my girlish fancies were correct; perhaps God wants me for other homes, not my own” (Journal, 15 May 1899).

fundamentalist tendency to reject those Christians who did not accept the same interpretation of the scriptures a dangerous tendency. “I find still strong within me the longing to bring together in one all who love my Christ, however conflicting their views on some points,” she explained.182

Southard recognized a “great gulf” in early twentieth-century Protestantism between progressive postmillennialists and conservative premillennialists, between “those who believe the Kingdom of God is coming gradually, and those who think it is coming only with the coming again of our Lord.” “I agree with both, and disagree with both,” she declared, recognizing that her views put her “in a difficult place.”183 Southard found the increasing tensions in American Protestantism between those committed to social action and those who emphasized personal conversion and individual religious experience profoundly troubling. As a Methodist raised in the holiness tradition, conversion and a personal belief in Christ’s atonement were central to her faith, and central to her message as a preacher. But the nineteenth-century holiness movement had encouraged the pursuit of “social holiness” in addition to personal holiness, a combination that was becoming less tenable in twentieth-century Protestantism. As a young woman, Southard had been drawn to reform work, and she continued her commitment to social reform throughout her career. She worked on behalf of temperance and social purity, and also advocated for a Christianity that would have the concerns of the poor and economically oppressed at its center.184 Even in 1935 she continued to

182 Journal, 15 July 1919.
183 Ibid.
184 She was a supporter, for example, of Harry Ward, one of the founders of the Methodist Federation for Social Action, and frequently complained about the “aristocratic” tendencies of many
struggle to hold together the individual and the social. Describing a series of evangelistic meetings she was holding in Wichita, she noted how the afternoon meetings were “devoted to a study of the work of the Holy Spirit,” while at the night meetings she brought “the message of a great personal redemption, a social note, prohibition, social purity, economic justice.” The attempt to “combine the individual and the social message of our Gospel” had been an ongoing theme of her ministry.185

Reflecting on her unwillingness to choose between premillennialism and postmillennialism, between the individual and the social, she acknowledged that she was “the same way about so many things—almost everything that the modern and traditional schools are parting company over.”186 Indeed, she was enthusiastic about the possibilities of modern criticism, while wary of the apparent weaknesses in the modern teachings to inspire men and women to preach. Modernism “has to work on those who have gotten their call under the old evangelical truths,” she considered. Although she did not want to discount the newer teaching, she felt that “the old attitude grips folks as the new does not.”187

Christians when it came to economic issues. She was a socialist herself, and looked forward to the eclipse of the competitive capitalist system in America. See, for example, Journal, 20 July 1919.

185 Letter from Southard addressed to “Comrades of the Cross,” 11 April 1935. Southard Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. In the letter Southard described a schoolteacher who “had been out in tours for world-peace,” and had come to hear Southard speak on militarism. The teacher was “soundly converted in this meeting,” and told Southard that she had thought she had found something better than Christianity in her work for world peace, but that she now “saw that Christ was the Prince of Peace both for nations and for individuals.” “Oh girls,” Southard wrote, “we have a great Gospel, a mighty dynamic to transform life, if only we could get it to more people.”

186 Journal, 15 July 1919.

187 Journal, 20 November 1923. After attending a “Liberal” conference at Mt. Holyoke, attended primarily by Unitarian youth, Southard was sympathetic to the college students, who seemed “nice high grade young people,” but after hearing them speak she felt as though they were “grasping for something.” This encounter made her “the more thankful for Jesus Christ as Lord,” since without that “everything seemed so colorless. No, I do not want a bloodless religion. I long to see our great Methodism swing back
In December of 1923, just as “the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy [was] raging in all the churches,” Southard considered how she would position herself along the spectrum. Having met Robert Zaring, editor of the *Northwestern Christian Advocate* and a man who described himself as a “conservative liberal,” Southard suggested that she would call herself a “liberal conservative,” though she noted in her journal, “what would I have done in my college years had any one dared call me a conservative!” She was somewhat bemused by the “big fight” that was on throughout American Protestantism, and by the lack of humility evidenced by all sides. “There are such vexed questions,” she concluded, “and so many things nobody knows.”188

The tensions surrounding Southard’s views of womanhood and her theological stance came to a head during her years of graduate study at Garrett Biblical Institute and Northwestern University. She had begun a course of study in order to familiarize herself with the modern teachings in theology.189 Soon after she commenced her studies she became enamored of one of her professors, Lynn Harold Hough.190 This apparently one-sided attachment reawakened her longings for home and family, while it challenged the mutually exclusive arrangement of cultural sophistication and Christian belief she had

---

188 Journal, 23 December 1923.
189 Journal, 19 June 1919.
190 Southard never mentioned Hough by name; rather, she told how the professor was appointed president of Northwestern University in 1919, but certain difficulties soon made it necessary for him to resign. Lynn Harold Hough, a professor at Garret Biblical Institute, became president of Northwestern University in 1919, and resigned the following year.
carried with her for so long. At least part of what attracted her to Hough was the fact that in his person he seemed to combine “humanism and orthodox Christianity” to an extent Southard had not considered possible. Having come directly from a camp meeting to her first class with Hough, however, Southard’s enthusiastic responses to his teachings were somewhat disruptive, so that it became necessary for Hough to call her into his office with a request that she be more self contained. “Of course I accepted it as a word from the world of culture that I had so definitely given up my early twenties,” Southard reported in her journal. But she continued to take classes with him, fascinated by “his combination of those things I had not been able to keep together.”

Over the course of her semesters at Garrett Southard became better acquainted with Hough, intensifying her feelings for him. Her self-consciousness in his presence, however, and his seeming lack of interest in her never allowed for the depth of relationship for which Southard yearned. She attributed their incompatibility to the religious and cultural sacrifice she had made two decades earlier. “God, what a price I have paid for my democracy!” she lamented. By sacrificing a life of cultural sophistication for simple Christianity, Southard had shaped herself in such a way that she could not be loved by the only man she felt could meet her ideals of manhood.

---

191 Apparently one source of tension between Southard and Hough were their contrasting views on the sexual double standard. As she described in her journal (9 December 1921), “…we quarreled over his double standard, he standing for the soldiers, I for the girls.” Southard recalled that it was something that she had said about that subject that had angered his mother, after which point his mother refused to remain friends with Southard. Southard never completely understood his mother’s response, but later she learned that Hough’s father had “left his mother for another.” Although she disagreed with Hough’s double standard regarding soldiers and “girls,” she had made clear to him how she felt “about his high chastity, his high level of purity.”

192 Journal, 9 December 1921.

193 Journal, 1 June 1919. Reflecting on his apparent resistance to or obliviousness to her interest in him, she reasoned, “I took it as a part of the price I paid long ago when I made myself literally one of the common people.”
Many of these intertwined tensions she worked through indirectly in her master’s thesis, “The Attitude of Jesus toward Woman,” in which she wrestled with understandings of womanhood, religion, and culture that she had struggled with over the course of her career. In her thesis she used modern methods of interpretation, reined in by her commitment to the authority of the scriptures and the historical truth of Christ and his atonement. She painstakingly demonstrated how Christ repeatedly went against the cultural assumptions of his day to elevate women and set them on equal—if not preferential—footing with men. One of the dominant themes of her work was the suggestion that Christ rejected any understanding of womanhood that defined a woman in terms of her relationships to others—particularly her familial relationships. Southard especially worked to deconstruct the ideal of motherhood that had long held sway in American Protestantism, and that had long pulled at her own heart.

Her scholarly research strengthened her commitments to women’s rights that she had developed over the course of her reform work. “I am reading in the library on the condition of women in the world in past ages,” she wrote. “It is a mystery to me how a Christian God has been able to let a world go on like this.” “Poor womanhood, how it has suffered, too ignorant often to know that it was crushed under injustice…carrying the world on its breast, yet crushed under the world’s feet.” “Maybe I can help in bringing in the new day when woman can be a person and have life’s beautiful relationships too.”

Southard’s thesis was published in 1927 by the George H. Doran Company.

---

194 Journal, 11 June 1919.
Soon after she completed her master’s thesis and received her degree, Southard inaugurated a new chapter in her life by founding an organization for women ministers. This organization was in many ways a logical outgrowth of her earlier experiences—her commitment to preaching, her work on behalf of women’s rights, and the isolation she experienced by missing out on the female companionship available to women involved in more conventional reform work. Although she herself had long preached without official ordination, by the spring of 1919 Southard had made up her mind that “women must everywhere be given equal right to preach.” She worked to form an organization that would advance this cause as well as provide fellowship for women preachers. She contacted Anna Gordon, the president of the WCTU, and Anna Howard Shaw, both of whom encouraged her to pursue the project. By the fall of 1919 she had organized the first meeting of an Association of Woman Preachers at St. Louis, Missouri. The group had twenty-nine charter members, and by 1923 membership had increased to 187. The majority of these women were “Methodist, Midwestern, college-educated, and progressive.” In 1922 the association began the publication of the Woman’s Pulpit, a

196 Journal, 17 May 1919.

197 As Mark Chaves notes in “The International Association of Women Ministers,” in Bendroth and Brereton, eds., Women and Twentieth-Century Protestantism, the name of the association has changed five times: “Association of Women Preachers of the United States of America (1922); Association of Women Preachers (1933); American Association of Women Preachers (1936); American Association of Women Ministers (1943); and International Association of Women Ministers (1970),” 274.

198 Chaves, “The International Association of Women Ministers,” 265, 259. Although the membership was never large, Chaves points out that, in the 1920s, “approximately 10 percent of the female ministers in the country belonged” (265). According to Chaves, over forty percent of the International Association of Women Minister’s early members were Methodist Episcopal. “Although sixteen different denominations were represented among members in 1923, no other denomination had more than 10 percent of the membership in that year” (260). The association, Chaves writes, “is one of the very few national, interdenominational professional associations of clergy—male or female—that has ever existed in the United States.” Although small in size, and now “largely eclipsed by groups for female clergy that now exist within virtually every denomination,” Chaves argues that the IAWM warrants attention for the “social support, affirmation, and sustenance” it provided its members (257).
periodical that included information on the status of women in the Protestant ministry, reports from the association’s annual conventions, theological writings, and information on the activities of its members.\footnote{According to Chaves, the information on the pages of the \textit{Woman’s Pulpit} “constituted the most comprehensive repository of information about the status of gender equality in religious denominations around the world” up until “the post-1970 burst of interest in female clergy” (Ibid., 257).}

The opening theme for one of the early national meetings was “woman’s place in the world.” Southard invited Mary McDowell, head of the Chicago University Social Settlement and of the department of industry for the League of Women Voters, to speak on women in industry. Anna E. Blount spoke on women in medicine, and Catherine Waugh McCullough, president of the Illinois Women’s Bar Association and head of legal work for the League of Women Voters, spoke further on women’s social condition.\footnote{Journal, 8 October 1921. For a description of the first convention, see \textit{Woman’s Pulpit} 1, no. 1 (1922).} Southard herself gave the main address. In it she lectured on the power of preaching, addressing the fruitfulness of preaching in an era when many doubted its usefulness. She stressed both the individual and the social message, and presented compelling arguments for women’s right to preach.

The early meetings of the Association of Women Preachers received extensive press coverage. The director of publicity for the Benevolent Board of the Methodist Press had alerted the Associated Press about Southard’s work, and Southard then provided them with information on their upcoming meeting and an abstract of her address. They sent out this information to all of their papers, which Southard estimated to number over one-thousand, so that Southard was “sure the world at large must think we had quite a convention.” “And in reality it was,” she added, although “perhaps not in the way they
suppose.” The attendance was not large, but those women who attended “seemed to feel it was a remarkably good meeting.” Southard saw in the ongoing public attention the organization was receiving a sign of God’s hand in the movement, and she believed that “all this publicity” would be good for the cause of equal ecclesiastical rights for woman.

Southard worked to shape the organization around her ecumenical sensibilities. She was proud of the fact that the early organization was composed of women representing a number of different denominations. On the eve of the famous Scopes Trial in 1925 that pitted fundamentalist lawyer Williams Jennings Bryan against his secularist counterpart Clarence Darrow in a highly publicized battle over teaching evolution in Tennessee schools, Southard took the opportunity to situate her organization in the midst of the battle lines being drawn. “Are we liberal or conservative, modernist or fundamentalist, have we a literal or a critical interpretation of the Bible?” Southard asked. But she preferred not to provide specific answers to these questions, pointing readers instead to the Association of Women Preachers’ constitution. Article Two of the constitution stated that the association was to be “Evangelical and Inter-denominational, two words that make us both liberal and conservative.” She argued that the group was liberal in the sense that “we think and let think” on very many questions that once

---

201 Journal, 8 October 1921.

202 Journal, 5 January 1921. Southard had recently read something referring to “how quietly the nation accepted woman suffrage,” suggesting that “the big stir is never made when a new movement carries but when it is launched,” when people are first organizing to accomplish it. “So that is the way we are making a stir now, by letting folks know we really expect ecclesiastical equality.”

203 By 1927, she was proud to report that the organization contained “women ministers from some twenty different denominations” in “happy fellowship.” See “The Theology of Women Preachers,” Woman’s Pulpit 3, no. 7 (December 1927): 1. Southard regularly emphasized the many denominations represented in their membership in the pages of Woman’s Pulpit.
separated Protestantism into opposing camps.” In 1925, for example, members of the association belonged to nineteen different denominations, and each woman had her “individual and church convictions,” and was free to preach them as strongly as she liked. But they were conservative in the sense that they closed the association to “the extreme liberal interpretation of Christianity” by requiring that their members be in good standing in “some evangelical denomination.” Although they recognized “that this shuts out some devout souls,” they felt it necessary to hold to the “Athanasian as against the Arian view of the person of Christ,” thereby excluding Unitarian Liberals from membership. They did, however, welcome such women into their fellowship, if not to membership. “We desire not to lose the spirit of our Christ in contending for His divinity,” Southard explained, “and we know that theological controversy easily becomes unchristian.”

In maintaining the belief in the divinity of Christ as the key requirement for membership, the association was following in the footsteps of the Federal Council of Churches, which employed similar membership requirements. While the Association of Women Preachers held to broadly evangelical requirements for membership, Southard was quick to distance herself and the organization from a “kind of obscurantism on the

204 “The Theology of Women Preachers,” Woman’s Pulpit 3, no. 7 (December 1927): 1. The Association had welcomed a “Rev. Mrs. Andrews,” a “liberal minister” from Minneapolis, to their convention. Although they did not want to lose the spirit of Christ in contending for his divinity, Southard felt it necessary to add, “Nevertheless we believe there are grave dangers threatening us today in the realm of belief, and that it is most important that there be no uncertain sound from the pulpit on this matter.” In their quest for respectability, the association restricted full membership to those women who were “licensed, ordained, or otherwise authorized as preachers, according to the procedure of the communion concerned” (see “Constitution and By-Laws,” printed in Woman’s Pulpit 10, no. 3 (January-February 1932): 4. Significantly, they also excluded Pentecostal women preachers from their association (Chaves, “The International Association of Women Ministers,” 264). Southard’s ecumenism reflected a common theme among many Protestant women during this time, and also echoed the ecumenical strain of nineteenth-century holiness advocates, who downplayed denominational distinctions by focusing instead on personal holiness and social reform.

part of those who insist that they are the special guardians of the Scriptures,” and she condemned the arrogance evidenced by both sides of the fundamentalist-modernist debates. 206

From the beginning of the Association of Woman Preachers, much of Southard’s energy was focused on nurturing the young organization. Excepting the four years she was overseas, Southard served as the president of the association from 1919 to 1939. During this time her energies were focused closely on church issues, which enabled her to accomplish lasting institutional changes for women for which she would be remembered. Largely through her work at the Methodist General Conferences in 1920 and 1924, ordination was opened up to women in the Methodist churches. 207 Her organization continues to this day, now known as the International Association of Women Ministers.

However, by founding an organization that was larger than herself, she did begin to lose some of the freedom that had enabled her in her earlier days. As she was planning the organization, she had faulted herself for her “persistent passion for justice rather than expediency,” a trait that made it difficult to achieve some goals. As she began to carry the weight of responsibility for the organization on her shoulders, however, she

206 Ibid. Such “obscurantism” was responsible for “driving many intelligent people to modernism,” Southard wrote. She also pointed out that it was “a consolation to remember that the great outstanding Fundamentalist of the time, the man who poured out his life for the defense of the Bible as the inspired Word of God, William Jennings Bryan, did not hold with these antiquated views in the matter of woman’s position, but was thoroughly progressive. It is a matter of honor to our Association of Women Preachers that Mr. Bryan was one of our fraternal members. We would that those who wish to wear his mantle might be given at least a single portion of his spirit in this matter that means so much not simply to women but to the world.”

207 The Methodist Church granted the ordination of women as local ministers in 1924, but did not give them full membership in the General Conference. They would not achieve full Conference rights until 1956.
began to feel the pressures of expediency and respectability in ways to which she had previously been immune. 208

Although her primary focus remained on the Association from the 1920s until her death in 1967, she continued her activism and her desire to bring together the individual and the social aspects of the gospel. In 1928 she traveled to southern Asia, where she worked as a missionary and a social purity activist in India, Burma, Malaya, and the Philippines. 209 While in India Southard met with Gandhi and worked to eliminate child marriage. She also spent time with E. Stanley Jones and others at the Sat Tal Ashram in the Himalayas, where she spoke on Christianity and sexuality. In 1931 she published The Christian Message on Sex based on her talk. Even as she approached the age of seventy, she continued her activism, rebuking General Douglas MacArthur for the United States’ Army’s “lax attitude toward the proliferation of vice and prostitution in the [Philippine] islands and its effect on young Filipino girls, not to mention American soldiers.” 210 She died in 1967, but more than Bushnell’s or Starr’s, Southard’s legacy has endured, primarily through her part in securing ordination for women in the Methodist Church, and for her role in creating the International Association of Women Ministers.

208 Journal, 11 August 1919. Her comment on justice over expediency was prompted by her reflections on an article she had written and sent to Bishop Oldham for review, “Women in the Ministry.” She doubted the article would please the bishop, since he had “suggested I chiefly emphasize women’s going to fields that could not support men with families. That does not appeal to me as the strong argument,” Southard insisted, “and I could not use it.”

209 Southard initially went overseas in 1928 under the auspices of the WCTU, who covered her expenses for a “temperance trip.” Later she returned, but in connection with the Methodist Church. In the mid-twenties, Southard taught college courses (including European history, and “Christian Sociology”) for three years at Taylor University. See letter from Taylor University Dean to Southard, 27 July 1925, Southard Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

210 Taken from Carol Lynn Yellin’s summary of audiotaped interviews with Southard in 1966, Southard Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.
Over time Bushnell, Starr, and Southard became increasingly out of step with their own times, and they ultimately failed to accomplish many of the wide-ranging social changes they had set out to achieve. They did, however, succeed in crafting remarkable, woman-centered Protestant theologies that could serve as a foundation for new, Christian constructions of gender and sexuality in a modern age. They provide examples of how some early-twentieth-century Protestant women worked to negotiate changes in their faith and in the world around them. And although their theological and social formulations were not widely embraced, they nevertheless illuminate the choices available to women of their time, the challenges Christian women faced, and the promising paths not taken.
CHAPTER 2

LIBERAL CONSERVATIVES: REDEFINING RELIGIOUS CATEGORIES IN EARLY-TWENTIETH-CENTURY PROTESTANTISM

In order to understand the relationship between Protestantism and feminism in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America, it is necessary to examine in some detail the changing nature of Protestantism itself at this time. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard lived during a period of increasing polarization between conservative and liberal Protestants, but they did not fit securely in either emerging camp. They found that their goal of constructing a woman-centered Protestant theology distanced them from the majority of liberals and conservatives alike.

Bushnell’s, Starr’s, and Southard’s primary concern was not with the debates raging among Protestants over methods of interpretation and biblical authority, but rather with the errors perpetuated by both liberals and conservatives who propounded a radically male-biased faith. They refused to abandon the “truth” of the Bible, and its evidence for women’s emancipation, to higher criticism, while at the same time they insisted on a radical reassessment of traditional Christian theology, and employed the tools of modern scholarship for this purpose. Unlike conservatives, they found little they wanted to “conserve” when it came to conventional understandings of womanhood, family, and society. But they also had little in common more “progressive” Protestants when it came to such issues. They were convinced that the vast majority of American
Protestants promoted harmful and inherently unbiblical views of gender and society, continuing in the tradition of centuries of misguided male biblical translators and expositors.

Well-trained in theology and biblical languages, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were eager to undertake the much needed feminist revisions of the biblical text. They were optimistic that, when their revisions would be made known, the new truth of their woman-centered theologies would be clear and convincing, and would usher in a new age of spiritual and social equality. As it turned out, however, the polarization of American Protestantism that they steadfastly resisted would affect the reception of their thought, and due in part to the repercussions of this division, they would ultimately be unable to find substantial support among either emerging faction.

The theological reflections of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were informed in many ways by their life experiences. As nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Protestant women writing theology, they inhabited two different religious worlds. Active in temperance and social purity work, they participated in predominantly female networks of Protestant reformers. But in their scholarly pursuits, they read widely in the literature of modern religious thought, and their own work reflected many of the prevailing theological trends of the time. As women, they were situated at the margins of mainstream Protestantism, frequently subordinated and “slighted” by the male power structures. As students they struggled to receive biblical training. As scholars or

---

ministers they did not attain to prestigious seminary chairs or influential city pulpits, but toiled independently to fund their projects, to find publishers and disseminators of their writings, and to work at the local level to effect change.

As they reflected on the world around them, however—a world they knew through their considerable involvement in social reform work—they came to believe that the roots of the social problems they identified could be traced back to the theological underpinnings of American culture. They deemed it necessary to enter the male bastions of seminaries and graduate schools in order to effect the theological revisions that they hoped would effect far-reaching social change. Turning to the realm of theology, they drew on a number of current theological trends to construct their powerful, woman-centered critiques of traditional, male-inspired Protestant thought. Theological developments in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, then, provide an important context for understanding the sources of their own theological reflections, and are also central in comprehending the frustrations they would face throughout their careers, and the reception their work would receive.

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were deeply committed to their Protestant faith, but they lived during a time when the nature of Protestantism was very much in flux. Together their lifetimes spanned nearly an entire century, from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth, and during that time they witnessed, and participated in, sweeping changes in American Protestantism. Both Bushnell and Starr were born in the 1850s. As children they grew up in a world still bearing the effects of the series of religious revivals that came to be known as the Second Great Awakening. They participated in the social reforms spawned by the fervors of the Awakening, and
absorbed the perfectionist spirit that inspired a generation of reformers with the faith that a better world was within reach. But that perfectionist and reformist Protestantism was about to encounter challenging new influences. When Bushnell and Starr were still young children, a book was published on another continent that would soon challenge people’s fundamental understandings of God, themselves, and the world around them. Charles Darwin’s monumental *Origin of Species* (1859) offered new understandings of Nature, opened up the possibility of a world without God, and revealed a new and at times frightening vision of progress.

This revolutionary scientific theory was to have profound theological implications. The relationship between science and religion had long been close; in fact, well into the nineteenth century theology was considered by many to be the “queen of the sciences.” For centuries of Christian history, theologians had seen no conflict between religious and scientific knowledge, and the Bible was considered an accurate guide to the natural world. In the precritical era, the veracity of the Bible and its cultural authority had been taken for granted. Biblical stories were considered self-referential, or true in their own right, without reference to an “external” historical or scientific reality. The Protestant Reformation, while modern with regard to its challenge to the authority of the Church, actually served to enhance the authority of the biblical text in its stead. It was not until the eighteenth century that the precritical confidence in biblical truth began to give way.  

---

2 This discussion is drawn from Peter J. Thuesen, *In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). In America, this process proceeded at a slightly slower pace than it had occurred across the Atlantic, as Jonathan Edwards espoused the last great premodern intellectual approach to the Bible.
Soon, however, a number of prominent American deists emerged who began to challenge the veracity of the events depicted in the scriptures. It was only with the dawn of critical historical consciousness that people could begin to perceive that the biblical account and the “real world” might provide distinct descriptions of reality, and it was in this context that modern biblical interpretation became possible. The key theological problem of the nineteenth century, then, lay in discerning the relative correspondence of these two authorities. In America a tradition of close correspondence flourished within the framework of natural theology and in conjunction with the importation of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy. This philosophical approach asserted the perspicuity of both nature and the Christian scriptures, and provided the optimistic framework that, because both nature and the Bible were of God, human “common sense” would reveal that the truths of one would necessarily support the truths discovered in the other. Together with widely disseminated explications of natural theology by writers such as Bishop Joseph Butler and William Paley, which attempted to demonstrate how scientific knowledge affirmed traditional beliefs by revealing evidences of God’s intricate and moral design, the Common Sense approach to faith and reason established a close and reassuring connection between the Bible, science, morality, and civilization in nineteenth-century American thought.

---

3 Ibid., 8.


5 Drawing on the work of Hans Frei, Thuesen explains: “The detachment of biblical history and “real” history force[d] interpreters to take sides on whether the two histories correspond with each other completely (fundamentalism) or loosely (liberalism)” (Ibid., 9).

6 George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 16-17. Popular works of natural theology throughout the nineteenth century were Butler’s *Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736) and Paley’s *A View of the Evidence of Christianity* (1794), which
But this old order was about to pass away. By the end of the Civil War, Darwinian thought had descended upon the American scene, radically unsettling the mutually supportive relationship between science and religion that had long been tended by Christian theologians. The potential implications of the Darwinian world view were far-reaching and revolutionary, challenging traditional views of the Bible, of humankind and morality, of the history of the world, and of God. During the last decades of the nineteenth century and into the opening years of the twentieth, every American religious leader had to confront the challenges posed by this evolutionary world view. Some responded by rejecting Darwin’s teachings outright, but the vast majority worked to adapt their theological views to the dynamic theory of evolution.  

Paley’s evidences of God in nature had been rooted in his belief in the existence of a static universe, unchanging since the original act of creation. Darwin, who had little use for Paley’s reasoning, disputed this static conception of nature with his projection of the evolution of species. By sweeping away the foundation of Paley’s theory, Darwin challenged the chief assertions of natural theology: the existence of a purposeful, creative

remain required reading at Cambridge University into the twentieth century, and his Natural Theology: or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature (1802), which more fully explicated his view of the relationship between God and Nature. It was Paley who introduced the metaphor of God as a divine watchmaker whose existence is known through his creation. On the nineteenth-century relationship between science and religion, see also Jon H. Roberts Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859-1900 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), and James Turner, Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985).

The disruptive forces of the Darwinian theory broke into American religious thought at a time when doctrinal controversies had long been brewing between supporters and opponents of “old light” Calvinism. “New Light” evangelicals like Lyman Beecher, Nathaniel Taylor, and Horace Bushnell led the attack against the old guard, and although their work preceded the impact of Darwinian thought on American theology, their emphasis on the potential for human progress, in opposition to the Calvinist avowal of human depravity, helped to pave the way for the acceptance of Darwin’s evolutionary theory among a number of American theologians [Janet Forsythe Fishburn, The Fatherhood of God and the Victorian Family: The Social Gospel in America (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 54].
God, and, subsequently, of a moral and purposeful universe. With traditional moral foundations in tatters, many religious and social thinkers looked for a new basis for morality in the evolutionary process itself. Refusing to accept a view of the world in which moral purpose gave way to an arbitrary and often brutal battle for survival, they instead posited a moral evolutionary process in which developmental forces perpetually led to a more advanced, and increasingly moral universe. Many theologians resisted the potential undermining of their faith by incorporating the Divine into this evolutionary view of the world, finding evidences of God not in a static view of Nature, but in the progressive development of human society. In doing so, they brought together religion and science by instilling a scientific process with religious significance. In a variety of forms, this social application of Darwinism would have a profound effect on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social and religious thought.

The social application of the Darwinian concept of evolution provided the ideological underpinnings for the ethos of progressivism that emerged in the late nineteenth century and blossomed in the early decades of the twentieth century. Evolutionary theory posited the perpetual progress of nature, and of humankind, and late Victorians became convinced of their own role in shepherding that progress. Emboldened by the advances of modern science, they were confident in their abilities to better human society through progressive reform efforts. Liberal Protestants led the way

---

8 Fishburn, *Fatherhood of God*, 47.
9 Ibid., 49.
10 Darwin himself did not popularize the social applications of his scientific theories. That was left to British philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer, who applied evolutionary thinking to philosophy, psychology, political thought, and the study of society, and to Thomas Huxley, another popularizer of Darwinism.
in efforts to bring about social redemption. By 1900, nearly all theological liberals had
accepted some form of evolutionary theory, and they worked to adapt their theology to
the new evolutionary world view. Refusing to choose between faith and reason, and,
believing that scientific findings could not be in opposition to God’s purposes, liberal
Protestants eagerly accepted the latest scientific theories. Theirs was an inclusive and in
many ways a flexible faith, and in embracing the new teachings they helped to legitimize
the new scientific world view.\textsuperscript{12}

In American Protestant circles, the liberal Protestant articulation of a progressive
worldview came to be most clearly espoused by a group of social and religious reformers
who advanced what became known as the “Social Gospel.” At the heart of the Social
Gospel was the integration of the new, evolutionary theology with the “earlier
evangelical interest in moral renewal, humanitarian concern, and missionary zeal.”\textsuperscript{13}
Social Gospelers hoped to reform society, and emphasized social salvation over the
traditional evangelical focus on personal salvation. Rather than preaching to save
individual souls or dispensing charity to individuals, they hoped to reform social
institutions and environments with the aid of modern scientific knowledge, to enable
people to rise from their poverty and their moral deficiencies.\textsuperscript{14} In doing so, Social
Gospelers hoped for nothing less than the gradual unfolding of the Kingdom of God on
earth.

\textsuperscript{12} Richard Wightman Fox, “The Culture of Liberal Protestant Progressivism,” \textit{Journal of
Interdisciplinary History} 23 (Winter 1993), 640.

\textsuperscript{13} Fishburn, \textit{Fatherhood of God}, 6. Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the leading spokespersons for
the Social Gospel, considered “the doctrine of evolution” one of the most influential modern beliefs (5).
Fishburn notes that although later Social Gospel men “spoke the language of ethical idealism and were
critics of Social Darwinism, there was more Social Darwinism than they were aware of” (101).

\textsuperscript{14} Rosen, \textit{Preaching Eugenics}, 14.
Somewhat neglectful of the long history of nineteenth-century evangelical reform, Social Gospel reformers frequently contrasted their own emphasis on social reform to the individualistic, other-worldly orientation of more conservative Protestants. Walter Rauschenbusch, for example, the leading Social Gospel theologian, distinguished the social salvation he preached from the self-centered piety of “so-called evangelicals.”¹⁵ Not all Social Gospelers had entirely abandoned the evangelical notion of personal conversion in their new emphasis on society. Nearly all of the leading Social Gospel proponents had come out of the evangelical conversionist tradition of nineteenth-century Protestantism, and men like Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden still believed that personal conversion experiences of some sort were necessary preconditions for Christianizing the social order.¹⁶ However, they rejected the notion that society could be redeemed through the church’s efforts to save each individual sinner.¹⁷ Along with other theological liberals, Social Gospelers decried the individualistic piety they attributed to conservatives. Personal conversion did not constitute Christian truth; it was, rather, a means to an end, the basis for self-discipline and social morality.¹⁸

¹⁵ Fishburn, *Fatherhood of God*, 29. As Fishburn points out, in doing so Rauschenbusch “failed to mention the host of pre-Civil War reform movements and missionary zeal” evidenced by the “new light” evangelicals who had been inspired by the Second Great Awakening. These evangelicals believed that conversion would lead to “observable moral behavior and good works.” The social gospel combination of “conversion, morality, and social service” was “a socializing of the ‘new light’ evangelical impulse,” Fishburn writes.

¹⁶ Ibid., 101-2. Fishburn claims that the faith of the second generation of Social Gospel leaders was in fact “closer to evangelical piety than they would have admitted.” She contrasts them to other theological liberals in their “retaining an evangelical concern for conversion, personal piety, and church renewal” (Ibid., 5). She notes, however, that some Social Gospelers’ understandings of conversion diverged quite clearly from traditional evangelical models. Gladden, for example, identified “his ‘new light’ experience with education” at Williams College as his conversion (Ibid., 19).


Christianity was not the salvation of individual souls, but of the entire social order, the realization of the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Social Gospel leaders accordingly focused their attention on modern scientific theories and techniques that could effect social reform, rather than on the doctrinal issues that had traditionally occupied religious thinkers. To these reformers, “deeds, not creeds” mattered most.19 Very few Social Gospel leaders concerned themselves with abstract theological intricacies. Those who dappled in theological writings generally did so “by necessity rather than by choice.”20 Most preferred to write religiously informed social commentary, believing that ideas that could spur social action were far superior to doctrinal or creedal explications. Additionally, because Social Gospelers embraced an evolutionary view of human society and social thought, they found little of value in the theological reflections penned by writers in centuries past. Reason, they believed, was constantly evolving. Within this evolutionary framework, new theology was considered superior to older theological traditions, and modern scientific knowledge represented a legitimate new source of truth. If modern theology did not embrace the new knowledge of the day and keep up with the perpetual progress of civilization, it would pass away.21 In the classic articulation of Social Gospel theology, Rauschenbusch’s 1917 *A Theology of the Social Gospel* (which he wrote in part to answer critics who claimed the Social Gospel had no theology), argued that theology “must always embody the best thought of


20 Fishburn, *Fatherhood of God*, 131. Rauschenbusch, Fishburn writes, thought “theology was too abstract to awaken an awareness of a need for God” (137). And Josiah Strong “chose not to write theology lest it perpetuate theological warfare and prove harmful to the religious spirit of cooperation of ‘the new era’” (131). Of the social gospel leaders, only William Newton Clarke focused to any extent on theology.

21 Ibid., 130.
its age or this age will seek religion outside of theology.”  

The Scriptures were still useful as a source book for general moral ideals, but no longer as the foundation for sophisticated theologies. And, because the New Testament was the product of a more advanced cultural age, it was a more reliable source of moral truths than the Old Testament, the product of a less civilized age.

In turning their backs not only on traditional theology, but also on the place of theological reflection in modern Christianity, Social Gospel leaders participated in a broader rejection of classical theology among liberal Protestants. Already in the nineteenth century liberals had begun to turn away from some of the traditional theological foundations of Christianity. Part of what had alarmed opponents of Presbyterian David Swing, in his famous heresy trial in 1874, was the fact that “Swing’s religion was an attack upon the doctrinal, formalistic habit of mind, an endorsement of deep feeling and vital sentiment.” And, as historian Richard Wightman Fox adds, “Henry Ward Beecher’s religion of love was all that and more, as Americans in every town square and country lane found out in 1874.” In the early twentieth century, leading theological liberals were known for their lack of a coherent doctrinal foundation. Like the famous liberal minister Harry Emerson Fosdick, they “appear in hindsight to be consistent only in their willingness consistently to rethink old creeds in light of new

---

22 Rosen, Preaching Eugenics, 16.

23 Fishburn, Fatherhood of God, 135. By taking this view, Social Gospel leaders accepted one of the basic teachings of higher criticism, that “all expressions of religion were related to the culture in which they were formulated,” and that “the Bible had developed over a long period of time.”

24 Fox, “Culture of Liberal Protestantism,” 642.
knowledge.”

There theologies were “pliable compendiums of belief” that could easily integrate new thought and stay abreast of modern trends.

In fact, historians have identified cultural adaptation as one of the hallmarks of liberal Protestantism. Liberal Protestants believed it was their duty to consciously adapt their religious beliefs to developments in modern culture, and their theology was marked by an openness to insights culled from modern scholarship, particularly from the natural and social sciences, as well as by a commitment to the authority of individual reason and experience. Drawing on social applications of Darwinism, theological liberals believed that God was immanent in human cultural development, and that human society would ultimately lead to the achievement of the Kingdom of God on earth. Above all, Protestant liberals sought to refashion Christianity in order to render it both relevant and acceptable to modern people.

In an era that witnessed remarkable advances in science and industry, innovation seemed to make more sense than tradition. What was new seemed

---


26 Ibid., 9. In *A Preface to Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 97, social critic Walter Lippmann characterized the flexibility in Fosdick’s thought, asserting that “No painter who ever lived could make a picture which expressed the religion of the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick” (quoted in Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics*, 5). This rejection of traditional theology and eagerness to adapt to the most current cultural developments created a kind of “theological void.” As Christopher Lasch argues in *The New Radicalism in America*, for a time this void was filled by the adaptation of the most recent scientific techniques and the seemingly boundless energy of social reformers. But, as Fox argues, eventually it would prove difficult to distinguish the religious impulses from the secular stimulus for reform.

27 In his discussion of theological modernism, for example, Hutchison explains that modernism, “first and most visibly…meant the conscious, intended adaptation of religious ideas to modern culture.” Beyond this definition, “two further and deeper notions were important. One was the idea that God is immanent in human cultural development and revealed through it. The other was a belief that human society is moving toward realization (even though it may never attain the reality) of the Kingdom of God” (*Modernist Impulse*, 2).


better than what was old. As one Oberlin professor expressed this sentiment, “Surely the
time has come to insist that illiberalism and conservatism are immoral and unspiritual in a
world of progress.”30

Nowhere was this attitude more sharply expressed than in the area of religious
thought. And in Protestantism, where the highest authority was located in the scriptures,
the Bible would become the primary battleground on which this struggle against tradition
was waged. The acceptance of evolutionary thought and the emphasis placed upon
cultural adaptation by liberal Protestants would indeed have a profound effect on the role
of the Bible in America. At its most basic level, the new doctrine of biological evolution
challenged the veracity of the biblical account of creation provided in the book of
Genesis. A literal understanding of the first chapters of the Bible, where God created the
entire world, the animals and humankind, was impossible to fully reconcile with the
developmental model of “creation” provided by Darwinian evolution. If the book of
Genesis was deemed “unscientific,” and an unreliable source of truth, what, then, should
be done with the remaining scriptures? Within the framework of natural theology, the
“scientific” examination of the Creator’s handiwork had validated not only the belief in
God, but also the account of God’s activities recorded in the Scriptures. With modern
science no longer supporting theological beliefs, the biblical claims that had relied on a
“self-evident truth” no longer seemed reasonable. Miraculous works and supernatural
interventions, and, most significantly perhaps, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, could be

30 Herbert Alden Youtz, *Democratizing Theology* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1919), 13, quoted in
looked at with a renewed skepticism. Protestant liberals in America drew on a biblical higher criticism imported from Germany, combined with positivist thought and Darwinian theory, to radically challenge traditional notions of biblical truth and authority. They adapted to the new scientific requirements for truth by advancing a “loose” correspondence between biblical history and “real” history, and they embraced a critical hermeneutics to evaluate the “truth” of the biblical text by virtue of its correspondence, or lack of correspondence, to an external historical or scientific reality.

Not all American Protestants, however, embraced evolutionary theory and its social and theological implications. Although many nineteenth-century evangelicals had attempted to reconcile evolutionary theory with their religious beliefs, a number of prominent religious leaders began to declare such a reconciliation impossible. Many conservative evangelicals, including some of those who had never abandoned “old light” Calvinism, stood firm against the forceful tide of evolutionary thought. Prominent conservative spokesmen like Charles Hodge and Billy Sunday, and later, William Jennings Bryan, boldly opposed the advancing wave of evolutionary scientific and social theories. The opposition of these conservative religionists to the advances of modern

---

31 Before 1859 Unitarians had, in fact, challenged these tenets, but after that date the skepticism became far more widespread (Fishburn, *Fatherhood of God*, 47).

32 James McCosh is an early example of an evangelical who argued that evolution was not incompatible with traditional Christianity. Other nineteenth-century Protestants found a way to reconcile science and religion through a redefinition of their relationship based on the philosophical tradition of Kant and German Idealism, as evidenced in the theological work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl. In this revised arrangement, religion was “no longer seen as dependent on historical or scientific fact susceptible of objective inquiry.” Rather, “religion had to do with the spiritual, with the heart, with religious experience, and with moral sense or moral action—areas not open to scientific investigation” (Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 20).

33 There was a diversity of opinion among American Protestants, including among notable conservatives, on the compatibility of evolution with traditional Christianity. James McCosh, B. B.
science helped to establish an image of persistent warfare between Christianity and scientific progress, conveyed in popular books like John William Draper’s *History of the Conflict between Science and Religion* (1874) and Andrew Dickson White’s *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). 34 This representation would be indelibly imprinted on American popular culture in the wake of the infamous Scopes “Monkey” Trial in 1925.

It is important to note, however, that these Fundamentalists who rejected the teachings of modern science were not anti-scientific in that they continued to advocate the nineteenth-century Common Sense view of science that asserted the mutually reinforcing relationship between nature and faith. They were convinced that the “facts” of nature did not add up to the verifiably insupportable theory of evolution. They rejected the “evolutionary hypothesis” as both poor science and as a serious menace to fundamental Christianity. 35

To conservative Protestants, the implications of evolution imperiled the very fundamentals of their faith. They recognized that their belief in the literal and “inerrant” truth of the Bible, in the divinity of Christ, and in the supernatural works of God were all vulnerable in light of the new theory. As Charles Hodge expressed in his 1874 book *What is Darwinism?*, the naturalism implicit in Darwin’s theory of evolution was incompatible with the supernaturalism of traditional Christianity. “Is development an intellectual

---


35 Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 4. William Jennings Bryan declared that the “evolutionary hypothesis” was “the only thing that has seriously menaced religion since the birth of Christ; and it menaces …civilization as well as religion.”
process guided by God,” Hodge asked, “or is it a blind process of unintelligible, unconscious faith force, which knows no end and adopts no means?” Conservatives argued that either the account of creation provided in the book of Genesis was correct, or Darwin’s theory of naturalistic evolution, but the two could not be reconciled. “If a man is sprung from primeval matter,” explained one opponent of the new theory, “he can not be the man spoken of in Genesis.” Conservatives refused to separate the truth of the Bible from the evidences of the natural world, and rejected modern views of Scripture that denied the “literal” truth of the Bible. They reasserted the “verbal infallibility” of the biblical text, and emphasized the need for a “literal” interpretation.

In the United States, confrontations between conservatives and liberals over and the application of historicocritical methods of biblical interpretation were particularly heated. The historical Jesus, biblical miracles, and the biblical creation account were all flashpoints in the debate. Both sides tended to argue that they were in fact defending Christian truth. Conservatives accused higher critics of denying the essence of Christianity: the historical or literal veracity of the biblical story and the reality of the supernatural, the historical reality of Jesus Christ and his atonement for the sins of humankind. Liberals, on the other hand, argued that they were in fact preserving the essence of Christianity by making it credible to believers in a modern age.

By 1900 a burgeoning countermodern movement was coalescing, and issues of biblical interpretation were at its center. But other cultural distinctions set conservatives

---

36 Quoted in Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 19.
37 The Reverend George W. Weldon of London made this assertion in response to James McCosh’s attempts to reconcile Darwinism with Christianity (quoted in Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 19).
apart from their more liberal counterparts as well. In contrast to liberal Protestants, who had adopted progressive views of society more amenable to their evolutionary framework, conservatives advanced a view of society that rejected immanent social progress. Unlike modernists, who adhered to a “postmillennialist” understanding of society, believing that human society would continue to improve until Christ returned to earth, conservatives advanced a “premillennialist” view, convinced that Christ would return before the millennium, and things on earth were likely to get worse rather than get better before his return. The rampant immorality promoted as the “new morality” of twentieth-century America seemed to reinforce this theological commitment. While some conservative Protestants continued to play active roles in the social reform movements that had characterized nineteenth-century evangelicalism, twentieth-century social reform increasingly became the domain of the more liberal parties.39

Historians have termed this transformation in social views the “Great Reversal.” Attributable in part to the adoption of premillennial theology, the dramatic reduction of social action on the part of conservatives can also be traced to their antagonism toward the liberal Protestant Social Gospel. 40 In the eyes of conservatives, practitioners of the Social Gospel were neglecting the close connection between personal salvation and social

39 Some premillennialists did support social reform, such as A. J. Gordon and Salvation Army workers (Marsden, Fundamentalism, 81-85). Among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century evangelicals a variety of views existed on the relation between personal salvation and social action, and the majority of evangelicals endorsed social involvement, even the participation in progressive reform movements. Apparently some disagreement existed on the best way to approach an unbeliever with an empty stomach. Moody recommended against bringing a loaf of bread in one hand and a Bible in the other lest the unbeliever grasp the bread and ignore the Bible, or A. J. Gordon’s conviction that it was futile to preach to people distracted by their empty stomachs (81, 83). See also Rosen, Preaching Eugenics, 66.

action that they considered essential. In the nineteenth century, the widespread influence of Christian perfectionism and holiness doctrines in American Protestantism had shaped the faith of many Americans and had compelled them to social action. They sought both individual salvation and social purity, and believed the two aspects to be inseparable. Sanctified Christians would live pure lives, they believed, and they were optimistic that through evangelism and social reform efforts such as temperance and social purity, they could usher in a more perfect society. But many heirs to this evangelical tradition began to fear that, in neglecting an emphasis on personal salvation, Social Gospelers were rejecting the heart of the gospel.

Conservatives accordingly worked to distance themselves from anything that smacked of Social Gospel theology. Already by the beginning of the First World War, social concern was well on its way to becoming the province of liberal Protestants, and the war only served to intensify the reaction among conservatives. “When fundamentalists began using their heavy artillery against liberal theology,” George Marsden explains, “the Social Gospel was among the prime targets. In the barrage against the Social Gospel it was perhaps inevitable that the vestiges of their own progressive social attitudes would become casualties.”

Rather than devoting their energies to social action, and to the application of modern scientific principles to social reform, many conservatives stressed the centrality of each individual’s personal conversion experience, and concentrated on the redemption of individual souls through ardent proselytizing and revivalism in the tradition of Charles Grandison Finney, Dwight L. Moody, and other great revivalists. In doing so, they

41 Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 91.
emphasized the individualism and pietism inherent in the social consciousness of nineteenth-century American Protestantism.\footnote{Ibid., 7. According to Marsden, one of the primary themes of fundamentalism was relation to the nineteenth-century evangelical tradition. “Its individualism and its effort to return to the ‘Bible alone’ came directly from the pietist and revivalist heritage.”} Although personal morality remained important to conservative Protestants, they tended to relinquish the pursuit of active social reform to their more liberal counterparts.\footnote{Many conservatives, for instance, remained active in social movements like temperance and, to a certain extent, social purity, but they were more likely to emphasize the importance of personal righteousness over the more environmental or scientific remedies proposed by more liberal Protestants.}

By the 1920s, then, substantial cultural and theological differences distinguished leading conservative Protestants from their liberal counterparts. Whereas the liberals worked to adapt their religious beliefs to current cultural trends, and emphasized the progressive development of society, many conservatives were alarmed by their cultural surroundings, and were convinced that American society was increasingly rebelling against God. The early decades of the twentieth century are often depicted as a period of polarization in American Protestantism. At times, however, the stark divisions between fundamentalists and modernists that seemed apparent in the 1920s, particularly in popular cultural depictions of religion in connection with incidents like the Scopes trial, can be read back into the history of the preceding decades. But in reality, far more fluidity existed among the majority of American lay Protestants than might be suggested by the bellicose statements of leading liberal and conservative spokespersons. As their prominent leaders battled each other over central doctrinal issues, members of Protestant congregations throughout the nation worked to negotiate the new challenges modern thought and reality presented to their inherited beliefs and practices. In retrospect, the choices available to them can seem to fall neatly into two categories: a progressive,
modern framework, or a conservative, reactionary one. In the early twentieth-century, however, these two choices were not clearly defined. The causes of temperance and social purity, for example, which today might appear both conservative and reactionary, were at the turn of the century supported by conservatives and progressives alike. As the nineteenth-century gave way to the twentieth, and as modern American began to take shape, a spectrum of religious responses remained available to many Protestants.  

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard lived and worked in the midst of this cultural and theological upheaval. They undertook their biblical studies and formulated their religious thought in the context of the widening divisions between liberal and conservative strands of Protestantism in nineteenth-century America. They sought a new “truth” about woman’s nature and her role in society and challenged centuries of traditional Christian authority during a time in which “truth” and “authority” were highly contested issues. They lived in a critical age dominated by an emerging scientific methodology and an increasingly authoritative historical consciousness, an age shaped by the evolutionary theories of Darwinism. And they participated in a widespread reexamination of the Christian scriptures as the challenges of modern thought complicated the concept of biblical truth that had once seemed transparent. They lived at a time when the relationship between the Bible, morality, science, and American culture were in flux, and, as American Protestants, they could not remain unaffected by the disagreements and debates expounded on the national level. But these three women do not fit securely into either of the opposing theological camps.  

44 “Before World War I,” Marsden writes, “the emerging fundamentalist coalition was largely quiescent. Few could have predicted the explosion that followed” (Fundamentalism, 6).
Like fundamentalists, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard persisted in their nineteenth-century evangelical emphasis on personal conversion, and they continued to preach the importance of individual salvation, piety, and personal purity. For these women, the gospel of Christ was integral to true social reform. They believed in “the Gospel of a Savior who really does transform the human heart.” As Southard wrote in 1927, “this ‘saving of souls’ that a good many ministers even in evangelical pulpits are now sneering at is inseparably linked up with the reality of sin, the incarnation and atonement and the resurrection of Christ. To leave it out is to preach something other than Christianity.”

They continued to uphold the authority of the Bible against the “destructive” inroads of modern higher criticism, and were committed to the historical veracity of events depicted in the scriptures, in both the Old and the New Testaments. Bushnell, for example, pointedly eschewed the aid of higher critical methods in her effort to demonstrate the liberating effects of the Christian gospel for women. She insisted that her argument “assumes that the Bible is all that it claims for itself”—that it is “inspired,” “infallible,” and “inviolable.” She criticized the work of “destructive higher critics” who manipulated the text beyond what was acceptable. Although she found higher criticism “both tempting and fascinating,” allowing for “brilliant guesses” as to the meaning of particular passages, she preferred leaving the text unaltered, even if at times the meaning must remain obscure. Comparing the higher critical method to cut glass and

---

45 Southard, “The Theology of Women Preachers,” Woman’s Pulpit 3, no. 7 (December 1927): 3. Southard added that “our Association of Women Preachers was not formed as an ethical culture society, much as we may believe in ethics.” Rather, it was a fellowship of women who were reaching this transformative Gospel.

46 She cited 2 Timothy 3:16 on the inspired nature of the Bible, Isaiah 40:8 on its infallibility, and John 10:35 on its inviolability (Author’s Note, viii). In paragraph 5 she clarified that when she spoke of the Bible as inspired, infallible, and inviolable, she did not refer to the English version, “or any mere version, to the original text.”
her own lower method to uncut diamond, she concluded that she preferred the unaltered text “to a pretty setting forth of mere sentiment.”

Starr, also, parted ways with what she termed “modern destructive criticism.” As she presented the issue, “the Bible is, or is not, the inspired word of God. If it be the former, we may forego human emendations; if the latter, it cannot speak to us with authority on any question.”

In addition to their rejection of the excesses of higher critical methods, all three women continued to maintain the importance of the Bible, and of theology, in shaping individual behavior and the social order. “Certainly perfect love in our hearts toward God and our fellowmen and clean, kind living are more valuable than dry theological beliefs, however correct those may be,” Southard acknowledged. “But it does not follow, as many have held in recent years, that life alone counts and that it does not matter what one thinks.” Life, “in all its higher ranges,” Southard believed, “really grows out of our thinking.” Along with Southard, Bushnell and Starr continued to maintain the centrality of theology to human behavior and social practice.

Accordingly, other scholarly works that mention the religious contributions of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, place them firmly in the context of conservative strands of American Protestantism. As such, the women serve to represent a flowering of evangelical feminism that would be “squeezed out” of conservative Protestant circles over the course of the first half of the twentieth century.

---

47 Bushnell, GWTW, 11.
50 Janette Hassey, in *No Time for Silence*, sets Bushnell and Starr in the context of the evangelical tradition, as does Dayton in *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*. In Rosemary Radford Ruether and
commitments do support this positioning; however, many of their commitments and methodologies do not fit comfortably into the conservative branch of American Protestantism. Placing them exclusively in this religious context risks reading later theological developments back into the past. It obscures the far more fluid reality of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Protestantism, a reality particularly present in the religious worlds of American women. And this positioning also disguises the varied influences that shaped their thought, and perpetuates the general neglect of gender in the study of liberal strands of modern Protestantism.

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard seem to have been far less clear about their own theological categorization than have been recent historians. As Southard’s own perplexity at the ill-fitting categories and frustrating divisions in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Protestantism reveals, there were many positions between the extremes of liberalism or conservatism. A fluid middle ground existed, inhabited by “liberal conservatives” and “conservative liberals,” by individuals whose personal struggles to come to terms with the “vexed questions” presented by early-twentieth-century religious culture have been obscured by the “big fight” that was on between the centers of power in American Protestantism.51

In fact, in combination with their conservative tendencies, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard evinced many liberal or progressive traits, particularly in their cultural

---

orientation, their firm commitment to social reform, and their theological methodology. Like other liberal Protestants, they were highly critical of “tradition,” in its social and religious manifestations, and they remained active participants in social reform causes throughout their careers. They also eagerly participated in the liberal Protestant project of cultural adaptation, working to fashion Christianity into a belief both palatable and relevant to modern people. While Bushnell, Starr, and Southard positioned themselves against what they perceived to be the excesses of modern criticism, they were in fact well versed in modern, critical theories, and drew upon modern criticism liberally, if selectively, as they embraced many of the critical methods popular at the time. Bushnell, for example, was familiar with and drew upon the work of Charles Briggs and John F. D. Maurice, and both she and Starr cited Adolf Harnack and Willaim Rainey Harper. In her study of the New Testament, Southard drew upon the voluminous writings on the life of Christ, including Godet’s *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, Frederic W. Farrar’s *Life of Christ*, Alfred Edersheim’s *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, and Alfred Plummer’s *Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Luke* and *The Life of Lives*.

It is likely that Starr began her study of the Hebrew language under the direction of William Rainey Harper at the Chautauqua School of Liberal Arts and Sacred Languages. Harper, a gifted Baptist who later became the founding president of the

---

52 They shared these liberal tendencies with a number of other women preachers. In a 1925 article that discussed several women ministers, including Starr and Southard, the writer commented that women ministers were “bringing a liberal spirit into the ministry, the outcome of clear vision and hard study. With more of them, we are apt to see a speedy end to the fundamentalist-modernist controversy” [Frances Drewry McMullen, “Women in the Pulpit,” *Woman Citizen* (February 21, 1925): 12-13, 27-28]. This general association of women with a healthy sort of liberalism was evidenced by Bernice Estes’ recollections of Euphemia Drysdale, a member of the Association of Women Preachers in the 1920s and an associate of Lee Anna Starr in her theological studies. When asked whether she would consider Drysdale theologically conservative or liberal, or somewhere in between, Estes said that she was “probably very liberal,” in that she accepted all sorts of people into her congregation (Bernice Estes, former member of Drysdale’s congregation, in discussion with the author, March 2003). On Drysdale’s views of women in the ministry, see her article “Woman and the Ministry,” *Homiletic Review* 83, no. 5 (May 1922): 347-353.
University of Chicago, was long active in leading summer and correspondence courses on the Bible at Chautauqua. Through the study of the Hebrew language Harper believed that Christians could construct a rational and scientific faith that could hold its own in the modern world. He, too, argued that “it was the misinterpretation of the Bible that furnished the occasion of all skepticism.” He was supremely confident in the ability of science to redeem the Christian faith, and in the words of historian Martin Marty, he felt it was his mission to clear away “the rubbish which traditionalists had placed between his Bible and the people.” Marty claims that “a less destructive critic than he one can hardly imagine.”53 Under Harper’s direction, the University of Chicago “became after the 1890s the leading American center for aggressive theological liberalism,” counting Shailer Mathews, George Burman Foster, Gerald Birney Smith, and Shirley Jackson Case among its faculty members.54 But both Starr and Bushnell drew on his work and shared many of his underlying assumptions.55

Bushnell and Starr also employed the work of Adolf Harnack, one of the fathers of German higher criticism. Influenced by Ritschl, Harnack stressed the need to investigate “the circumstances of the origins of theology and dogma,” and his *History of Dogma* (1886-1890) is considered the “landmark of late-nineteenth-century reconsideration of the development of Christian doctrine.” He believed that theological work, and the history of dogma in particular, was ineradicably linked to one’s present convictions. “We study history in order to intervene in the course of history, and it is our right and duty that we do this,” he explained, “for if we lack historical insight we either

---

54 Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 105.
permit ourselves to be mere objects put in the historical process or we shall have the tendency to lead people down the wrong way.” Harnack was convinced that dogma could be “purified by history,” and that historical inquiry could successfully free the church from dogmatic Christianity, enabling Christians to “reject the past when it reaches into the present only in order to block us.”

In their own critiques of traditional Christian dogma, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard relied extensively on modern historical and anthropological research. All three women delved into these writings, including William Robertson Smith’s *The Religion of the Semites* and *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, Edward Westermarck’s *Development of Moral Ideas*, James Hastings’ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* and his *Dictionary of the Bible*, Peritz’s *Women in the Ancient Hebrew Cult*, Wellhausen’s *Reste Arabischen Heidentumes*, Eliza Burt Gamble’s *The Sexes in Science and History*, Letourneau’s *Evolution of Marriage*, and Peter Taylor Forsyth’s *Marriage: Its Ethic and Religion*. These historical and anthropological writings played a crucial role not only in their critiques of traditional Christian doctrine, but also in their interpretation of the biblical text itself. For while Bushnell may have claimed to believe in the “inspired,” “infallible,” and “inviolable” nature of the biblical text, she, as well as Starr and Southard, employed a more flexible view of inspiration than did some conservatives, emphasizing the importance of considering the historical context in which biblical texts were penned. Starr, for example, explained that it was necessary to “differentiate between inspired and uninspired utterances” in the Bible. She took issue with redactors who held,

56 Welch, *Protestant Thought*, vol. 2, 176. Bushnell wrote that “We are not accustomed to look to German sources for broad-minded statements as regards women,” but considering that she “more readily turn[ed] in that direction” to quote from Harnack on the authority of the New Testament Christian, Priscilla (196).
for example, that “every deliverance of an Apostle was under the Divine inflatus,”
drawing attention to the Apostle Paul’s claim to the contrary.\(^{57}\) And she criticized the
Protestant tendency to “clothe the Apostle Paul with infallibility,” and to impose upon the
scriptures an uncritical and misleading method of interpretation.\(^{58}\) Starr also distanced
herself from excessive biblical literalism. She criticized, for example, “some religious
sects” who took literalism to the point of forbidding “the plaiting of the hair, or the
wearing jewels of gold.” “Fortunately,” she added, “their literalism carried them no
further, otherwise it would have compelled them to also interdict the “putting on of
apparel.”\(^{59}\)

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard embraced a “lower critical” method between the
extremes of higher criticism and biblical literalism. In order to understand the meaning of
the biblical text, they worked to analyze the historical setting in which each portion was
written. Convinced that biblical commands and pronouncements must always be
understood in relation to the cultural situations in which the immediate audiences found
themselves, they liberally drew upon a wealth of historical and anthropological studies to
illuminate thousands of years of biblical history.\(^{60}\) They insisted that Christian truth must
be distinguished from the cultural context in which it was communicated. Both Bushnell
and Starr, for instance, quoted John Stuart Mill’s injunction that “to pretend that

Christianity was intended to stereotype existing forms of government and society, and

\(^{57}\) Starr, *Bible Status*, 223. She refers here to I Corinthians 7:12, where he writes, “But to the rest
say I, not the Lord;” to 7:25, “I have no commandment of the Lord; but I give my judgment.” She notes
that “he avers his lack of spiritual illumination, and we accept his words at face value.” Starr cites F. W.
Robertson and others.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 235.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 221.

\(^{60}\) This was particularly important when it came to New Testament pronouncements on the roles of
women. See Bushnell, *GWTW*, 320.
protect them against change,” was to distort the faith.\textsuperscript{61} To understand the Christian faith, then, the Bible could no longer stand alone, wrapped in its own infallibility. It needed to be juxtaposed to scholarship.\textsuperscript{62} For theology in the tradition of Schleiermacher, Maurice, and Horace Bushnell, “wholly normative and nonhistorically conditioned dogmatic statements were no longer conceivable.”\textsuperscript{63}

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were convinced that modern Protestantism, in both its conservative and its liberal formulations, was a thoroughly male-centered enterprise. Thus, while they shared similarities with both conservative and liberal Protestants, their consistent and self-conscious woman-centered perspective served to distance them from Protestant male conservatives and liberals alike. For example, while they eagerly sought to adapt the Christian faith to modern culture, unlike most Protestant liberals, they identified the emancipation of women as one of the defining features of modern society. Traditionally liberal Protestantism has been seen as a largely male enterprise, and this is not without reason.\textsuperscript{64} As one participant described the modernist project, religious impulses were fast culminating in the realization of “the nearness of man to man, the

\textsuperscript{61} Precisely, Mill wrote that such a move would “reduce [Christianity] to the level of Islamism or of Brahmism.” Bushnell quoted this sentence twice (250, 307), and Starr once. Bushnell added in a note that “every woman should be well acquainted with his book \textit{The Subjection of Women}.”


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 172.

\textsuperscript{64} In his overview of American religion, for example, Marty defines theological modernists as “male members of the privileged subculture” (\textit{Irony}, 13). “One became a member of the modernist group by attending one of the more notable divinity schools, many of which were becoming interdenominational and university related,” Marty writes, noting that women were largely excluded from seminaries in a way that they had not been from earlier parliaments and congresses (Ibid., 27). See also Brereton, “United and Slighted.”
Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of the human race.” The strikingly gendered nature of this language, although undoubtedly less remarkable in its own time, was nonetheless revelatory of liberal Protestantism’s character. In white, mainline churches, women were routinely excluded from positions of power and leadership.

Like liberal Protestants, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were critical of inherited tradition. In order to demonstrate that “true” Christianity would in fact be acceptable to modern rational people in general, and to modern feminists in particular, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard set about to peel away centuries of misdirected tradition. “We accept no authority save our own experience and reason,” Bushnell could boast. But though they were critical of tradition, they did not embrace a liberal faith in the perpetual progress of society. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard took a far more critical stance. They could not share a blind faith in “progress” or see present-day religious or social arrangements as the apex of an evolutionary development, when those arrangements relegated women to...

---

65 Colonel George R. Davis, the director of the World’s Columbian Exposition, quoted in Marty, *Irony*, 18. Marty noted that although Davis’ images were all male, the World’s Parliament of Religions actually involved more women than would participate in such events in the decades to come.

66 See Brereton, “United and Slighted,” and Michael S. Hamilton, “Women, Public Ministry, and American Fundamentalism, 1920-1950” *Religion and American Culture* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 183. Hamilton notes that the literature generally presumes that early-twentieth-century mainline Protestantism steadily moved towards greater equality and increasing opportunities for women, particularly when compared with Fundamentalism. But empirically this does not hold up. The relative number of women ordained by mainline churches likely fell in the interwar years, and most mainline Protestants were unenthusiastic about the possibility of women pastoring their churches. Mainline divinity schools were reluctant to enroll women, and when they did they intended to train women not to be “pastors, theologians, or denominational officials,” but to be “ministers’ wives, directors of religious education, and teachers of religion in colleges and on the mission field” (182). On historians who have wrongly presumed mainline Protestantism’s greater openness to women’s leadership, Hamilton includes Bendroth, “Fundamentalism and Femininity,” 2; Edith L. Blumhofer, *The Assemblies of God: A Chapter in the Story of American Pentecostalism. Volume 1—to 1941* (Springfield, Mo: Gospel Publishing House, 1989), 370; Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 123. And this conclusion, Hamilton argues, “is implied by the construction of two articles in Ruether and Keller, eds., *Women and Religion in America: Volume 3*...”

67 Bushnell, *GWTW*, 102. Bushnell referred to the authority of translators and expositors, not the inherent authority of the biblical text. When speaking of the Bible as “inspired, infallible, and inviolable,” Bushnell clearly articulated that in doing so she was not referring to the present English language versions, or to any mere version, but only the original text (Ibid., 5).
subservient and, they were convinced, thoroughly unbiblical positions. In this conviction they parted ways with many contemporary accounts that linked Protestantism with Anglo-Saxon “civilization” and the steady “advancement” of women in society.  

As noted above, Bushnell and Starr also parted ways with liberal Protestants when it came to issues of higher criticism. In part this was due to their theological convictions, but they also objected to higher criticism from a pragmatic, woman-centered perspective. Whereas some historians have suggested that “without doubt,” “radical feminists received the higher criticism from Europe ‘as a gift from heaven,’” Bushnell and Starr explicitly repudiated the “tempting” opportunity. Bushnell rejected the higher critical approach in part because she was convinced that “however freely certain male scholars of the present day manipulate the text,” she was aware that “no confidence would be placed in the results thus obtained by a woman, for “at once” she would be accused of manipulating the text to suit her argument. “Even if we thought it lawful under any circumstances,” Bushnell averred, such manipulation proved unnecessary. “The assumption that the text needs amending, to any great extent, is very erroneous,” she contended. Additionally, Bushnell explained, even if she did not believe in the historicity of the events depicted in the Bible, as a woman she could not afford to ignore them, for their false interpretation by people convicted of their truth had caused immense

---

68 See also Haynes, Divine Destiny.

69 Kraditor, Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 76. Bendroth quotes Kraditor in Fundamentalism and Gender, 37. “Embracing rather than rejecting the spiritual crisis of their age,” Bendroth continues, “they capitalized on rising intellectual skepticism about the Bible’s supernatural origins to raise difficult questions about its interpretation…”

70 Bushnell, GWTW, 2, 3
and very real sufferings on the part of women.\textsuperscript{71} The biblical text demanded a reassessment, and women were finally sufficiently educated to undertake this task. Through her knowledge of the ancient languages, Bushnell would accomplish a radical rereading of the text without the tools of higher criticism. Starr, also, believed that higher criticism was not only erroneous, but also was as likely to have detrimental effects on women’s condition as had traditional biblical exegesis. And Southard, too, rejected extreme higher critical methods, preferring to unearth the egalitarian teachings of a historical Christ.

All three women agreed that the Bible was far too valuable to women to subject it to the vagaries of higher criticism, particularly a criticism developed and applied by men. Aware that many people no longer believed in the literal or historical truth of the Bible, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard nevertheless refused to dismiss biblical stories as “mere ‘folk-lore.’” “We are convinced that they are history, and to women very valuable history,” Bushnell explained.\textsuperscript{72} They understood that traditional Christian belief had often contributed to the subjection of women, but rather than abandoning the biblical text or turning it into a loose allegory that could be manipulated this way or that, both their personal belief and their pragmatic sense compelled them to work within the bounds of orthodox Christianity to bring about women’s emancipation.

Bushnell’s, Starr’s, and Southard’s emphasis on the advancement and rights of women in religion and society also served to distance them from a group of early-twentieth-century Protestants with whom they otherwise shared significant goals in

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 22.
common: proponents of the Social Gospel. As we will examine in the following chapters, their reassessments of gender, sexuality, and family arrangements in modern America and in the Christian faith set them apart from leading Social Gospel ministers, for whom traditional Victorian arrangements remained central to their religious and social visions.

Informed by their woman-centered perspective, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were highly critical of liberal Protestantism. Yet in their opinion traditional Christianity fared no better than did liberal innovations when it came to woman’s condition. They largely agreed with Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s assessment that the Bible had been used repeatedly to restrict women to their “divinely ordained sphere” as prescribed in the Old and New Testaments. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were well aware of the fact that when early-nineteenth-century women “began to protest against their civil and political degradation, they were referred to the Bible for an answer. When they protested against their unequal position in the church, they were referred to the Bible for an answer.”

The subjugation of women under the guise of God’s Word stretched far back in time and continued in the present, they understood, and it was little wonder that the male bias in traditional Christianity had invited the rejection of the Christian faith in its entirety by women committed to the feminist cause. “At times, some holding to the equality of the sexes have felt constrained to apologize for the teachings of Scripture on this subject,” Starr acknowledged; “others, smarting under a sense of injustice, have flouted Sacred

73 Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible*, 8. In Stanton’s view, “the Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent…” (7).
Writ.’’ But the church consistently had failed to respond adequately to these charges, and with dire consequences. “The Church so far attempts no defense here of her children,” Bushnell warned, since “it assumes that the interests of merely a few ambitious women are involved.” To the contrary, “the very fundamentals of our faith” were at stake.”

By participating in the subjection of women, Christian tradition had not only caused women to suffer grave and enduring consequences, they argued, but this patent injustice also threatened to destroy the credibility of the Christian faith. “At no point is faith in the entire Bible being so viciously and successfully attacked today,” Bushnell conjectured, “as at the point of the ‘woman question.’” In fact, much of the blame for the erosion of the Christian faith that conservatives attributed to liberal dilutions should in fact be placed upon the “traditionalists” themselves, they contended. Religious conservatives had narrowly and at times willfully misinterpreted Scripture and corrupted the truth, they argued, thus making Christian belief ultimately incompatible with modern thought. Because of the misinterpretation and misuse of biblical Christianity, many “fair-minded people,” including many women, had been compelled to turn away from the faith.


75 Bushnell, *GWTW*, xvii. In *Covet to Prophesy* (Piedmont, California: privately printed, 1943), Bushnell writes that “The object has been to show that the position and privilege of woman has been falsely interpreted and misunderstood, almost from the first, and that the clearing away of misconception and misinterpretation is demanded in order to remove impediments that block the progress of the Church. The question is much more than a ‘woman question’: it concerns the Church to prepare the way for a completer fulfillment of God’s will as to a general outpouring of His Spirit upon believers—a fulfillment in completeness of what we saw in part in the Welsh revival…” (3).

76 Bushnell, *GWTW*, xvii. While this statement might not hold up empirically, it reflects the assessment of the challenges to the Bible and to traditional Christianity from the position of a Protestant woman active in the woman’s movement.
By insisting on the biblical sanction of women’s rights, including the right of women to preach the gospel, they parted ways with those conservatives who championed a narrowly literalist application of the Bible, since they needed to find a way around such scriptural passages as “Let our women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak,” and “I permit not a woman to teach, nor to have dominion over a man.” In their rejection of a narrowly literal approach to such texts, however, they stood in a long line of evangelical biblical interpretation. They pointed out that for centuries reformers had been grappling with opponents who pointed to particular biblical texts in attempts to halt progressive reform. The divine right of kings, slavery, polygamy, the consumption of alcoholic beverages could all be supported by various proof texts, Starr reminded her readers. Most Christians would agree, however, that at least some, if not all of these matters, were in fact incompatible with the spirit of Christianity and the general understanding of the biblical message. It was really no surprise that opponents of women’s rights would try once again to use the Bible against progressive reform. A correct understanding of the Bible, however, one shorn of its male supremacist rhetoric

---

77 I Corinthians 14:34, 35. Starr cited these problematic passages in her article The Ministry of Women, 34.

78 This was a common argument advanced by women’s rights activists concerning scriptural opposition to their cause. Southard notes this, too, in “Controversy in Tennessee,” Woman’s Pulpit, 2, no. 3 (July 1925): 1. “It seems a great pity that men should use the Bible to bolster up their pagan prejudices, but the same thing was done for slavery, for the divine right of kings, is now being done for war, so it is not strange that it is done in the matter of woman’s subjection.”

79 Starr, Ministry of Women, 34. “Scarcely a reform but has had its opponents who based their opposition on what they believed, or professed to believe to be Bible teachings,” Starr wrote. For added effect, Starr reminded her readers that the “pioneers of the Methodist Protestant Church were confronted with such passages as ‘Obey them that have the rule over you,’ and ‘If a man seeketh the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.’” As Starr had contended earlier in her article, these two passages apparently restricting women’s activities needed to be interpreted “in the light of other Scripture,” whereas opponents of women’s ecclesiastical rights tended to “interpret all other Scripture in the light of these two passages” (13).
and the fallacies of male interpretation, would bring about progress for women while defending the truth of the Christian gospel. 80

But Bushnell, Starr, and Southard also parted ways with conservatives who were retreating from an emphasis on social reform. Southard described herself as “a passionate preacher of the social Gospel,” which she considered “just the discovering and loving your neighbor at both short and long range in all the human relationships of domestic, social, industrial, racial, national, and international life.” 81 Southard, Bushnell, and Starr all inhabited the shrinking middle ground in early-twentieth-century Protestantism between liberals and conservatives in their emphasis on both personal conversion and social reform. They had been shaped by a nineteenth-century Methodism that encouraged both personal and social holiness and purity, and were initiated into social reform through the temperance and social purity movements, two causes that had long brought together both the individual and the social impulses of reform. They continued to advance both of these impulses, but found that they were increasingly in the minority of American Protestants in their desire to do so. As Southard explained, her social vision had “not lessened, it has rather increased, her desire for the salvation of individual souls…” 82 At the same time, she maintained that she was “not an individualist who thinks everything can be made right by converting folk and that only.” She considered herself both a

80 Ibid., and Bushnell, GWTW, 1.
82 Ibid. Southard distinguished herself from those who “disdain[ed] the theology of evangelical theology” and “sneer[ed] at the ‘saving of souls’ as individualistic and plead[ed] for a social religion that does not bother with anything so out of date as ‘souls’.”
preacher and “a social worker.” Southard attributed her combination of the individual and the social messages of Christianity in part to her position as a Christian woman. And she blamed the diminishing space in American Protestantism for those who combined both messages on the persistent marginalization of women in Protestant churches.

“The social aspects of the message of Jesus make a strong appeal to the hearts of women,” Southard wrote in 1919, at a time when conservatives were becoming increasingly suspicious of social action. Frustrated with the growing separation of conversionist and activist aspects of Christianity, Southard argued that the Protestant church’s treatment of women had contributed to this estrangement. Women who would have combined social reform with passionate Christianity had frequently been prevented from doing so within Protestant churches. Women like Frances Willard, Southard reminded her readers, had initially wanted to enter the ministry. “But even my dear old mother Church, the Methodist, did not call women to her altars,” Willard had recollected. She was “too timid to go without a call,” and, although her “unconstrained preference would long ago have led [her] to the pastorate,” she turned instead to reform work. One minister commented that “Miss Willard did a far greater work than if she had been in the pulpit.” But Southard challenged this assertion. “An amazing amount of social reform has been brought about since women have had some part in municipal and educational affairs,” she conceded, but “The loss on this line that the church has sustained through its resolute closing of the ministry to women is beyond estimate.” Had the church embraced the social and religious work of women, “who can say how much farther along both the

---

83 Southard to Sister Kroft, undated letter. Southard Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. Southard wrote to Kroft that the “drys must be liars like other folk” to have given Kroft misleading information. “I think some of them are,” Southard added, revealing her disillusionment. “Even in our organizations for godly things pride of self, envy, etc. creep in.”
Church and social reforms would be today?” The church had just begun to awaken “to its loss in allowing certain great social impulses born of the Christian spirit to crystallize in secular movements which are indifferent, sometimes hostile, to formulated Christianity,” she contended. “Very much social service fails through lack of spiritual vision,” Southard argued, and “much religious effort fails through lack of practical human contact.” She believed it was “quite probable that these two aspects of the Gospel would not have become so estranged” if women had been allowed to take their proper positions in the churches.84

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard sought to reclaim the essence of the Protestant faith by carefully reexamining what they perceived to be the ultimate source of that tradition, the Christian scriptures. Rather than turning away from a detailed examination of the Old and New Testaments to embrace a more modern faith, they insisted that the basis for a progressive, woman-centered Christianity could be found in the pages of the Bible and expounded in a new theological discourse.

They acknowledged that “the advanced thought of the age” was indeed “out of harmony with some of the interpretations of bygone years,” since “individuals of sluggish thought have at times claimed the warrant of Scripture.” But the fact that the Bible had been misappropriated for conservative and unbiblical causes should in no way discredit true Christianity, Starr suggested, any more than centuries of false understandings of the natural world had had any effect on the existence of that world. “The fallibility of human understanding in nowise alters the truth as revealed in God’s Word,” she explained. “Not

Scripture, but our exegesis has been at fault.\textsuperscript{85} Now “keener research has revealed the error” of the false exegesis and misappropriation of the Bible, and the “proponents of true reform” needed not fear to look within the covers of the Bible for sanction. “They will find it here, enwrapped in some mandate or promise which the near-sightedness of the race has overlooked or misread,” Starr asserted.\textsuperscript{86} Bushnell, Starr, and Southard turned their attention to the Bible even as liberals were turning away from biblical authority because they remained convinced that the Bible, as the Word of God, contained truth even in the modern age. And even though they acknowledged that biblical authority could no longer be taken for granted, they saw how, in America, cultural debates about women’s roles and woman’s nature invariably returned to biblical foundations.

Dating back to the early Puritan settlers, American Protestants had long been “people of the book.” Even in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America, when Protestant hegemony encountered the social upheavals brought about by industrialization and immigration, the Bible remained a formidable cultural power. “So long as tens of thousands of Bibles are printed every year, and circulated over the whole habitable globe, and the masses in all English-speaking nations revere it as the word of God,” wrote Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the 1890s, “it is vain to belittle its influence.” Although she herself had long abandoned any sense of the Bible as “the word of God,” having through reason “repudiated its divine authority,” she acknowledged “sentimental feelings” that persisted for things one once believed sacred. This religious residue

\textsuperscript{85} Starr, \textit{Bible Status}, 17.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 17, 18.
continued to sustain the cultural power of the scriptures. Writing three decades later, Starr concurred. “The Bible holds an enlarged place in the thought of mankind,” she wrote. “Not a jot or tittle has been surrendered. ‘What saith the Scripture?’ ‘Thus saith the Scripture,’ and ‘It is written’ more than ever determine the beliefs of the race.”

While the cultural authority of the Bible might have persisted well into the twentieth century, in the age of modern biblical criticism the nature of the truth contained within the Bible was increasingly contested. Bushnell and Starr in particular worked not only to reinterpret the truth contained in the Bible, but to reconstruct that truth through retranslations of the text. Their retranslation project was hardly without precedent. Indeed, by the late nineteenth century, Americans not only debated the authority of the Bible as the word of God, but they also heatedly contested which Bible contained that word. Before the rivalries between Fundamentalists and modernists reached their peak in twentieth-century America and crowded out an ever-shrinking middle ground of biblical interpretation and theological moderation, “lower critical” methods like those employed by Bushnell, Starr, and Southard had received widespread acceptance, even among those nineteenth-century Protestants who rejected higher criticism. In the context of common sense philosophy, and practiced by those convinced that biblical history and “real” history corresponded closely, “lower criticism,” or textual criticism, could be seen not as a “destructive” method that would decay the authority of the Bible, but as a constructive method that would bring Christians as close as possible to the “unadulterated” word of

87 Stanton, Woman’s Bible, 11-12.
88 Starr, Bible Status, 17. Though her position as a minister and as a member of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union may have somewhat exaggerated the apparent cultural power of the Christian scriptures by the 1920s, Starr recognized the persistent use of biblical “evidence” by a large number of Americans during this time that would have been apparent particularly in the public debates over evolution, as well as in cultural views of womanhood.
God. Whereas higher critics called into question the historical truth of biblical accounts and the assumed authorship of biblical texts, lower textual criticism could employ the tools of modern scholarship in order to reconstruct a more accurate Bible, one that more closely mirrored the “original,” or “primitive” Hebrew and Greek texts, and one that would command the respect of even the most scientific scholars.  

Thus began the biblical revision work that caught the imagination of nineteenth-century English-speaking Christians worldwide. For centuries the hegemony of the King James Version had been uncontested. But by the 1870s the findings of modern scholarship convinced many that an updated and corrected version of the Bible was necessary for modern Christians. And so thirty-four American biblical scholars, all white, male elites, joined forces with their British counterparts to replace the King James Version with “King Truth.” Supremely confident in their own abilities, and in their “scientific,” scholarly credentials, they set out to produce the most perfect Bible the world had ever seen.

Rejecting higher critical methods, the revisers reasoned that by removing the errors and archaisms of the King James Bible they would be bolstering the authority of the Bible in the modern age. They were confident that in order truly to know God, people needed the most accurate Bible possible. “There is no surer way of undermining the authority of the Scriptures in the public estimation,” remarked on member of the revision committee, “than, while admitting the existence of inaccuracies, to refuse to allow them

89 Thuesen, *In Discordance*, 45. Unlike higher critics, lower critics respected the authority of the biblical text.

90 Ibid., 44. The Revised Version was published in 1881 and 1885.

91 Only one member of the Revised Version committee, William Robertson Smith, espoused higher critical methods (Ibid., 45).
to be corrected.” Even for devotional purposes, another argued, “knowledge of the exact sense of scripture” was necessary.\(^92\) Sacrificing the beauty and familiarity of the King James was a small price to pay for the empirical perfection of the new Revised Version. If one had to decide between truth and beauty, most American Christians opted for truth.\(^93\) Those who thought otherwise were admonished by those like F. W. Farrar, who demanded, “Can it then be said that custom is dearer to us than truth? Do we desire the plain bare facts of that which we call the word of God, or do we desire melodious glosses and mistaken interpretations?”\(^94\)

American Christians were caught up in the epistemological optimism of the project, as millions rushed to possess the “unadulterated” Word of God, the “plain facts” of the Bible that would bring them closer than ever to the truth of the gospel.\(^95\) But this enthusiasm was also accompanied by controversy, as some people began to question the disinterested, “scientific” work of the Revised Version translators. As Peter Thuesen explains in his history of Bible translation in America, “both the revisers and their supporters conflated the purposes of historical and textual criticism.” The purpose of textual criticism was “simply to reconstruct the bare text as it appeared to its original

---


\(^93\) Thuesen, *In Discordance*, 56. Americans were largely willing to trust the expertise of the Revision Committee.

\(^94\) Ibid., 50. Farrar was then canon of Westminster and later appointed dean of Canterbury Cathedral, and Bushnell drew upon his work. Thuesen notes that Henry Ward Beecher, too, supported the revisers’ effort, and that he had been “indignant” at the American Bible Society when they had canceled “a typographically corrected and orthographically updated edition” of the King James Version, due to conservative pressure.

\(^95\) Ibid., 51.
audience.” But the textual question often blended imperceptibly into the historical question of whether or not the event actually happened. The translators, however, insisted on the “scientific” nature of their task, a scholarly project irrespective of individual commitments or beliefs. Eminent church historian Phillip Schaff claimed that textual criticism had nothing to do with “hermeneutics and interpretation” or “subjective likes and dislikes, but only with the facts,” just as historical criticism had “no other purpose than to ascertain the real facts of the case.”\footnote{Schaff, A Companion to the Greek Testament and English Version (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1883), 406, quoted in Thuesen, \textit{In Discordance}, 51.} Controversies surrounding new translations, however, called into question this optimism.

Already in the 1860s doctrinally informed translations sparked the ire of attentive critics. The American Bible Union, for example, a Baptist organization that had formed as the result of disagreements with the American Bible Society, published its own version of the New Testament that translated “baptize” as “immerse.”\footnote{Thuesen, \textit{In Discordance}, 47.} Two other versions of the New Testament, both translated by Unitarians, were also accused of theological bias.\footnote{Ibid. The translations were by Leicester Sawyer (1858) and George Rapall Noyes (1869).} The Revision Committee, however, had hoped to provide an authoritative translation that avoided any narrow doctrinal prejudices. For this reason Schaff had insisted that no single person or denomination could be trusted to produce a satisfactory translation.\footnote{Ibid., 47.} Initially, the Revised Version met with enthusiastic responses from liberals and conservatives alike. As one writer in the \textit{Sunday School Times} expressed his reaction to the revisions, “We may be sorry to miss the last part of [Romans 8:1]; but if Paul did not
write it, we do not want it in our Bibles.”  For a time a general trust in the competence and expertise of the revisers seemed to prevail.

It did not take long after the appearance of the Revised Version, however, for conservatives to begin to find fault with some of the modern alterations of the text. Suspicious of the liberal leanings of the translators, a number of countermodernists began to reject the Revised Version, and along with it even the lower critical methods employed in its composition. Faced with the troubling possibility of an “ unholy scriptures,” of uninspired versions of the word of God, some staunch conservatives re-enshrined the King James Version as the only acceptable word of God by the 1920s, claiming that “modern textual critics and translators had imbibed too much German higher-critical ideology, thereby rendering even well-intended Bible revision subversive of Christian truth.”

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were also highly skeptical of the revisers’ liberal optimism that they could, through scientific methods, achieve an unbiased, “truthful” translation of the scriptures. But unlike many conservatives, they refused to enthrone the King James Version of the Bible, sharing the liberal critique of the inadequacies and errors of the traditional version. For while they embraced the tools of modern scholarship and historical criticism in their theological work, they never failed to draw attention to the positionality of the religious scholar. As far as they were concerned, neither the

100 Sunday School Times 23, no. 23 (4 June 1881), quoted in Thuesen, In Discordance, 56.

101 Even staunch conservative B. B. Warfield, for example, endorsed the new version. Although he opposed higher criticism, he advocated “text-critical research and ecumenical revision,” and was confident that the essence of the Scriptures had been “kept pure in all ages” through God’s “singular care and providence” (Thuesen, In Discordance, 70). The last phrase is taken from the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of 1648, and represents a view very different from Bushnell’s, Starr’s, and Southard’s.

102 Ibid., 61. This transition did not happen over night; as Thuesen points out, a number of authors of The Fundamentals (1910-1915) cited the Revised Version text (Ibid., 59).
authority of Christian tradition encapsulated in the King James Version nor the
“scientific” work of modern translation committees could be trusted, since both were
marked by a profound male bias.

“Turn to the Title Page of your Bible,” Bushnell instructed her readers. “If you
have an Authorised Version, you will read the assurance given to the reader, that the
Book has been ‘Translated out of the original tongues; and with the former translations
diligently compared and revised.’ If you have a Revised Version, of 1884, it will claim to
be ‘the version set forth A.D. 1611 compared with the most ancient authorities and
revised.’ But, she avowed, “These assurances do not hold good,” at least not “in this case
where the status and welfare of one-half the human race is directly and vitally
concerned.”

“Give men what proof you will,” Bushnell quoted Canon Payne-Smith’s
comments on Bible translation, “but seldom do they find more than what it suits them to
find. If what is said agrees with their preconceived notions, well; if not, they reject it.”
And drawing on Farrar, she quoted, “Few are the translators, fewer the exegetes…to
abstain from finding in the Bible thoughts which it does not contain, and rejecting or
unjustly modifying the thoughts which are indeed there.” Starr agreed. Men “who sit in
judgment” on matters concerning women have certain predilections, and “without a
scintillation of…proof” to support their assumptions, “they lay down their proposition,
and then exhaust their energies in trying to align the facts of Scripture and its teachings in

103 Bushnell, GWTW, 144. And, she added, “the highest good of the other half” was “just as vitally
concerned, if even more remotely and less visibly.”
104 Ibid., GWTW, 172.
105 Ibid., GWTW, 375.
sustentation of their postulate.” Instead of assembling facts, weighing them with an open
mind, and drawing a conclusion, men started out with prepossessed notions about
women, and read the scriptures accordingly.¹⁰⁶

Ever since her discovery of a “sex-biased” Chinese translation of the scriptures
that had been intentionally misconstrued in order not to offend “pagan prejudices,”
Bushnell had been aware of the translator’s potential to distort the word of God. “All
translation implies some, if only a slight, alteration of the sense of the original,” Bushnell
quoted Adolf Diessman.¹⁰⁷ What might first seem to be the “scientific” or neutral task of
translation, she suggested, was in fact a far more fluid and value-laden “art.” The
translator frequently had to use his or her judgment to determine the correct rendition of
the original language. This was particularly true for the Old Testament, because of the
nature of the ancient Hebrew language. The original Hebrew of the Old Testament,
Bushnell explained, did not distinguish between capital and lower case letters, and double
letters were often written only once. More importantly, the original Hebrew text
contained no vowels. “Uninspired” scribes later added vowel-signs in order to render the
words understandable. For Bushnell, and for Starr and Southard, only the original
Hebrew consonants represented the true and infallible word of God.¹⁰⁸ This allowed for
much flexibility as translators worked from the original Hebrew to modern English, and
preconceived notions invariably shaped the modern translations of the Hebrew text. “Men
never do understand anything unless already in their minds they have some kindred

¹⁰⁶ Starr, Bible Status, 116.
¹⁰⁷ Bushnell, GWTW, 5.
¹⁰⁸ Starr followed this explicitly in her own book, often quoting from Bushnell, and Southard
indirectly by recommending the Old Testament exegesis of Bushnell and Starr.
ideas,” she reminded her readers, and cited Farrar’s caution that “a translator has the need of invincible honesty if he would avoid the misleading influences of his own \textit{a priori} convictions.” But Bushnell, Starr, and Southard found little evidence of such “invincible honesty” when it came to men abandoning their preconceived notions of women.

For centuries, they argued, men had claimed the sole right to translate and interpret the Word of God, and this male dominated tradition of biblical scholarship had left its mark on the faith. A male bias emerged already during biblical times, Bushnell argued. As soon as it became necessary for common people to have the Scriptures translated and interpreted for them, “man began to interpret those writings . . . to the detriment of woman.” Intelligent and spiritually mature women, without knowledge of the biblical languages, could do little to combat this distortion.

At times Bushnell, Starr, and Southard accused men of intentionally conspiring to suppress women through willful misinterpretation and faulty translations. At one point Bushnell went so far as to intimate that, through their misrepresentations of Scripture,

\begin{quote}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{109}] Bushnell, \textit{GWTW}, 14. Here she again quoted Canon Payne-Smith.
\item[\textsuperscript{110}] Ibid., 374.
\item[\textsuperscript{111}] “Better, far better,” Bushnell wrote, “that we should doubt every translator of the Bible than to doubt the inspiration of St. Paul’s utterances about women; and the justice of God towards women; or, above all, to doubt that ‘Christ hath redeemed us’ (women) ‘from the curse of the law’” (Ibid., 371).
\item[\textsuperscript{112}] Bushnell qualified her statement that “every translator of the Bible, throughout Church history has been a male” by acknowledging that a few women have translated a part of the Bible, or the whole. “But their work is allowed to perish,” she argued, noting that women have never enjoyed a seat on Translation Committees, nor has their work been allowed a place of influence in the Church (Ibid., 377).
\item[\textsuperscript{113}] As Susan Juster describes in “The Spirit and the Flesh: Gender, Language, and Sexuality in American Protestantism,” in Harry S. Stout and D.G. Hart, eds., \textit{New Directions in American Religious History} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), literacy has been portrayed as a masculine mode of communication in religious culture, and notes that “religious traditions that place a strong emphasis on the ‘Word’ as the source of divine authority have been described as particularly masculine in orientation, whereas those that privilege the more mystical elements of religious faith, like that of personal revelation, are seen as more feminine” (343).
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}
men were allying themselves with the devil, in the devil’s enmity with women.\textsuperscript{114} Generally, however, they took a less conspiratorial view, concluding that many—though not all—of the errors proceeded unintentionally from a long line of exclusively male expositors. Granting that they may have “done the best they could alone,” Bushnell nevertheless asserted that they did not do “the best that could have been done.” To illustrate this contention, she told how it was known that when a man lost his way on the prairie, he would eventually begin to go around in a circle. One side being stronger than the other, he tended to pull unconsciously with greater strength upon one reign than upon the other. So is it with the translator, she suggested. “He pulls unconsciously on the strong side of preconception or self-interest.” While this might not be intended, she conceded, “it is none the less inevitable to the uninspired hand.”\textsuperscript{115}

Therefore, Bushnell suggested that readers should “remember that no translation can rise much above the character of the translator.” Translators should be known for their honesty as well as their learning. But even then, the translator would be bound by his or her cultural presuppositions, and “cannot properly render what has not as yet entered in the least into his consciousness as the truth.”\textsuperscript{116} “For this reason,” she contended, “no class or sex should have an exclusive right to set forth the meaning of the original text.” It was little wonder that “all versions, having for all time been made by men, should disclose the fact that, on the woman question, they all travel more or less in a circle, in accordance with sex bias, hindering the freedom and progress of women.” Throughout Jewish and Christian tradition, “the self interest of man led him to suppose

\textsuperscript{114} On willful mistranslation see, for example, Bushnell, GWTW, 152.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 616.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 375.
that woman served God best as his own undeveloped subordinate.” As a result, every
time a passage has presented more than one possible translation, Bushnell argued, “this or
that man of learning” has taken the opportunity “to build up one sex and to depreciate the
other.” The result of this, “through the ages, has been cumulative,” even if not through
actual intention.

Because of the subjectivity and uninspired nature of biblical translations, there
was a crucial need for women as well as men to translate and interpret the text. Bushnell,
in particular, repeatedly entreated her female readers to undertake study of the biblical
languages and theology, in order that they might assist in rectifying the imbalance
brought by centuries of male translators and expositors. She counseled women to “learn
to read and judge of the original” for themselves if at all possible, and, admitting that all
women would not be able to accomplish this feat, she urged her readers not to rest until
they had “seen to it that a sufficiently large number of young women are kept in training
in the sacred languages.”

“The world, the Church and women are suffering sadly from
woman’s lack of ability to read the Word of God in its original languages,” she
insisted. Only when women had a voice in interpreting the Bible, particularly in

---

117 Ibid., 616; see also paragraphs 617 and 619.
118 Ibid., 619.
119 Ibid., 375. Decades earlier, in Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, Sarah M. Grimké had made
a similar plea: “… [I] must enter my protest against the false translations of some passages by the MEN
who did that work… When we are admitted to the honor of studying Greek and Hebrew, we shall produce
some versions of the Bible, a little different from those we have now,” she contended. [Grimké, Letters on
the Equality of the Sexes and Other Essays, ed. Elizabeth Ann Bartlett (New Haven: Yale University Press,
1988), 38].
120 Bushnell, GWTW, 13.
passages relating especially to the interests of women, would “women’s temporal and spiritual interests receive their due consideration.” 121

For those women who found it impossible to study the sacred languages and interpret the original biblical texts, Bushnell had further words of advice. Quoting “an eminent Scotch divine,” she advised, “if we find even in the Bible anything which confuses our sense of right and wrong, that seems to us less exalted and pure than the character of God should be: if after the most patient thought and prayerful pondering it still retains that aspect, then we must not bow down to it as God’s revelation to us, since it does not meet the need of the earlier and more sacred revelation He has given us in our spirit and conscience which testify of Him.” If, then, women were unable to reconcile the biblical text they read with their innermost convictions, after serious deliberations they should reject the passage as a faulty exposition, for “the Holy Spirit invariably refuses to seal to us as truth that which is error.” Rather, the Spirit “will warn us against accepting the error, even though it appears on the page of our Bible translation.” 122

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard all believed that women’s presence on translation committees was absolutely essential in order to avoid this persistent male bias. The work of previous committees “would have been of a much higher order had they first helped women to learn the sacred languages,” Bushnell argued, “instead of putting obstacles in their way,” and if they then had “given them a place by their side on translation committees.” 123 She was convinced that the Revised Version would have avoided some

---

121 Ibid., 371.
122 Ibid., 375.
123 Ibid., 372.
of its errors of interpretation “had educated women been on the last Revision Committee.”

Southard also tried to ensure that women would be given a voice in Bible translation work. When the Revised Version was itself undergoing revision, Southard wrote to Luther A. Weigle, the head of the translation committee. She informed Weigle that “a considerable number of church women” were “deeply concerned that the American Standard Bible…shall not perpetuate certain injustices to women.” Asking only for a “perfectly honest translation,” she told Weigle that they believed that “the obvious bias of early translators has not been sufficiently realized by those who have followed them.” She sent a copy of Starr’s *Bible Status of Women* to the translation committee.

124 Ibid., 622.

125 Southard to Weigle, 18 October 1940, Southard Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. She continued, “Some women who knew the Greek and Hebrew have made studies along this line, and have left some writings. Would your committee be willing to examine their translations? If so, please let me know to whom to send material, particularly concerning the Pauline and Petrine writings. We have no desire to attempt to influence these men, but we do feel that scholars in the middle of the twentieth century may be open-minded enough to give the same translation when a word is used for a woman that they do when it is used for a man—but we doubt if they will notice this unless it is called to their attention.”

Weigle replied (Weigle to Southard, 25 July 1941, Southard Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute), noting that members of the committee—himself, Dr. Moffatt, Professor Burrows, and others—had found Starr’s book “of real value,” and noted that he and his committee were “doing our best to guard against the sort of unfairness of which she writes.” Responding to Southard’s suggestion, he wrote that he “had not thought of asking a woman scholar to read the manuscript before publication, but that probably is an excellent idea,” and that he thought he would propose it to the committee at their next meeting. Weigle’s apparent enthusiasm for the idea is not certain, however. I have found no record in the minutes of the Standard Bible Committee of this proposal taking place, and have found no mention of Starr’s book in the “List of Books Used by the Bible Revision Committee, 1939-51, 1968” in the papers of the Standard Bible Committee at Yale Divinity School. In a letter sent to Moffatt, presumably from Weigle’s secretary, the writer expressed that Weigle had requested that a copy of *The Bible Status of Woman* be sent to Moffatt. “He feels that it is a matter that the Committee will have to deal with some time, and he would like you to look it over” (Letter to Moffatt, 27 March 1941, Weigle Papers, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University).
What distinguishes the work of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard from most of the previous religious writings penned by women was the fact that they wrote self-consciously, intentionally, and consistently from a woman’s perspective. They were careful not to claim an innate female superiority, although some of their narratives might have implied such, but they insisted that women’s experiences enabled them to produce a religious knowledge different from male theological reflection. There were, Bushnell maintained, “equally in each sex, certain sex prejudices and certain sex limitations that unfit either sex to be the sole custodian of divine truth for the opposite sex.” For this reason there was an urgent need for women translators and Biblical expositors. For centuries theology had been almost exclusively a male endeavor, and even in their own time, a time marked by women’s advancement in nearly every realm of activity, women had been able to make only modest inroads into the centers of theological education and citadels of religious power. As a result, religious knowledge and Christian tradition had been gravely distorted.

Bushnell’s, Starr’s, and Southard’s involvement in women’s reform work, particularly in the temperance and social purity movements, undoubtedly revealed to them that men and women could at times have separate and at times conflicting interests. Bushnell’s investigations, in particular, had also revealed the social evils that could be perpetrated by “respectable,” Christian men. But their sensitivity to the gendered subjectivity of the translator and the theologian was also in line with broader cultural and theological patterns. Nineteenth-century theology, too, exhibited what one historian has

---

called “a decisive Socratic turn to the self.” 127 This turn was embodied in different ways in Schleiermacher and Coleridge, in Hegelian thought, in the work of F. D. Maurice and Horace Bushnell, and is reflected in the thought of others as well. 128 The effect of this turn to the self was evident in “a new kind of self-conscious and systematic recognition of the involvement of the religious subject.” Theological reflection was rooted in the individual’s point of view. Knowledge of God, or the religious object, was possible only through knowledge of the self, or self-consciousness. Religious truth, then, was “not of a disinterested, neutral sort,” but irreducibly involved “the believer’s being in the truth.” 129

The proposition that what had been elevated as truth was neither disinterested nor neutral rang true to Bushnell, Starr, and Southard. They eagerly drew upon modern criticism of a transparent or universal biblical truth to bolster their arguments that what had come to be known as Christian truth was in reality gravely distorted by male bias. “Men only need to bring to the Bible sufficiently strong prepossessions, sufficiently fixed opinions,” Bushnell quoted the Unitarian scholar Charles Beard, “to have them reflected back in all the glamour of infallible authority.” 130 She echoed the words of another scholar who urged readers to “interpret your Bible by what the Bible says, and not by what men say that it says.” 131 In both of these cases the conventional masculine pronouns

---

127 Welch, Protestant Theology, vol. 2, 68.
128 Welch also identifies this turn in Kierkegaard and John Henry Newman (Ibid., 68).
129 Ibid., 68.
131 Ibid., 20. Here Bushnell quoted G. Campbell Morgan, a British Congregationalist pastor and an associate of Dwight L. Moody.
could be read in their gendered sense, and the proposition that “Nothing has been learnt from any man” had a specifically gendered significance to these women.132

The assertion that religious truth was inherently subjective reinforced their accusations of a persistent male theological bias, and gave Bushnell, Starr, and Southard the freedom to challenge dramatically many traditional Christian understandings of gender without discarding altogether the Protestant faith. If religious truth was in fact inseparable from an individual’s experience of the truth, then it was not difficult to infer that the gendered experiences of women as women might contribute to a different religious truth than the one handed down through male theological tradition. Writing in an age marked by the general devaluing of traditional authorities, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were free to apply a critical, and woman-centered, lens to the history of traditional Christian dogma. No longer would women be bound by a tradition shaped by the male bias and social myopia of the great theologians of the past. The authority of the early church patriarchs, the medieval scholastics, the Protestant reformers, and the Puritan divines, could be deconstructed through a critical analysis of the historical and social positions from which individuals engaged in theological reflection.

Employing the tools of modern theology and the methods of historical criticism, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were able to find substantial evidence to discredit the authorities that had loomed large in Christian tradition. Bushnell happily drew on F. D. Maurice, for example, to dismantle Tertullian’s influential and damaging views of

132 Ibid., 102. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were aware of the gendered nature of language, and recognized the need for what later would come to be called “gender-inclusive language.” “Can we ever imagine the wonderful lightening of the burden,” Bushnell wrote, “if women opened their Bible merely to read precisely what the Hebrew says,” if instead of reading “‘No MAN can serve two masters,’ we could read what Christ meant,—‘No ONE can serve two masters.’ In such cases of translation, where the common gender is expressed by the masculine form, “the masculine interpreter and translator is accustomed to take as exclusively his own so much as he sees fit” (Ibid., 374; the first quote is citing J. H. Moulton’s words).
women. “Every page almost of Tertullian would furnish terrible instances of the irreverent torturing of Scripture to his own purposes—of a resolute determination that it shall never contradict or weaken any purpose of his—all the while that he professes to take it as his judge and guide.”133 They turned not to tradition, but to the Bible, and demanded a voice in determining what the scriptures contained. They were confident that truth could not be “wounded unto death by false exegesis. Though crucified, consigned to a rock-hewn tomb, and sealed with seven seals,” Starr wrote, “it will have its Easter morn.”134

As they would demonstrate in their theologies, a woman-centered approach to the scriptures could produce vastly different narratives. Although they avoided what they perceived as the excesses of higher criticism and generally limited their methods to lower criticism, they proved that this seemingly conservative approach did not preclude radical results, particularly when it came to discerning the word of God for women. The following three chapters will examine in greater detail the woman-centered theologies that Bushnell, Starr, and Southard produced, focusing particularly on their revised Genesis narratives, and on the challenges they posed to Victorian constructions of virtue and to conventional Victorian family arrangements.

133 Ibid., 265.
134 Starr, Bible Status, 122.
CHAPTER 3

REREADING EVE: NEW BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Book of Genesis, according to the King James Version

Chapter 1: [1] In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth… [26] And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. [27] So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. [28] And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth… [31] And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.

Chapter 2: [7] And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. [8] And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. [9] And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil… [18] And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. [19] And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. [20] And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. [21] And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; [22] And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. [23] And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. [24] Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. [25] And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

Chapter 3: [1] Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? [2] And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: [3] But of the
fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. [4] And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: [5] For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. [6] And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. [7] And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. [8] And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden. [9] And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? [10] And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. [11] And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat? [12] And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. [13] And the LORD God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat. [14] And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: [15] And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. [16] Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. [17] And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life: [18] Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; [19] In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. [20] And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living. [21] Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them. [22] And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: [23] Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. [24] So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.
In the Beginning…

Katharine Bushnell, Lee Anna Starr, and Madeline Southard were convinced that American women’s social inequality and oppression were ultimately rooted in the dominant Western construction of womanhood that was informed by the Christian scriptures. And the portion of the scriptures most crucial to this construction was the story of Adam and Eve found in the book of Genesis.¹ They were not alone in turning to the first chapters of the Bible to contest social and religious views of gender and sexuality. The story of the first man and the first woman had long been used to justify contemporary social arrangements and moral standards, and an earlier generation of women’s rights activists had frequently found it necessary to return to the scriptural account of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her fellow collaborators, too, had found it necessary to reinterpret the creation account in their Woman’s Bible at the end of the century, as had Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the early decades of the twentieth century. As Gilman had argued in 1910, “our ideas are all based on the primal concept expressed in the Adam and Eve story,” and she was optimistic that, in reversing the assumption of women’s subordination depicted in Genesis, she could reform “the social structure as it concerns the sexes,” and clear up “all our dark and tangled problems of unhappiness, sin and disease, as between men and women.”²

¹ The book of Genesis in general had received renewed attention in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as Protestants struggled to ascertain the nature of the truth they believed to be contained in the biblical narrative. During the 1860s and 1870s the theory of evolution gained acceptance in America, demanding a reexamination of the creation story. While some theologians opted for a less literal interpretation of the scriptural account, others held even more firmly to the “literal truth” of the book.

Even at a time when the historicity of the Genesis account appeared dubious to many, rivaled by the explanatory power of evolutionary theory and the increasingly popular higher critical methods of biblical interpretation, the cultural power of the creation myth persisted. Many Christians continued to cling firmly to a belief in the historical “truth” of the account, and guarded its authority jealously. And even those who had abandoned the text in its entirety recognized its continuing symbolic power and persisting cultural influence. As social mores shifted and evolved, and late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Americans found themselves in a society where basic ideas of humanity, gender, and sexuality were contested, many turned once again to the biblical narrative to rediscover or reaffirm “universal” truths, or to overturn traditional social and moral conventions.

As a creation myth, whether perceived historically or metaphorically, the Genesis account served to convey the nature of reality and how that reality came to be. The scope of the narrative is vast. In just a few chapters, Genesis depicts the creation of the cosmos by a sovereign God, the coming into being of man and woman, the nature of humanity, and the origins of evil. The story functions not only as a history of how things once were, but serves to structure reality in the present as well. Whether understood as actual history or meaningful myth, then, it provided a symbolic framework and narrative of meaning that gave significance to human actions and helped to construct human experience. As

---

3 Facing an apparent assault on the veracity of the Scriptures through evolutionary theory, which rendered Genesis superfluous at best, and higher criticism, which separated religious belief from historical or empirical truth, conservative Christians found ample reason to uphold and defend the book of Genesis. Despite the onslaught of higher criticism and evolutionary theory, however, the Genesis story as myth exerted an enduring power throughout the twentieth century. As Elaine Pagels notes in Adam, Eve, and the Serpent (New York: Random House, 1988), xix, “even those who think of Genesis only as literature, and those who are not Christian, live in a culture indelibly shaped by such interpretations as these.”

4 “Myth” here connotes a narrative that functions to give meaning and structure to reality; it is not an evaluative comment, and neither claims nor denies a correspondence to a literal or historical “truth.”
such, the Genesis narrative could play a key role in fashioning the “webs of significance” that constitute culture.\(^5\)

The story of Eden has indeed engendered powerful symbols that have transmitted meaning through the ages. For centuries Western theorists had looked back to paradise to discover and defend foundational values. They scrutinized the characters of Adam and Eve to discern universal rules defining morality, gender relations, and the social order. They searched Eden to find clues to a normative framework for how things ought to be, and to understand how present reality fell short of that ideal.\(^6\) Central to any religious thought is “the conviction that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality,” and Genesis provided the clearest window onto that structure for those in the Western, Christian tradition.\(^7\) The basic tenets of Christianity were believed to be encapsulated in the first chapters of Genesis, and those conceptions of reality have inscribed an indelible mark on Western culture. In order to achieve a comprehensive revolution in social and religious understandings of gender, sexuality, and morality, then, a number of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women deemed it necessary to go back to the apparent foundations of the social order, to the original creation story of

---

\(^5\) The anthropologist Clifford Geertz has described culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols; a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form, by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” See Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).


the Christian scriptures. From there, they hoped to achieve widespread social reform that would bring about women’s emancipation.

Bushnell and Starr, in particular, focused their attention on the early chapters of Genesis. In doing so they were not unique among American women, although their meticulous approach to the biblical texts, their knowledge of biblical Hebrew, and their commitment to work within the bounds of orthodox Christianity set them apart from other women who had pursued similar goals. Additionally, Bushnell and Starr continued in their reassessments of the Genesis account through the 1920s and beyond, by which time the vast majority of women’s rights activists and feminists had dismissed the relevance of this project. But Bushnell and Starr, as well as Southard, recognized that powerful cultural prejudices against women’s equality persisted, and they remained convinced that in order to achieve true social reform, a thorough revision of religion must take place. This chapter presents some of their key efforts toward this goal, and describes the methods they employed as they worked to establish a new biblical foundation for ideas of sexuality, gender, and morality.

**Redeeming Eve**

Perhaps no symbol from the book of Genesis had been more influential or had had more cultural staying power than the figure of Eve. For centuries Eve had signified the embodiment of evil, representing almost paradoxically a pathetic vulnerability alongside a dangerous capacity for seduction. The name of this first woman could quickly conjure up images of female nakedness suggesting sensuality and allure, along with subtle cunning or malicious deceit. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard all discerned that this legacy
of Eve was a formidable barrier to women’s emancipation. Challenging her symbolic representation, and in fact the entire narrative from which it sprang, was central to their theological project. They faced a daunting task, for the image of Eve as the devil’s handmaid stretched far back into history, and was firmly embedded in Christian tradition. As Bushnell explained, men’s defamation of Eve “began so early in the world’s history, and has prevailed so persistently,” that it had become entrenched in Christian thought, and had succeeded in gaining respectability. Writing in 177 A.D., for example, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, had ascribed disastrous consequences to Eve’s disobedience. Her behavior, he asserted, was “the cause of death, both to herself and to the entire human race.” But it was Tertullian of Carthage, writing a few years later, who was particularly known for perpetuating this belief. He not only attributed the guilt of sin and death to Eve, but he also ruthlessly visited this guilt on all Christian women. “Do you not know that you are an Eve?” he insisted. “God’s verdict on the sex still holds good, and the sex’s guilt must still hold also. YOU ARE THE DEVIL’S GATEWAY, you are the avenue to the forbidden tree. You are the first deserter from the law divine. It was you who persuaded him [Adam] who the devil himself had not strength to assail. So lightly did you esteem God’s image. For your deceit, for death, the very Son of God had to perish.”

While crediting Eve with power greater than the devil’s own, at least when it came to tempting man, Tertullian laid at her feet the greatest evil ever committed, the guilt of which still clung to Eve’s daughters. Other prominent Christian theologians such as

---

8 Bushnell, *GWTW*, 165. She cited the poet Alexander Pope, who had penned, “We first endure, then pity, then embrace.” This slandering of Eve Bushnell connected with “the sin of the male in loving the preeminence,” that she traced back to the Garden of Eden.

9 Ibid., 88.

10 Tertullian, *De Culta Feminarum*, 1, 12, quoted in Bushnell, *GWTW*, 88. Pagels also quotes this in *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, 63.
Jerome and Augustine echoed Tertullian’s denunciation, ascribing to Eve the guilt for the sin of the world.

Religious thought in America continued in this interpretive tradition. The Puritans intoned John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which Eve admitted sole responsibility for humanity’s sin, blaming herself for Adam’s woe. “Me, me only, just object of his ire,” she cried after her conviction. The example of Eve was routinely employed to bolster negative views of womanhood. Even as nineteenth-century American Protestants stressed the innate virtue of women, and her well-tuned religious sensibilities, the specter of Eve lurked just beneath the surface. Eve’s shadow threatened to engulf any woman who slipped from her pedestal of moral perfection, and strong male authority was deemed necessary to ensure that women chose the path of virtue, or to ensure that those who did not suffered the consequences for following the way of Eve.

This trope maintained its purchase well into the twentieth century. Particularly in conservative Protestant circles, women’s relation to Eve justified—and sanctified—their subordination. The symbol of Eve was a flexible one, often representing moral weakness, and at times buttressing women’s perceived intellectual or spiritual inferiority as well. In the religious fray of the early twentieth century, for example, it was not unusual for conservatives to draw on the example of Eve to link women to theological vulnerability.

---

11 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 10, Lines 930-936. This is not to suggest that the symbol of Eve was the only biblical trope Puritans employed to give meaning to womanhood. Bathsheba, the presumed subject of Proverbs 31, Mary, and Martha were among the other models presented to Puritan women in addition to the symbol of Eve.


13 Bushnell, Southard, and Starr were all familiar with women who had no claim to the moral ideal, and in their own lives, as they challenged traditional notions of womanhood, they frequently came up against the legacy of Eve. For more on the gendered nature of virtue in America, see Chapter Four, “Virtuous Women.”
and a special receptivity to the evils of modernism. Writing “To a Woman Modernist,” one man with poetic flourish advised women to turn away from the serpent’s falsehoods. “Why should you be another Eve/To question God? Why must you doubt./And thus God’s blessed spirit grieve./While jeering demons raise a shout?” The writer recommended that women should “Just be a child in humble guise./And trust your Lord implicitly./Then your own soul will hate, despise./The Serpent’s lie—and you’ll be free!” Unconstrained by rhyme and meter, another man explained more pointedly that “Many of the subtle and dangerous and seductive heresies and perversions and distortions of the gospel of Jesus Christ have sprung from the brain of woman.” “From Eve down to Mrs. Eddy, women have played a sad part in the spread of anti-Christian doctrines, and that under the guise of Christian teachings.” While men were guilty of their share of erroneous theology, agreed another writer, the devil “got his masterpiece through a woman’s brain.”

Such slanderous depictions of woman’s character based on the biblical Eve had not gone unchallenged. In the decades before Bushnell, Starr, and Southard undertook their own revisions of the first woman’s legacy, early women’s rights leaders on both sides of the Atlantic had recognized the enduring significance of the “curse of Eve,” and, whatever their personal beliefs, had acknowledged that the biblical Eve remained a

---


15 Clarence Macartney, “Shall We Ordain Women as Ministers and Elders?” Presbyterian 7 (November 1929), quoted in Bendroth, 58-59. Macartney was referring, of course, to Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science.

powerful cultural symbol to be reckoned with. The nineteenth-century British radical Eliza Sharples, for example, had offered an interpretation of Eve informed by her own rationalist Christianity, a belief system that understood biblical truth to be contained in the form of moral allegory. Rejecting her evangelical upbringing and its notion of original sin, Sharples had characterized Eve as “the personification of wisdom, of liberty, of resistance to tyranny; the mother of human knowledge; the proper help meet for man.”17 Owenite socialist women of the 1830s and 1840s had also worked to counter “the terrible template of womanhood” that Eve had become in the hands of evangelicals, offering their own reinterpretations to reclaim Eve.18

In America, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard had been preceded by women such as Elizabeth Wilson, a key figure in early women’s rights conventions. Wilson had begun her more orthodox biblical defense of women’s rights with a careful examination of the creation and fall of the first woman. In Genesis she had found proof of Eve’s equality with Adam and no mention of her special culpability for the fall, evidence that she had placed in the hands of other women’s rights activists.19 Her analysis provided them with solid scriptural rebuttals to wield in the face of frequent religious opposition to their cause that was based rhetorically on the symbol of Eve.

While memory of Wilson’s work faded, however, the symbol of a weak and morally culpable Eve persisted, maintaining its metaphorical power. At the end of the


18 See Eileen Janes Yeo, “Introduction,” and Helen Rogers, “‘The Prayer, the Passion…”” in Yeo, ed., Radical Femininity.

19 Wilson, Scriptural View of Woman’s Rights and Duties, 1-36.
century Elizabeth Cady Stanton found it necessary to return once again to the Genesis account. She and her Woman’s Bible co-authors acknowledged the enduring influence the traditional narrative wielded in establishing woman as “the author of all our woes,” and in pronouncing an eternal curse upon her. In order to emancipate women, they felt it was vital to undo this curse. Lacking formal theological training and unable to delve into the original languages, the authors of the Woman’s Bible embraced the possibilities of higher criticism. Like Sharples and other earlier British radicals, they left the biblical text itself largely unchanged, and suggested alternative meanings to events recorded. Those portions they could not reconceive, they were apt to reject. “Whatever the Bible may be made to do in Hebrew or Greek, in plain English it does not exalt and dignify woman,” Stanton stated unequivocally. Therefore she had no qualms about picking and choosing freely from among biblical texts to achieve the revisions she felt necessary for the emancipation of women.

By approaching the text in an “unprejudiced” manner, Stanton and her co-authors found Eve’s behavior to be above reproach. Lillie Deverreux Blake was impressed with “the courage, the dignity, and the lofty ambition” demonstrated by Eve, who displayed

---

20 In her introduction to the Woman’s Bible, Stanton noted that she and her committee “were desirous to have some Hebrew and Greek scholars, versed in Biblical criticism, to gild our pages with their learning. Several distinguished women have been urged to do so, but they are afraid that their high reputation and scholarly attainments might be compromised by taking part in an enterprise that for a time may prove very unpopular. Hence we may not be able to get help from that class.” “Others fear,” she continued, “that they might compromise their evangelical faith by affiliating with those of more liberal views, who do not regard the Bible as the ‘Word of God,’ but like any other book, to be judged by its merits” (Woman’s Bible, 9).

21 Stanton, Woman’s Bible, 12. “The writings of Paul, like our State Constitutions, are susceptible of various interpretations,” Stanton had written in 1855. “But when the human soul is roused with holy indignation against injustice and oppression, it stops not to translate human parchments, but follows out the laws of its inner being written by the finger of God in the first hour of its creation” [Stanton, “To the Women of the State of New York,” 11 December 1854, as printed in Lily (Seneca Falls, N.Y.) 1 January 1855, quoted in Kern, Mrs. Stanton’s Bible, 12].
“an intense thirst for knowledge,” a knowledge “that the simple pleasures of picking flowers and talking with Adam did not satisfy.” She observed that from beginning to end, Eve’s conduct was “so superior to that of the whining Adam,” who behaved “to the last degree dastardly,” that she found it “amazing that any set of men ever claimed that the dogma of the inferiority of woman is here set forth.” This creative and critical process produced radical and empowering reinterpretations of the Genesis account, but the committee’s complete rejection of traditional understandings of biblical interpretation and scriptural authority also provoked the storm of controversy that engulfed the project and discouraged further critical reassessments of traditional theology.

Like the authors of the Woman’s Bible, Bushnell and Starr, too, were convinced of the need to change underlying cultural assumptions rooted in the figure of Eve, but they employed a significantly different methodology in their reexamination of the Genesis account. Rejecting higher criticism, they insisted on the authority of the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God. But even within this seemingly restrictive methodological framework, they achieved equally radical revisions. For while they maintained the authority of God’s Word, they argued that that Word did not necessarily correspond to the words found in either the Authorized or Revised Versions of the Bible. Unlike Stanton and her colleagues, they were unwilling to dismiss “whatever the Bible may be made to do in Hebrew or Greek.” Instead, using their knowledge of biblical languages, Bushnell and Starr retranslated and reinterpreted the entire Genesis story.

22 Stanton, Woman’s Bible, 24, 26-27.

23 Stanton, “Introduction” to Woman’s Bible, 12-13. In Mrs. Stanton’s Bible, Kathi Kern identifies the Woman’s Bible as “the most devastating weapon in the antisuffrage arsenal” (5).
Convinced that Scripture was not to blame for the subjugation of women, they set out to prove that only false exegesis and the fallibility of human (male) understanding had brought about that oppression. This endeavor was critical to women’s advancement, they believed, and they were optimistic that much could be accomplished by “clearing the reputation of one so remote in history as Eve.” “The false teaching that God is in some way punishing women for the sin of Eve,” Bushnell argued, had “throughout past ages, and up to the present hour” robbed women of sympathy, “furnished a cloak for sensuality,” and had sanctioned “much unnecessary cruelty to women.” Such teaching was “a wicked and cruel superstition,” and “unworthy [of] the intelligence of Christians.” By robbing women of self-respect, self-confidence, and harming their spiritual activity, the doctrine had caused “the entire Church of Jesus Christ” to suffer grave “moral and spiritual loss.”  

In order to overturn the legacy of Eve that had haunted women through the centuries, Bushnell and Starr began by demonstrating that the symbol of Eve had been historically constructed. Through historical research they established the fact that the unflattering picture of the first woman did not stretch from the beginnings of time, but was in fact invented at a particular moment in history. As such, it was not God-ordained, but rather “man-made.” Bushnell pinpointed the emergence of Eve’s identity as “the temptress” to around 250 B.C. At that time one of the books of the Apocrypha—writings deemed by Protestants as non-canonical due to spurious origin or authority—contained the assertion, “From woman a beginning of sin, and because of her all die.”  

---


25 Ibid., 87. The book was known as *Ecclesiasticus*, or *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*. 

177
surmised that in the “days of mingling,” the time between the writing of the Old Testament and the New, the “pagan Greek myth” of Pandora became intertwined with the story of Eve. As the mythical Pandora blended imperceptibly into the biblical Eve, the true meaning of the story of Eden was lost. Through “ uninspired” Apocryphal writings, then, the story influenced the Jewish Talmudic teaching of the Fall, Bushnell explained, and from there it influenced many of the early church fathers, who absorbed into their thinking Eve’s culpability for humanity’s fall into sin. Over time the image of a Pandora-Eve infiltrated Jewish and Christian tradition, shaping theological views of women down through the centuries.26

By exposing the historical construction of the idea of woman as temptress, Bushnell and Starr created a space for a new narrative and a new symbol that could redefine womanhood. But in locating the origins of the old symbol in the pre-Christian writings of the Jewish faith, they could also draw upon a powerful anti-Semitic sentiment in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American culture. Like one of the authors of the Woman’s Bible who had asserted that the creation story had been “manipulated by some Jew,” Bushnell and Starr were not above such insinuations.27 Their primary goal was the liberation of women, and, like many other women’s rights leaders, they at times succumbed to the temptation to advance their own cause at the cost of others.28 Their chief opponents, however, remained men of their own faith. They undertook an ambitious

26 Ibid., 85, 86, 112.


28 They did not, however, adopt a pervasive racism as did many Americans of their time who embraced evolutionary views of society, or like early-twentieth-century women’s rights activists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for example.
project to undo centuries of *Christian* men’s manipulation of the biblical text. In doing so, they worked not only to reclaim Eve, and to construct a new biblical symbol of womanhood, but they also endeavored to reframe the whole course of human history, and recast the entire system of biblical symbols that served to structure reality.

**The Book of Genesis, according to Katharine Bushnell**

_In the beginning . . . God created “Male-Female,” (“Adam”), and it was very good. “Adam” was charged to watch and protect the Garden of Eden. But “Adam” began to lose perfection, and God decided that “It is not good that Adam should be alone, in-his-separation.” To prevent further falling into imperfection, to restore “Adam” to original goodness, God said, “I will make a (superior) help meet for him.” So God took from Adam’s side, and separated Eve from Adam._

_Before Eve had been formed, God had commanded Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But when Eve was walking in the garden, a Serpent came to her, and tempted her to eat of the tree. Although she had heard from Adam not to eat of the tree, she succumbed to the Serpent’s tempting, and ate. The man, too, ate of the tree, not through the Serpent’s tempting, but at Eve’s invitation._

_But after they had eaten, they became aware of their nakedness, and ashamed. They sewed clothes of fig leaves, and when they heard God approaching, they hid. God knew of their sinfulness, and questioned them. Adam and Eve both confessed “I did eat,” and both told of the immediate influence that led to the eating. Eve spoke of the Serpent, and Adam, (whose job it had been to protect the garden, presumably from serpents and other sources of harm), speaks not of the Serpent, but of Eve. But Adam does not stop there. “The woman,” he says to God, “who you put here, caused me to sin.” Unlike Eve, who blamed Satan for her downfall, Adam blamed God. Satan, who lurked nearby, rejoiced that Adam shielded him from blame and accused God instead. Man’s betrayal of God was the true rebellion of the Fall._

_Thus the man advanced to the side of the Serpent, becoming a false accuser of God. But Eve, by exposing the character of Satan before his very face, created an enmity between herself and him. God proposed to widen the breach Eve had made, saying to Satan “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed. “It will bruise thy head, and thou will bruise his heel,” God prophesied. The Word of God called Eve “the mother of all living,” of all who were spiritually living._

_As Satan’s declared enemy, and as the progenitor of the coming destroyer of Satan and his power, Eve became the target of Satan’s wrath. Satan set out to cripple her, inciting her husband against her, and inflicting pain upon her child-bearing._
For his disobedience and rebellion, God exiled the man from the garden. Failing to heed God’s warning, however, Eve then turned away from God to follow man out of the garden. And so she became the first woman of many to turn from God to her husband, and to forsake her heavenly calling for the sinful submission to man.29

Establishing Equality

Like other women’s rights activists who preceded them, Bushnell’s and Starr’s initial task was to establish a biblical argument for the original, God-ordained equality of the sexes. Rather than commencing their study of women at Genesis 3:16, after the fall into sin, as many men tended to do, they insisted on beginning with an examination of the first two chapters of Genesis. There, they argued, the “thought of God” was revealed, and “we find the sexes in normal relation.”30 As other women had before them, both Bushnell and Starr argued that the appellation “Adam” initially belonged equally to male and female. God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion…”31 “In the day that God created man” (“man” here meaning the human pair), the story continues, “in the likeness of God made He him; male and female created He

29 Paraphrased from Bushnell, GWTW.

30 Starr, Bible Status, 18. Starr noted that Christ himself went back not to Genesis 3:16, but to “the beginning” in addressing the relation of men and women. “Expounders of Sacred Writ have,” she wrote, “down through the centuries, dinned into the ears of the race, that “from the beginning” the Almighty decreed the subordination of woman.” But they pointed “with confidence” to Genesis 3:16, “ignoring the awful hiatus between creation and the apostasy.” While it is clear that Starr read and was influenced by Bushnell’s work, it is also possible that Bushnell may have read Starr’s 1900 article “The Ministry of Women,” and that Bushnell’s interpretive method, if not influenced directly by Starr’s work, could have been thereby reinforced.

31 Genesis 1:26; see Bushnell, GWTW, 23, and Starr, Bible Status, 18-19. Emphasis added by both Bushnell and Starr. Commenting on Genesis 1:26, Wilson had written that “we see by this, that man and woman’s creation was simultaneous in the Divine mind…and whatever was the design our Creator had in forming man, woman was the same…” (Scriptural View of Woman’s Rights and Duties, 15).
them, and blessed them, and called their name... “man” (or “Adam”) in the day when they were created.\(^3^2\)

To make sense of this language, Bushnell introduced the idea that in the beginning “man” was “male and female in one person.”\(^3^3\) She offered a literal interpretation of this androgynous state, suggesting that Adam originally could have been a “bi-sexual organism.” Though she conceded that this might sound incredible, she attempted to bolster her argument by drawing on “scientific” evidence of bi-sexual organisms in Patrick Geddes’ and J. Arthur Thomson’s *The Evolution of Sex* (1889).\(^3^4\) Starr, however, found this reasoning dubious, and she rejected any suggestion that Adam was “a bisexual individual, androgynous or hermaphrodite.” But she did agree with Bushnell that the central message of this creation account is “the perfect equality of the sexes” in God’s original creation.\(^3^5\)

In the Bible there is a second account of creation, however, that also needed to be taken into consideration. The second chapter of Genesis contains the more familiar story of Eve’s formation out of Adam’s rib. The two accounts seemed to contradict each other,

---

\(^3^2\) Cited in Starr, *Bible Status*, 18 (italics in Starr), and by Bushnell, *GWTW*, 23, who also emphasized the plural.

\(^3^3\) Bushnell, *GWTW*, 24. She traced this idea “at least as far back” as the time of Christ, to the writings of Philo.

\(^3^4\) Bushnell included a clarifying note on the possibility of an “androgy nous” or “hermaphrodite” Adam. Drawing on Darwin, “whose Darwinian theory we do not believe,” she asserted, but whose “theory could never have gained acceptance anywhere had he not based it upon well-founded facts,” she cited examples of creatures where “one sex bears rudiments of various accessory parts, appertaining to the reproductive system, which properly belongs to the opposite sex,” suggesting that “at a very early embryonic period both sexes possess true male and female glands.” She pointed out that “the Scriptures in no way contradict scientific facts such as these, discovered only thousands of years afterwards by human research,” but added the caveat that “in all this which we have said regarding the physical, or animal, form of mankind, as having resemblance to God, whose image man bears, we need to remember that God Himself is pure Spirit.” Starr, too, while disagreeing with the possibility of an androgynous Adam, noted the compatibility of this theory with evolutionary theory (*Bible Status*, 23).

\(^3^5\) Starr argued that Adam was originally in “a kind of divided state,” “in separation from his correspondent” (*Bible Status*, 23).
and in the eyes of leading higher critics, this incongruity seemed to prove that the second chapter of Genesis must have been written by a different author. Bushnell and Starr, however, rejected this critical assessment. Instead, they found a way to retranslate the second chapter in a way that complemented, rather than contradicted, the first. After “Adam” had been created in chapter one, we read the familiar refrain that “God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.” But, Bushnell argued, this condition did not last long, for in the next chapter we learn that God decided that it was “not good that the man [or “Adam”] should be alone.” What could have happened to make the “very good” state of humanity become “not good”? Bushnell wondered.

To answer this question, she suggested an alternate reading of the Hebrew expression traditionally translated as “alone.” It could also mean “in-his-separation,” she explained. And who could Adam be in separation from, but God? This conclusion implied the rather startling suggestion that Adam could have been less-than-perfect before the Serpent’s tempting. Traditionally, most theologians had maintained that the act of eating the forbidden fruit marked humanity’s fall from perfection to sin. A few scholars, however, had in fact drawn attention to the possibility of Adam’s “stumbling” before that moment. William Law, an eighteenth-century British clergyman, for instance, had written that the fact that it was not good for man to be alone “shows that Adam had

36 Bushnell explained that, though “it is not for us to wander far afield in textual and higher criticism,” the proof for higher critics’ claim “is supposed to lie principally in the fact that ‘God’ alone is mentioned in the first chapter, ‘the Lord God’ (Jehovah God) in the second.” She cited Harold Wiener’s “recent highly valuable investigation” of the original Hebrew, which seemed to show “conclusively” that “our ‘received text’ is at fault” for these discrepancies. In this way, Wiener’s methodology mirrored Bushnell’s own, and his conclusions supported her own belief in the reliability of the “original” text, despite the unreliability of current translations.

37 Genesis 1:31.

38 Genesis 2:18.
altered his first state,” bringing “some beginning of evil into it.” He had “lost much of his first perfection before his Eve was taken out of him; which was done to prevent worse effects of his fall, and to prepare a means of his recovery when his fall should become total…”

In order to redeem the stumbling Adam, then, God made for Adam a “help-meet,” taking Eve out of Adam. In this interpretive context, both Bushnell and Starr noted that the traditional reading of “help-meet” as an inferior or servile assistant or a mere afterthought could not be legitimated. “Contestants for man’s supremacy,” Starr wrote, “seize on this word ‘help’ as proof of the subordinate relation of woman.” But she and Bushnell pointed out that “the facts are against them.” The Hebrew word translated “help” occurred twenty-one times in the Old Testament, they observed, and twenty of those times it connoted a superior form of help, in sixteen cases referring in fact to divine assistance. If anything, then, the passage would suggest that Eve was created to offer a higher form of assistance, corresponding to the assertion that Adam had indeed stumbled and was in need of Eve’s help in order to be brought back into communion with God.

39 Bushnell, GWTW, 32. Emphasis in original. William Law’s influence extended to Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and William Wilberforce, among many others. Bushnell also cited Alexander Whyte, whose Bible Characters influenced Law, and the German philosopher Jacob Behman, who influenced John Wesley. Behman wrote “There must have been something of the nature of a stumble, if not an actual fall, in Adam while yet alone in Eden…Eve was created [he should say, “elaborated,” noted Bushnell] to ‘help’ Adam to recover himself, and to establish himself in Paradise, and in the favor, fellowship and service of his Maker” (Ibid., 33).

40 “By the elaboration of Eve,” Bushnell wrote, “and her separation from Adam, God intended the development of the social virtues, as an aid for Adam” (GWTW, 35).

41 Starr, Bible Status, 24. See also Bushnell, GWTW, 34. Starr also provided an argument “that should appeal to the student of eugenics,” that if either Eve or Adam were inferior, then God would have “provided for the deterioration of the race,” since if one sex were habitually inferior, this would in time “insure race extinction,” and to believe this would be to “charge the Almighty with design against His creatures, with foreordaining human retrogression” (Bible Status, 25).
But the conventional interpretation of woman’s inferior help-meet status seemed to be supported by the subsequent account of creation, where Eve is allegedly formed out of Adam’s rib. The passage describes God causing Adam to fall into a deep sleep and taking out of Adam a “rib” from which the Creator molded woman. Both the Authorized and the Revised Versions contained this account, and the story had long ago found its way into traditional lore. The supposed fact that woman came from man’s rib substantiated in the eyes of many that Eve was but an afterthought, and her creation out of Adam was frequently used to justify her depiction as the “weaker part of the human couple.”

Christian commentators had occasionally seized upon a rabbinical tale depicting how God deliberated in creating woman. “He reasoned with himself,” the story went, “I must not create her from Adam’s head, for she would be a proud person, and hold her head high. If I create her from the eye, then she will wish to pry into all things; if from the ear, she will wish to hear all things; if from the mouth, she will talk too much; if from the heart, she will envy people; if from the hand, she will desire to take all things; if from the feet, she will be a gadabout.” Finally, God decides, “I will create her from the member which is hid, that is, the rib, which is not even seen when man is naked.”

This “inane fable” of the rib was based on a faulty rendering of the Hebrew text, Bushnell and Starr insisted. They both pointed out that, of the forty-two times the word occurred in the Old Testament, in this instance only was it translated as “rib.” The story should have read that “God took one of Adam’s sides,” or “one part of Adam’s being,” out of which God formed Eve. This would be a far more suitable translation, they argued,

42 See Pagels, Adam, Eve, and the Serpent, 114. On the persistence of this belief among twentieth-century Calvinists, see Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender, 36.

43 Bushnell, GWTW, 42-43. Bushnell credited this fable to “Rabbi Joshua.”
indicating a mutual equality and supporting the fact that woman was made “A help like unto himself.” This would explain, they added, why Adam declared woman not only “bone of my bone,” but also “flesh of my flesh.”  

The “‘rib’ story” was yet one more piece in a misogynistic pattern of Christian thought that effected the subjugation of women, Bushnell and Starr contended. It had done much harm in twisting Christian constructions of womanhood, but its damage was not limited to that. More recently, the story of the rib had been held up as an example of the implausible passages of the Bible that precluded belief for many rational people. Bushnell reminded her readers that when they heard “a rationalist ridiculing the ‘rib’ story of ‘creation,’” they should keep in mind that the rationalist was not “in reality ridiculing the Bible, though he may think he is. He is holding up to contempt a stupid mistranslation.”

Monkeys, Cows, and Other Rebuttals

Establishing the original equality of male and female was central to Bushnell’s and Starr’s task, and clearing up “stupid mistranslations” was only a part of this chore. Centuries of hostile tradition had attempted to demonstrate that every aspect of the Genesis account supported woman’s created and God-ordained inferiority. For instance, going back to New Testament times, the order of creation was said to have established the “natural” inferiority of women. Since man had been created first, the reasoning went, man must be superior to woman. As both Starr and Bushnell pointed out, however, if

---

44 Ibid., 43. On the mistranslation of “rib,” see Ibid., 36-44 and Starr, Bible Status, 22-23.
45 Bushnell, GWTW, 39.
anything this line of reasoning should attest to woman’s superiority, since the order of
creation appeared to be ascending rather than descending.”46 Their logic seemed
unassailable. “If priority of creation is a proof of superiority,” Starr wrote, “the monkey
has advantage over man,” for, after all, “the monkey was on the scene first.” Her choice
of illustrations was not likely to be lost on conservatives and liberals alike, reflecting as it
did the widely debated theory of evolution. Starr, in fact, claimed that both scripture and
science established that “the lower orders” came first, and that “each successive creative
act brought forth higher.”47 In a similar examination of creation order, Bushnell examined
the concept from a common sense perspective. “Every man has a mother who was made
before himself,” Bushnell reminded her readers, “and yet she is held to be his inferior.”
And, like Starr, she too brought the argument back to the primary act of creation, adding
a pointed twist by suggesting that since “cows were made before men—even before
theologians, —men must be subordinated to cows.”48

46 Starr, Bible Status, 22. The idea that woman’s inferiority had been established by her creation
after man was frequently traced to the Apostle Paul’s New Testament commentary on the creation of men
and women. Bushnell, however, found this logic deeply flawed. Even John Calvin, she noted, found Paul’s
supposed argument extremely weak. “The reason which Paul assigns, that woman was second in the order
of creation, appears not to be a very strong argument for subjection,” he explained, “for John the Baptist
was before Christ in order of time, and yet was greatly inferior in rank…” Following Calvin’s lead,
Bushnell suggested that Calvin might have added the metaphor of a mother and her son. Bushnell did not
wish to impugn Paul’s words, as part of the inspired biblical text; she preferred to assume that biblical
expositors had erred rather than that Paul had done so. “Paul has not twisted Scripture; rather, men have
twisted Paul’s arguments out of conformity with Scripture…” (GWTW, 351).

47 Starr, Bible Status, 22. Starr noted that the substance of the male body came from inorganic
matter, while woman “was built of organic substance.” Additionally, she argued that “man physically is of
coarser mold. The beard and hirsute cuticle ally him, in appearance at least, more closely to certain
members of the animal kingdom.” She noted that “Mr Darwin himself incautiously admits that ‘hairiness
denotes a low stage of development.” While she assured readers that she herself attached “no importance to
these incidentals,” she mentioned them only “to show that claimants for the superiority of man by no means
occupy an unassailable position.”

48 Bushnell, GWTW, 346. In the Woman’s Bible, Lillie Devereux Blake similarly noted that “it
cannot be maintained that woman was inferior to man even if, as asserted in chapter ii, she was created
after him without at once admitting that man is inferior to the creeping things, because created after them”
(Woman’s Bible, 19).
Another aspect of the Genesis narrative used by generations of male theologians to defend the subjugation of women was the supposed fact that man had been given the power to name both the animals, and, importantly, woman. Many expositors had found in this power to name “certitude of man’s supremacy.” Bushnell and Starr demurred. “The seriousness with which they advance this claim is provocative of mirth,” Starr commented.⁴⁹ For Bushnell, who had theorized that originally “Adam” consisted of both male and female together, this could be a moot point, since this “Adam” was given the authority to name. But regardless of the gendered nature of the original “Adam,” both Bushnell and Starr found ample evidence to counter the “power to name” as an indication of man’s primal supremacy.

Both, for instance, called attention to the fact that it was Eve who named her offspring, a detail many expositors apparently had found inconsequential.⁵⁰ And as for Adam naming Eve, Bushnell contended that although the man called his helpmeet “Woman,” a closer examination of the text revealed that “it was not Adam, but the Word of God itself,” that declared woman the “mother of all living.” Adam simply affirmed this fact in calling his wife “Eve,” which in Hebrew resembles the word “living.”⁵¹ Starr, too, found this change important. The first woman’s name was changed from “Isha,” which meant “Female man,” to “Havvah,” signifying “Life,” since she was to be the “mother of all life.” Far from seeing woman’s new name as a symbol of her subordination to man,


⁵⁰ “In the early history of the race,” Starr wrote, “it was the mother, rather than the father, who named the children. Out of forty-four cases mentioned in the Old Testament, in twenty-six instances the naming is ascribed to women, fourteen to men, and four times to God” (*Bible Status*, 24).

⁵¹ Bushnell here was referring to Genesis 3:15, where God tells Eve that her seed will crush the serpent’s head. She drew on the work of Franz Delitzsch and Monroe Gibson, who defined the “seed of woman” as those who are spiritually her children, those who are “on the side of good, the side of God and righteousness” in the drama of redemption. See *GWTW*, 83.
Bushnell and Starr both found this designation a significant affirmation of her status, one that “uninspired men” never would have allowed.52

Moreover, Bushnell also pointed out that Christ, who was “born of a woman,” was also “fittingly named by woman.” Responding to the promise of a redeemer, Eve herself “bestowed upon Him the title ‘Lord.’” 52 Hannah, another Old Testament woman, “first called Him ‘The Anointed,’ that is, ‘Christ.’” And the Virgin Mary, she wrote, “was instructed to name Him, before He was born, ‘Jesus.’” Thus, Bushnell concluded, playing her trump card, “that name which is above every name, THE LORD JESUS CHRIST, at which ‘every knee shall bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth,” was in fact bestowed upon the redeemer by three individual women, three “prophetesses of God.”53

Contending with the Curse

14. So the Lord God said to the serpent . . . 15. “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” 16. To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” Genesis 3:14-16.

52 Starr, Bible Status, 54-55. Starr added, “Incidentally, it may be said that this promise, in itself, is a proof of the inspiration of the Mosaic record,” since no uninspired man would have allowed “Her seed” to play such a role in biblical history. The full significance of this appellation, however, can be ascertained only after considering Adam and Eve’s fall into sin, and will be examined below.

53 Bushnell, GWTW, 81. Hannah’s naming Christ is drawn from I Sam 2:10, and Mary’s from Luke 1:31. In her sweeping rereading of Genesis, Bushnell turned many negative Christian stereotypes of women on their head. She depicted Eve and Mary not as opposites, but as sisters. The prophecy concerning womanhood God made to Eve would begin to be fulfilled through Mary’s childbearing (Ibid., 76). In fact, Eve was so inspired by God’s promise that her seed would “crush the serpent’s head,” that she wrongly anticipated the birth of her first child, Cain, as the fulfillment of that promise, naming him “the Coming one.” Rather than establishing woman’s moral and spiritual inferiority, Bushnell argued that, if anything, Eve possessed a stronger moral spirit than Adam.
Bushnell’s and Starr’s efforts to establish and defend the equality of woman and man at creation would have been largely irrelevant if they did not also address the subsequent chapters of Genesis. While some arguments for women’s inferiority cited the original creation of man and woman, the most oppressive aspects of Christian tradition with regard to women were rooted in the third chapter of Genesis. There one finds humanity’s fall into sin and the subsequent “curse.” According to traditional interpretations, upon learning that Adam and Eve had eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God cursed the ground, so Adam could only produce food from it through painful toil and by the sweat of his brow. And God “cursed” Eve by greatly increasing her pains in childbearing, and commanding that her “desire” should be for her husband, and that he should rule over her.

Bushnell and Starr were both aware that this supposed “curse” on Eve had had profound implications on the perceptions and status of women over the course of Christian history. The curse of womanhood resonated through centuries of theological works penned by men. “No passage of Scripture has claimed a larger place in the thought of mankind,” wrote Starr, “than Genesis 3:16.”\textsuperscript{54} Through the centuries biblical expositors had turned to the words found in Genesis 3:16 as the key to understanding “womanhood,” and for the ultimate justification for women’s subjection to men in their families and in society. “Mankind has never overlooked it,” and it is “one of the great, outstanding passages of the Bible,” holding “a large place in the world’s thought.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} Starr, \textit{Bible Status}, 27. Genesis 3:16 reads “Unto the woman He said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception: in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 49. As Bendroth notes in \textit{Fundamentalism and Gender}, dispensationalist ideas central to fundamentalist beliefs traced women’s subordination to the Fall. Bendroth observes that this
Starr and Bushnell were at pains to point out the theological double standard exemplified by this method, for the verses where God addressed Adam directly never seemed more than an afterthought. Instead, to discern man’s destiny scholars turned either to man’s commissioning before the fall, or to the redemption from the fall accomplished through Christ. “It is astounding,” Starr wrote, “that translators, revisers, and compilers, requisition Genesis 3:16 whenever the Divine intent concerning woman is under discussion.” The verse could be found “on the margin of every reference Bible,” she contended, and “Exegetes and commentators seize upon it with avidity as their favorite proof-text.” While those interested in asserting male supremacy with one accord pointed to Genesis 3:16 as the allotment of women, they inevitably turned to Genesis 1:28 for God’s purpose concerning man, “oblivious of the fact” that Genesis 1:28 was spoken to Eve as well as to Adam, “and with as much import.” Starr noted that Genesis 3:16 “has received a thousand-fold more attention than Genesis 3:17-19,” where God addressed man after the fall.” Eve’s penalty had long overshadowed Adam’s, and Starr aggressively protested this injustice. If Genesis 3:16 expressed God’s purpose concerning woman, she argued, then Genesis 3:16-19 must declare God’s purpose with regard to man. And if man’s purpose was to be found in Genesis 1:28, then so too must dispensationalist teaching contrasted with Wesleyan perfectionist teachings. “Although both agreed that women were victims of the Fall,” she explains, “perfectionists emphatically denied the permanence of feminine subordination” (45).

56 Starr, *Bible Status*, 18-19, 49. Starr noted that men look to Genesis 1:28 as their heritage, while they “generously point woman to Genesis 3:16 as her allotment” (Ibid., 19). Jesus Christ, however, when addressing the loose divorce laws of his age, pointed not to Genesis 3:16, but to “the beginning” (Ibid., 18).
woman’s, insisted Starr, “and no mortal may dispossess her of her birthright.” It was “palpable injustice to set the stakes further back in one case than in the other.”

Focusing on the curse in order to understand God’s will for women was not only unfair, both Bushnell and Starr argued, but it also had serious theological consequences. To understand God’s will for “humanity,” meaning men, expositors had looked not only to the first chapter of Genesis, but also to the New Testament discussion of Christ’s atonement. There they found that Christ had died on the cross to fully atone for man’s sin, washing him “white as snow,” and making him right with God by the grace of God. This tenet constituted one of the foundational beliefs of the Protestant church. Martin Luther, the great leader of the Protestant Reformation, had broken with the Roman Catholic Church over this very issue. Rejecting the Catholic system of penance as a means of “earning” salvation, Luther had written, “It is a great error to seek ourselves to satisfy God’s justice for our sins, for God ever pardons them freely by an inestimable grace.” But, Bushnell suggested, this father of Protestantism never paused to think that such might be the case for women as well. Through the centuries, she insisted, Protestant women had been “taught by Bible commentators to keep to penance (seek to satisfy God’s justice) for Eve’s sin” by keeping silent in church and obedient to man.

---

57 Ibid., 19. For after the fall into sin, Starr wrote, the sexes could be found “not in normal, but in abnormal relation.” The creational order had been uprooted. “Catastrophe has overtaken the race: the harmony of creation has been destroyed; everything is unbalanced; there is subversion; there is chaos.” In this bedlam woman does indeed find herself “unseated from her throne,” Starr conceded, but by her own wrongdoing, not by divine edict. If God had intended that oppressed condition to be the actual state of womanhood, then “why did He promise a Saviour—a Restorer—a Repairer of the breach?” she asked.

58 Bushnell, GWTW, 345. Emphasis in original. Of course Luther and other Protestants after him preached salvation by grace for both men and women, but that did not keep them from turning to the “curse” to understand God’s will for women. As an example of the repercussions of finding God’s purpose for women in Genesis 3:16, Starr described how Martin Luther once said “If a woman becomes weary and at last dead from bearing, that matters not. Let her only die from bearing; she is there to do it.” She contended that expositors of scripture had “announced the premises, and Martin Luther drew the
By turning to Genesis 3:16 to understand God’s will for women, male theologians and scholars had, in effect, denied the efficacy of Christ’s atonement for women, Bushnell and Starr insisted, since Christ had died to redeem humanity from the curses of sin.⁵⁹ “Expositors of the Bible will never be able to understand, or to set forth a clear, consistent, correct interpretation of the Word of God as regards women,” Bushnell averred, “until they abandon, once for all, the attempt to found the social, ecclesiastical and spiritual (as far as this life is concerned) status of Christian woman on the Fall,” and instead, found women’s status on the atonement of Jesus Christ, as they do man’s. Using a biblical metaphor she explained, “they cannot, for women, put the ‘new wine’ of the Gospel into the old wine-skins of ‘condemnation’ before God’s law.” For if they do this, the skins would burst and the wine would spill. The effects of such faulty “theology” could be seen in the “free-thought” abounding “among justice-loving persons,” she explained, who confused “the teaching of the expositors with the teaching of the Bible, and denounce the latter instead of the former.”⁶⁰

If traditional exegetes were right, Starr added, then “we face the appalling fact that the Almighty—one of whose attributes is Love—‘in His inscrutable wisdom,’ and ‘for His own glory’ brought into being a human creature with full intent to ‘greatly multiply’ her ‘sorrow and conception’; to rack her with birth-pangs, and to subject her to the dominion of her husband.” “Away with such dogma!” she exclaimed, and accused

---

⁵⁹ Here Bushnell and Starr were undoubtedly playing off the debates over the atonement between liberal and conservative Protestants in early twentieth-century America.

⁶⁰ Bushnell, GWTW, 363.
men who propounded such doctrine of being “afflicted with mental and moral myopia.” Bushnell and Starr both refused to believe that “a just and righteous Being willed the subjugation and affliction of an entire sex” as a penalty for Eve’s sin.

Common sense and theological study alike convinced both Bushnell and Starr that, in the age of Christ’s atonement, women could not be condemned to live under a curse, and they both vehemently rejected the idea that God’s ultimate will for women could be found in Genesis 3:16. But their theological critique did not end there. Both took a far more radical step, going so far as to challenge the entire notion that Eve had ever, in fact, been cursed by God. And this reassessment proved to be the basis for a radically different biblical narrative and social vision.

Bushnell demonstrated that nowhere in the Bible did one read of such an expression as “the curse” in connection with women. “We get the teaching about woman’s ‘curse’ wholly through tradition,” she declared. And both she and Starr diligently set out to dismantle that tradition. Having determined that traditional “theology points no other way for women” but “into a ‘curse,’” Bushnell maintained that it was necessary for women to forge a new and dramatically different path, to “hew a hermeneutical and exegetical road for ourselves.” Using their knowledge of the

---

62 Ibid., 41.
63 “As Christian women, we refuse to address ourselves to the task of working out Eve’s “curse” for sin, if indeed she ever had one,” wrote Bushnell (*GWTW*, 102).
64 Ibid., 113.
65 Ibid., 102.
Hebrew language, combined with their intuitive sense of justice, both Bushnell and Starr constructed a radically different interpretation of the third chapter of Genesis.

To understand the “curse,” Bushnell began by examining the presumed sin of both Adam and Eve, respectively. While popular Christian tradition had largely held Eve responsible for the fall into sin, Bushnell pointed out that the New Testament taught that Adam, not Eve, was “the one who brought sin into the world, and death through sin.” New Testament passages twice referred to Eve as having been deceived, and thereby brought into the transgression, but the Apostle Paul declared eight times that “one person” alone was accountable for the Fall. Twice he named that person as Adam, who, he noted, was not deceived. The greater culpability of Eve with regard to the fall, Bushnell concluded, was thoroughly unbiblical, and “taught by tradition only.”

Adam, however, was repeatedly assigned culpability, according to Bushnell, because his sin was in fact far more serious than Eve’s. Turning back to Genesis,

Bushnell drew attention to the contrasting responses of the man and the woman upon

---

66 1 Timothy 2:14 reads “The woman being deceived was [literally, “became”] in the transgression,” according to Bushnell, or, as rendered by the British New Testament scholar Richard Weymouth, the woman “was thoroughly deceived, and so became involved…” And 2 Corinthians 11:3 reads, “the serpent beguiled [literally, “thoroughly deceived”] Eve through his subtlety. See Bushnell, GWTW, 91.

67 1 Timothy 2:14 states that “Adam was not deceived,” and 1 Corinthians 15:22 reads “In Adam all die…” Other passages blaming one person for the fall into sin are found in Romans 5:12-19. See Bushnell, GWTW, 91. Bushnell explained that the “Adam” here referred to did not mean “mankind” (Ibid., 92).

68 Bushnell, GWTW, 92. Italics in original. This presumed greater culpability, and a misunderstanding of “the curse,” had had very tangible effects on the sexes down through the centuries, Starr argued. “We find man doing his utmost to evade the penalty imposed upon him; he has invented all kinds of machinery to lighten his toil; his insistent demand has been for shorter hours of labor; he has sought for himself the easy places, and unless man-written history belies him, as often as otherwise he has impressed the ‘weaker sex’ to do the sweating for him.” But “from the hour of his apostasy man felt it incumbent upon him to supervise woman; to see that she underwent in fullest measure the penalty imposed upon her. He rebuked every attempted evasion as rebellion against the Almighty. It is recorded that when anaesthetics were first discovered and used in cases of severe suffering at maternity, some clergymen preached against it, declaring that ‘such relief from pain was contrary to Scripture, since pain at maternity was a part of the curse’” (Bible Status, 48).
God’s questioning them concerning their sin. She identified a striking difference. When God interrogated the woman, Eve confessed, “The Serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.” When God questioned Adam, “Hast thou eaten of the tree?” Adam too confessed, but he said, “The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.” Both confessed “I did eat,” Bushnell assessed, and both told truthfully “the immediate influence that led to the eating,” and in that they were equal. However, rather than assigning the remote cause of his sin to Satan, Adam instead “accuses God to His face of being Himself that remote cause.” As Starr noted, Adam responded to God’s question with a startling counter-charge, posing himself as the aggrieved one. Bushnell surmised that Satan, who had likely lingered nearby through this interview, “must have rejoiced as much in Adam’s attitude towards God in charging Him with folly, as in Adam’s attitude towards himself, the tempter, in shielding him from blame.” Through their responses, then, “Adam advanced to the side of the serpent, in becoming a false accuser of God.” But Eve, by exposing “the character of Satan before his very face, created an enmity between herself and him.”

This, then, provided the crucial context for understanding “the curses” of Genesis 3:14-19. If Eve blamed the serpent, considered both Bushnell and Starr, but Adam

---

69 Bushnell, GWTW, 68. Emphasis in Bushnell. As Starr reminded her readers, “Eve yielded to the assault of a supernatural being; Adam, on the other hand, succumbed to the solicitation of a “weaker vessel (Bible Status, 45).

70 Bushnell, GWTW, 69.

71 Starr, Bible Status, 45.

72 Bushnell, GWTW, 69. Bushnell noted, “Is this not the scene, this conduct on the part of Adam, to which Job refers (31, 33) when he complains, ‘If, like Adam, I covered my transgressions by hiding mine iniquity in my bosom?’” Drawing on the German scholar John Peter Lange (see paragraph 36), she added that perhaps because Adam had been charged with watching and protecting the garden from an “existing power of evil,” he had declined to mention Satan, who had somehow been let inside.

73 Ibid., 71.
blamed God, why then would Adam be “wonderfully rewarded for his part in that Garden fruit-eating”? Why would Adam’s arrogance be “rewarded with sex supremacy”? Starr reminded her readers that before Adam had sinned, he had shared dominion with his wife. After his fall into sin, he was supposedly empowered to subjugate her as sole sovereign. “Surely the propagandists of such dogma face some knotty problems,” she concluded. If anyone caused Eve to suffer through a curse, Bushnell and Starr argued, logic would dictate that agent to be Satan, her newly established enemy. Correspondingly, if anyone would reward Adam for shielding Satan, it would not be God, she reasoned, but Satan. Thus the “curse” that Christian tradition had for centuries understood as God’s punishment of Eve, was in fact Satan’s curse on women, out of revenge for her rightly attributing her sin to the serpent’s deceit rather than to God.

“I will put enmity…”

The background to Satan’s cursing Eve can be found in verse fifteen of the third chapter of Genesis, a verse traditionally pointed to as the first promise of the coming of Christ. Addressing Satan, God declared, “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise His heel.” When God addressed Satan, dictating that woman would be both “the progenitor of the coming destroyer of Satan and his power,” and also “in her own person” an “enemy of Satan,” God widened the breach already opened by Eve’s

---

74 Ibid., 104.
75 Starr, Bible Status, 45.
76 Genesis 3:15.
rightfully blaming the serpent. Concerning this fact, Starr could not resist commenting that in this promise alone one could find “a proof of the inspiration of the Mosaic record,” since no uninspired man would ever have allowed the seed of a woman such a role in redemptive history. With so noble a destiny assigned woman, Bushnell argued, Satan would naturally attempt to cripple woman, his enemy, to inhibit her carrying out that destiny. And the most logical way for him to torture her would of course be “at her function of motherhood,” in her child-bearing, since it would be through childbearing that she would bring into the world the seed that would crush the Serpent’s head.

What “common sense tells us Satan would most certainly wish to do,” that is, increase woman’s pain of childbearing, most Bible expositors told us God did, Bushnell explained. If God had cursed woman in this way, she added, it would be an unprecedented occasion where God and Satan were working on the same side, for the same result. The mere suggestion that God and Satan could work harmoniously together in their treatment of women, “from the Fall in Eden as long as this world lasts,” struck Bushnell as ridiculous. Yet Bible expositors would have people believe that after God

77 Bushnell, GWTW, 99. Here Bushnell noted that “despite the popular cry regarding the ‘universal Fatherhood of God, and the universal brotherhood of man,’ which is in part true, we who accept the Scriptures as authority must not forget that Satan, as well as God, has his children—moral and spiritual delinquents—among men” (GWTW, 73).

78 Starr, Bible Status, 55. And, she added that it was not until 1827, when Von Baer discovered “the ovule, the reproductive cell of the maternal organism, and demonstrated that its protoplasm contributed at least half to the embryo child,” were women considered to have an “essential share in the formation of her offspring.” “How could Moses, uninspired, gain possession of the biological secret that the mother organism furnished the ovule,” Starr demanded.

79 Bushnell, GWTW, 99. Both Starr and Bushnell noted that, after the birth of her firstborn, Eve exclaimed “I have gotten a man, even Jehovah.” This passage had troubled exegetes, who had often needed to add the words “with the help of” Jehovah. But other scholars, like Luther and Origen, had understood Eve’s exclamation “to be an expression of her belief that the promised seed, which was to bruise the serpent’s head, had come—that Cain was that seed.” This hope, however, would soon “die out of her heart” (Starr, Bible Status, 56-57).

80 Bushnell, GWTW, 100.
exalted Eve as the progenitor of Christ, and after he put enmity between her and Satan, so that she was “no longer associated with God’s great enemy,” God suddenly turned and pronounced several curses upon her. Bushnell refused to accept this interpretation, arguing that “the idea of God’s passing a punitive sentence upon Eve, after the wonderful prophecy regarding her in verse 15,” would be inconsistent and illogical.

Under close examination, Bushnell maintained, the traditional interpretation of “the curse” breaks down. “Every word of God is tried,” she contended, “and if we attempt to insinuate a false interpretation into it, it proves, on close inspection, a misfit all around.” She then set about to demonstrate how the traditional interpretation of Gen. 3:16 proved to be a misfit, and although it bore a resemblance to the correct interpretation, it was in fact flawed. She turned to the original Hebrew to work out an alternative reading, one that did not contradict her sense of God’s righteousness or her understanding of Christ’s own view of womanhood.

Bushnell maintained that rather than “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow,” verse sixteen should read “Unto the woman He said. A snare hath increased thy sorrow.” The difference in the original Hebrew between the two translations lies wholly in the interlinear vowel-signs, additions to the text of comparatively recent invention. As Starr noted, Bushnell’s rendering of the Hebrew text makes Satan, rather than God, the author of woman’s woe.

Bushnell also took issue with the translation of the Hebrew “HRJWN” as “conception,” in “I will multiply thy sorrow and thy conception.” Wrongly translated,

---

81 Ibid., 114.
82 Ibid., 117.
83 Starr, Bible Status, 43.
this phrase had “wrought terrible havoc with the health and happiness of wives,”
Bushnell argued, “because, so read, it has been understood to rob woman of the right to
determine when she should become a mother, and to place that right outside her will and
in abeyance to the will of her husband.” The word in question was actually two letters
short of spelling the Hebrew word for conception, Bushnell attested, as “all Hebrew
scholars know.” “Our highest lexical authorities,” she reported, “call it a ‘contraction, or
erroneous.’”84 “Indeed!” exclaimed Bushnell. “And is one-half the human family to be
placed at the mercy of the other half on such a flimsy claim as this!” Here she turned a
commitment to the literal interpretation of the Bible to the defense of women,
propounding, “We stand for our rights, as women, on the assurance of our Lord, that no
word in Divine law has lost any of its consonants, or angles of a consonant; and on our
Lord’s promise we demand a very different rendering of the word.” For that reading, she
turned to the Septuagint, which translated the word in question as “thy sighing.”
Accordingly, the sentence reads “A snare hath increased thy sorrow and thy sighing.”85
For both Bushnell and Starr, this was a significant revision, particularly when combined
with the sentence that followed.

84 The “highest lexical authorities” she referred to are Francis Brown, Charles Augustus Briggs,
and S. R. Driver. G. J. Spurrell commented, “It is an abnormal formation, which occurs nowhere else in the
Old Testament.” See Bushnell, GWTW, 121; and Starr, Bible Status, 43-44.

85 Bushnell, GWTW, 121, emphasis in original. See also Starr, Bible Status, 44. “It cannot be
denied,” Starr wrote, “that, in the past, mankind in general has felt itself empowered, from some source, to
administer reproof and correction to womankind, and no one who has studied history with impartial mind
can charge that the administrators have erred on the side of leniency” (Bible Status, 41).
Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

In addition to the misrepresentation of “thy sighing” as “conception,” the last part of verse sixteen, “thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee,” had played a key role in the subjugation of women in Christian tradition, both Bushnell and Starr agreed. That verse had “been the cause of much degradation, unhappiness and suffering to women,” and had instigated “much immorality among men, in the cruelty and oppression they have inflicted upon their wives,” asserted Bushnell. It in fact composed “the very keystone of an arch of doctrine subordinating woman to man, without which keystone the arch itself falls to pieces.” Since all of the Apostle Paul’s pronouncements on the “woman question” were routinely interpreted through this verse, Bushnell determined that it stood as the ultimate foundation of Christian views of womanhood, and as such it deserved careful scrutiny. 86

“Desire here expresses that reverential longing with which the weaker [woman] looks up, to the stronger,” wrote one relatively moderate male interpreter, and another commented, “woman is to desire man’s society, notwithstanding the pain and subjection which are the result.” 87 On this text John Calvin had written that it was as if God said, “Thou shalt desire nothing but what thy husband wishes,” adding that woman was at that point “cast into servitude.” 88 Another scholar wrote that it was a part of woman’s punishment, “and a part from which even God’s mercy will not exempt her,” that her desire would be to her husband. “Subjection to the will of her husband,” he noted, “is one

86 Bushnell, GWTW, 139.
88 Bushnell, GWTW, 108. “In other words,” Bushnell added, “Calvin would have us believe God first ordained marriage, but afterwards substituted ‘servitude.’”
part of her curse; and so very capricious is this will often,” he conceded, “that a sorer
punishment no human being can well have.”

This pattern of interpretation was made worse by the connotation of sensuality
attached to the word “desire.” Bushnell traced this tradition back to early rabbinical texts,
which later influenced the English Bible through the work of a sixteenth-century Italian
Dominican monk named Pagnino. In 1528 Pagnino had published a translation of the
Hebrew Bible in which he rendered the Hebrew word teshuqa not as “desire,” but as
“lust.” Due to persecution in England, no English Bible could be published there at the
time, and both Tyndale’s and Coverdale’s English Bibles were published in Europe.
Influenced by Pagnino’s translation, both English versions also translated teshuqa as
“lust,” and with the exception of two earlier Vulgate versions of the scriptures, every
English translation had followed this example. Bushnell argued that the original
Hebrew connotated no sense of libidinous or sensual desire, but she and Starr agreed that
that attachment had been “forced upon it by carnal minds.” This false interpretation
suggested that God instilled in women the potential for a “morbidly intense sensuality,” a
belief that proved to have grave consequences for women. “Thou shalt be possessed by
passionate desire for him,” interpreted one commentator, and others explained that

89 Ibid. Here Bushnell quoted the British Methodist scholar Adam Clarke.
80 Pagnino, Bushnell explained, was influenced by the teachings of the Talmud, “the bane of the
Jewish race.” One critic of Pagnino noted that he “has too much neglected the ancient versions of Scripture
to attach himself to the teachings of the rabbis.” As Bushnell carefully explicated in her book, the Greek
Septuagint, the Syriac Peshitto, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Old Latin, Sahidic, Bohairic, and
Aethiopic texts all rendered the word a form of “turning.” The Babylon Targum, a text penned much later
than those listed above, and described by Bushnell as “purely rabbinical teaching,” translated teshuqa as
“lust,” while translating the same word as “turning” in another context [Genesis 4:7] (GWTW, 138-144).
81 Starr, Bible Status, 28-29; Starr quoted Bushnell on this, and considered her argument “well
supported.”
woman “was punished with a desire bordering upon disease.” Another wrote, “the special punishment of the woman consists in the evils by which she is oppressed in her sexual vocation, in the position she occupies in her relation to man.” Bushnell, Southard, and Starr were all too familiar with the “fallen women” who had suffered the consequences of this interpretation, and with Christian views of women that depicted women as sensuous and morally susceptible. To them, the connections between nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century ideologies and social practices with faulty biblical translations and interpretations were clear. This sensual desire attributed to women had helped to define women’s roles as well, they recognized, for woman was said through her sensuality to have desired man’s cohabitation, “thereby at the same time increasing her liability to the pain of childbearing,” assigning and confining women to the domestic sphere. What Bushnell found astounding about all of these interpretations of the third chapter of Genesis, however, was that the men propounding them “fail to see that, if a wife must be under a ‘curse’ because she is under a husband who exercises the cruelties that constitute that curse, that is equivalent to saying that God has ordained that man and marriage shall be a curse to woman.” Such teaching was further incongruous in that it essentially “relieves a husband of the duty to observe nearly the entire Decalogue.”


93 Ibid. Here Bushnell quoted the German theologian August Dillmann, and added that Dillmann doubtless would “scarcely hesitate to pronounce such a relation ‘Holy Matrimony!’”

94 Ibid. Bushnell quoted S. R. Driver. If this sensuality were indeed “the state of woman’s mind in general,” Bushnell noted, “it would not be necessary to starve women out of industrial lines, and put a check upon their mental development, lest they be disinclined to marry if capable of self support,” yet precisely these methods had been used to “maintain the ‘domestic’ desires of women.”

95 Bushnell, GWTW, 109.
In her own analysis of *teshuqa*, Bushnell rejected both of the traditional renderings. “Desire” and, to a greater degree, “lust,” supported assertions of woman’s inferiority and “morbid sensuality,” but they were in fact mistranslations of the original Hebrew, she insisted. Having studied several ancient texts and scholarly commentaries, Bushnell concluded that, rather than “lust” or “desire,” the Hebrew *teshuqa* should be more accurately rendered “turning away.” Without question, she asserted, a more sound translation of “Thy desire shall be to thy husband,” or “Thy lust shall pertain to thy husband,” would be, “Thou art turning away to thy husband.” This rendition was strongly supported by a number of ancient texts, as well, she explained. Neither the King James Version nor the Revised Version, however, had construed the meaning correctly. Bushnell’s translation, then, demolished the keystone of women’s supposed inferiority and erased any hint of a cursed female sensuality, but it also provided the basis for a comprehensive reassessment of woman’s relation to man and to God. But before that strategic move can be explored, the final phrase of verse sixteen must be addressed.

Both Bushnell and Starr agreed that the key to understanding the concluding words of Genesis 3:16, “…and he shall rule over you,” was in determining whether it was intended as a prophecy or as a penalty. An intrinsic difference distinguished one from the other, Starr elucidated: prophecy foresees, while penalty foreordains; prophecy says, “It will be”; penalty says, “It shall be.” Traditional interpretations had held to the punitive nature of the verse, translating it in the imperative, but both Bushnell and Starr argued for the prophetic. As God stood in the garden with Adam and Eve, Starr explained, he looked

---

96 For Bushnell’s full analysis of *teshuqa*, see paragraphs 122-145, *GWTW.*
down through the ages, foreseeing the “awful outcome of their sin,” and the awful subjection of women that would come about.  

The passage had been wrongly interpreted in part due to the King James Version’s confusion of “will” and “shall.” Scholars had in fact long criticized the Authorized Version for its liberal use of “shall.” The preface to the American Version stated that “shall” “is certainly used to excess in the Authorized Version, especially when connected with verbs denoting an action of the Divine Being.” In this passage, the difference between “shall” and “will” was substantial, Bushnell and Starr maintained, either mandating God’s will for men and women, or allowing for God’s dismay at the effects sin would bring upon that relationship. “All the stress of teaching woman’s supposed obligations to man is in the “shall be,” which is supplied by the translators.” “The force of the mandatory teaching,” then, rested on an inaccurate translation. “Must man rule woman, whether he will or no?” The answer to this question would have vast implications, theologically and socially.

Rightly translated and interpreted, Bushnell argued, the third chapter of Genesis revealed that “the lordship of the husband over the wife, which began when man sinned,

97 Starr, Bible Status, 44. Starr cited Dr. H. A. Thompson, who wrote that the passage “was not a new enactment, but a prophecy of the treatment that should come to [Eve].” Bushnell made this point as well, as had other women before her. The suggestion that the passage should be read as a prophecy rather than as a penalty was common among feminist revisionists. Early in the women’s rights movement, Antoinette Brown had also insisted that God did not command that man “shall” rule over his wife, but simply said that he “will” do so (see Nancy Hardey, Women Called to Witness, 64). Elizabeth Wilson, too, had suggested this interpretation in her 1849 Scriptural View of Woman’s Rights and Duties, as had Lillie Devereux Blake, a contributor to Stanton’s Woman’s Bible.

98 Cited in Starr, Bible Status, 27-28; she referred to page vii in the Authorized Version. Starr also cited J. H. Moulton, who in his grammar of New Testament Greek explained, “the use of ‘shall’ where prophecy is dealing with future time is particularly unfortunate” (Bible Status, 28).

99 Bushnell, GWTW, 127, emphasis in original.
was satanic in origin,” not mandated by God.100 To bolster her argument, Bushnell drew on the New Testament words of Christ, where he pronounced that “NO ONE can serve two masters.” Christ said this as much of women as of men, she maintained, and thus God could not have commanded women to submit to the rule of her husband.101 “Can we ever imagine the wonderful lightening of the burden, if women opened their Bible merely to read precisely what the Hebrew says of man: ‘he will rule over thee?’” Or, she added, “if instead of reading, ‘No MAN can serve two masters,’ we could read what Christ meant,--‘No ONE can serve two masters.”’ Bushnell was aware that in such cases where the common gender was expressed by the masculine form, “the masculine interpreter and translator is accustomed to take as exclusively his own so much as he sees fit.”102

The traditional interpretation of the passage, “Thy desire shall be for thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” was in fact a morally absurd rendition of the text, Bushnell argued. For if it stood as male expositors would have us believe, then it would logically follow that “the more carnally-minded a man is the better he keeps that sort of ‘law!’”103 God would not and did not “subordinate Eve to Adam, and all women to their husbands,” both Bushnell and Starr insisted, “as has been claimed by the Church throughout many

100 Ibid., 167. Drawing on her experience in foreign mission work, particularly her work in India and China, Bushnell maintained that on the whole women enjoyed more liberty in Christian countries than in “heathen” ones, because with the light of the gospel “man loses the disposition to rule his wife when a Christian” (Ibid., 127).

101 Ibid., 127, emphasis in original.

102 Ibid., 374, emphasis in original. Here Bushnell cited Archdeacon Farrar, who warned that “a translator has the need of invincible honesty if he would avoid the misleading influences of his own a priori convictions.”

103 Ibid., 127. Bushnell could not resist pointing out that if this were the case, it would be like saying “that God has ordained that man and marriage shall be a curse to woman.” Such teaching, she added, “relieves a husband of the duty to observe nearly the entire Decalogue, if only the person he practices his transgressions upon happens to bet the one he has vowed, before the marriage altar, that he will ‘love and cherish.’”
centuries.” Instead, it was “man” who “gradually brought about that subordination to himself.”

104 How much this was a deliberate, calculated act, and how much it was simply a reflection of man’s sinful state, was arguable. At times Bushnell suggested that men’s subordination of women was achieved through willful misinterpretations of scripture, but she also allowed for the fact that it could have been less intentional. She considered that the mistranslation of Genesis 3:16 could be attributed to “men of old,” who came across a phrase “that seemed to have to do with woman’s relation to her husband, but it was beyond their comprehension.” “Unconsciously,” she surmised, these men “consulted their own ideas of what a wife should be, in her relation to her husband, and inserted those ideas into their interpretation.” This interpretation then was accepted by other men without challenge, “because it conformed to their unsanctified wishes,” and was handed on “from generation to generation, until it became weighty through ‘tradition.’”

105

However it came about, the effects of this subordination were undeniable. Having found the assertion of the punitive nature of this passage absurd, both Bushnell and Starr tested their theory that the passage was in reality a prophecy. To test their hypothesis, they inquired whether or not the prophecy had been fulfilled. “Did the entrance of sin bring about the dethronement of woman?” Starr asked. “Has her sorrow and her conception been multiplied? Did her turning away to her husband result in her subjugation?” “Yes—a thousand times, Yes!” was her resounding answer. “The earth has been swept by her sighs and watered by her tears; the atmosphere has been burdened with her cries of anguish; her tears, if gathered together, would make a great salt sea; her

104 Ibid., 418.
105 Ibid., 112.
sighs, if merged, would rock the globe with cyclonic power; her pangs, if concentrated, would strike creation dumb with horror. Her body has been tortured by lust and cruelty, her spirit buffeted by wrong and oppression, and her heart the very seat of agony ever since sin entered the world.  

With the advent of sin into the world, “might supplanted right,” and women became the ultimate victims. “The historian has never lived,” Starr suggested, “who could chronicle all her wrongs or tabulate half her woes.” Since Eden, her path had led precipitously downward. She had become chattel, “a toy or slave, subject to every whim of her lord and master,” while “man-made religions reckoned her a soulless creature,—or, if she had a soul, her hope of future existence hinged on her alliance with some man.” Her purpose was designated as valueless in its own right, useful only to stand at the side of some masculine figure, enhancing his value.

In order to rectify this effective enslavement of women by men, Bushnell and Starr, along with Southard, worked to address the religious roots that seemingly sanctioned women’s oppression. Their theological reflections were motivated by their observations of the social constructions of their own time. Witnessing the harsh social condemnation of “fallen women,” and the critical views of women expounded by many Christians, they looked to the Bible to reassess traditional notions of women’s virtues and vices. Observing wives bound in oppressive marriages and deprived of legal rights, and women robbed of the control of the conception and rearing of their own children, they

---

106 Starr, *Bible Status*, 29. Bushnell also concluded that “as a prophecy it has been abundantly fulfilled in the manner in which man rules over women,” and this was particularly true, she argued, in countries where the Christian gospel has not taken hold. This is similar to Elizabeth Wilson’s conclusion that “the page of history teems with woman’s wrongs, and is wet with woman’s tears,” demonstrating the fulfillment of the Genesis prophecy (*Scriptural View of Woman’s Rights and Duties*, 27).

went back to the Christian scriptures to provide new models of marriage and motherhood. Their theological work reflected the social milieu in which they lived, and was crafted to address the sources of women’s present cultural oppression and to provide the keys to comprehensive social change.

One of the foundational theological changes that Bushnell and Starr attempted, and hoped would have profound social implications, was a redefinition of what constituted sin for women and for men. Although Bushnell and Starr accused men everywhere of following in Adam’s footsteps, blaming and oppressing women throughout history, they did not hold women altogether guiltless in their fate. Eve had not sinned grievously by blaming God for her own disobedience, as had Adam, but she had committed another mistake that would entail serious consequences. Recall Bushnell’s translation of verse sixteen of chapter three, “Thou art turning away to thy husband, and he will rule over thee.” God saw that Eve was “inclining to turn away from Himself to her husband,” and warned Eve that for this she would suffer appalling consequences.108 Here again Bushnell departed radically from Christian tradition by suggesting that only Adam, and not Eve, was evicted from the garden after the fall. “Adam,” she wrote, “was thrust out of Eden, with a flaming sword between himself and the tree of life.” God had warned Adam that the day he ate of the tree, he “would surely die.” But Adam did not actually die that day, for it was not a physical death that was to follow sin, but a spiritual death. Bushnell reminded her readers, however, that immediately after her confession of guilt, Eve was named the “mother of all living.” At the moment that Adam was facing his own spiritual death, he called his wife “Eve,” “Living,” marking a spiritual contrast

108 Bushnell, GWTW, 124.
between himself and his wife. If Eve were indeed spiritually living, Bushnell reasoned, then “we see no reason why Eve should have found a ‘flaming sword’ between herself and the tree of life.” But, of course, further reading finds Eve outside of the garden. As God had foretold and subsequent history had demonstrated, Bushnell contended, Eve did eventually make the disastrous choice to turn to her husband and follow him out of Eden.

In effect, Bushnell did not exonerate women from all sin. But she did dramatically redefine what constituted sin for women. Both she and Starr had recognized that traditional conceptions of sin and fallenness had indeed been gendered, as women had long been labeled “the weaker sex,” more prone to sin than men. Having dismissed such associations as based on faulty translation and exegesis and perpetuated by patent male bias, Bushnell articulated instead a construction of sin as gendered in a startlingly different sense. Based on her rereading of Genesis, Bushnell maintained that conventional conceptions of sin, associated with pride, remained appropriate when applied to men. But, over the course of history from the time of the fall, women had been far more likely to commit the sin of inappropriate humility.

As they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, both Adam and Eve had wanted to be “as God.” From the very beginnings of humanity, the sin of Eden was

---

109 Ibid., 96-97, emphasis in original. Bushnell cited Revelation 22:14, which reads that those who “wash their robes have right to the tree of life,” to support her claim that Eve, who was deceived rather than a deliberate sinner, could remain in the garden. In paragraph 95, Bushnell wrote, “Now please rub your eyes carefully, search the latter end of chapter three of Genesis, and point me the place where the Bible teaches that Eve was expelled from Eden. I cannot find such teaching. . . . Yet Eve must soon have abandoned Eden to follow Adam.”

110 “Eve repented,” Bushnell wrote, “but there is no inference that Adam repented at this time, for he was expelled from the garden. What must have happened, after this? Before Cain could have been born (Gen. 4:1) either Adam must have repented and become again the child of God, or Eve must have turned from God and followed Adam out of Eden. The fact that Cain was a murderer certainly argues that Eve followed Adam” (GWTW, 122).
the sin of pride. But while Eve repented, Adam continued in his rebellion. Since that
time, Bushnell explained, a dispute had raged between God and man for control of the
throne. And what role, she asked, would God have women play in this dispute?
According to a tradition shaped by male expositors—men who, Bushnell averred, were in
fact continuing to participate in this struggle for the throne—women were to “show their
humility, their willingness to take a lowly place.” They were to “show they owe no
allegiance but to MAN ALONE,” not even to God’s angels.111

But if women were to obey this injunction, Bushnell argued, would they not be
acting as accomplices in man’s rebellion against God? “What madness for women to do
this!” she exclaimed, “And call it ‘humility!’” In an attempt to assess this corrupt
condition, Bushnell asked rhetorically what one should think of this distortion of biblical
truth. “Who knows, but Satan?” was her stark answer, for “Satan knew very well how to
clothe an insult to God in the garments of “humility” and “womanliness.”112 The special
virtues of “womanliness” had been preached from many pulpits in nineteenth-century
America, and the social implications of this false view of womanhood based upon
mistranslations of Genesis were profound, Bushnell and Starr were convinced. Their
attempts to overturn this tradition through social activism as well as through critical
retranslations of the scriptures and a woman-centered biblical exegesis, together with
Southard’s explications of key New Testament passages, will be explored more fully in
the following chapter.

111 Bushnell, GWTW, 390, Bushnell’s emphasis. Here Bushnell quoted Arthur Penryn Stanley,
Dean of Westminster.

112 Ibid., 391. By extension, then, male “authority” over women was the fruit of man’s original sin;
and forcing women to submit, to be silent, to be womanly, was a flagrant sin not only against women, but
against God’s will, and a symbol of man’s original rebellion.
Piece by piece, then, Bushnell and Starr had dismantled the “curse” of Eve, and had worked to discredit every way in which the book of Genesis had been used to support the subjection of women. In doing so, they restructured the entire narrative, the foundational myth of the Christian faith. They gave new meanings to familiar symbols, altering the comprehensive framework within which believers could make sense of their worlds and redefining basic values. Their work engendered a new view of history and tradition, and allowed for a radically different prescription for how things ought to be. Without departing from the theological “rules” of Christian orthodoxy, they nonetheless effectively constructed new, woman-centered theological foundations for a radically different cultural embodiment of that faith. Their new theologies would disrupt conventional views of gender, sexuality, family, and society, and provide alternative models for a modern Christian morality and social order.
CHAPTER 4

VIRTUOUS WOMEN: GENDERED VIRTUE AND SOCIAL PURITY
IN AMERICA

One of the fundamental aspects of Katharine Bushnell’s and Lee Anna Starr’s revised creation narratives was the reassessment of Eve’s character. Bushnell and Starr concerned themselves with the reputation of this first woman because they believed that she continued to provide a powerful template for religious and cultural views of womanhood. Thus, rereading the biblical Eve was not simply a theological exercise for Bushnell and Starr. They envisioned that the new understanding of womanhood they offered might serve as the basis for radically different constructions of gender and society. Through their biblical revisions, they hoped to sweep away the theological underpinnings of the Victorian gender system and social order. Rehabilitating the character of Eve was central to these purposes, but they did not limit their critique of traditional theological conceptions of womanhood to the book of Genesis. They extended their critical examination to the rest of the scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments, where they attempted to expunge the faulty teachings of womanhood that permeated the texts. In this project they were joined by Southard, who, without a knowledge of biblical Hebrew, focused her attention of the teachings of Jesus found in the New Testament.
All three women firmly believed that, in order for women to achieve true liberation, fundamental changes needed to occur in religious and cultural understandings of virtue. Through their involvement in social reform work they had all witnessed concrete manifestations of the very different standards of virtue that applied to men and to women. Bushnell and Southard, in particular, became actively involved in the social purity movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Through their observations of the social status of “fallen women” and their engagement in public debates concerning the role of prostitution in society, they became increasingly convinced of the detrimental effects for women of the Victorian double standard of morality. They were not alone in this conviction; opposition to the sexual double standard of morality was a unifying force among nineteenth-century feminists. Women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Emily Blackwell, and Josephine Butler all attacked the double standard as one of the chief obstacles to women’s social equality. And for many women reformers, the double standard that pervaded Victorian society was nowhere more clearly expressed than in prostitution. Not only did prostitution seem to exemplify men’s control over women, but the uneven social condemnation that vilified prostitutes as “ruined” women while allowing their male customers to continue to enjoy the privileges of respectability was perhaps the most blatant example of the Victorian double standard.

Opponents of prostitution, and of the double standard of morality, joined forces in what came to be known as the social purity movement of the late nineteenth century. Evangelical notions of regeneration and purity had motivated an earlier generation of reformers to oppose prostitution and to redeem “fallen” women. In 1834 evangelical women had organized the Female Moral Reform Society to pursue these ends, and they
had identified the sexual double standard not only as an unchristian concept, but also as a key source of women’s social oppression. In the years after the Civil War, many of the society’s goals were embraced by social purity advocates who appealed to legislative means to achieve social morality. Social purity reformers emphasized in particular the effects of cultural understandings of morality on women’s rights, and they expressed outrage over the different standards applied to women and to men who failed to embody the high standards of purity. By the late nineteenth century, then, social purity had become integral to the women’s rights movement in America.

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were all convinced that the social inequalities exemplified by prostitution and the double standard were deeply entrenched in Western culture, and when they turned to the pages of the Bible they found ample evidence that Christian teachings had greatly contributed to these injustices. This chapter explains their critiques of traditional scripture and theology with respect to notions of female virtue, and it also examines the emergence of the social purity movement in Britain and America. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard considered their biblical studies and their social activism inseparable, and, in order to understand what would eventually become of their own

---

1 In 1830 John McDowell, a young Protestant divinity student working with the American Tract Society in the Five Points area of New York City, became concerned with the prostitutes living in that area. He conducted social research on prostitution, and he came to the controversial conclusion that prostitution was not simply the result of the moral weaknesses of women, but instead could be blamed on their wealthy and respectable male patrons. This stance garnered passionate opposition, and McDowell eventually abandoned his work. Protestant women influenced by the revivalism of Charles Grandison Finney, however, soon picked up this cause, establishing the Female Moral Reform Society in 1834. See Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness*, 108-110, along with Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, 19-25. In 1839 the organization changed its name to the American Female Moral Reform Society, and in 1849 to the American Female Guardian Society and Home for the Friendless.

2 Already at this point in time greater emphasis was given to efficiency and legal methods of reform as opposed to the earlier generation of reformers who had stressed the power of female moral suasion. Lori Ginzberg suggests that by the late 1840s, “all but the most ultra of reformers agreed that moral suasion had failed to transform society” (*Women and the Work of Benevolence*, 98). However, in the work of Bushnell and Southard, morality remained an important factor in social purity well into the twentieth century.
work, it is helpful to explore not only the theological and religious contexts in which they found themselves, but also the development of social movements in which they participated. First, however, it is useful to situate their discussions of virtue historically by examining briefly the changing perceptions of virtue in America.

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were historically situated at a time when it was particularly important to reassess not only the cultural significance of Eve, but also the entire concept of the gendered nature of virtue. Understandings of womanhood were in flux, and although new constructions of gender seemed to be emerging and a new era for women appeared immanent, powerful reminders of traditional constructions persisted.

It might at first seem surprising that Bushnell and Starr felt it necessary to expend such energy on establishing the initial moral goodness of the first woman. After all, the nineteenth-century world in which they came of age and first began their work routinely celebrated women’s special virtue. Powerful Victorian social constructions had set women upon a pedestal of moral superiority. Within this ideological framework, it was presumed that women were innately pure and naturally religious. They were seen as models of virtue, effortlessly exuding their moral purity upon all those they encountered. At first glance, then, by the middle of the nineteenth century the symbolic power of Eve as a morally weak but seductively powerful temptress seemed to have faded away.

This ideological shift is reflected in the nineteenth-century “cult of true womanhood,” a powerful script for women that celebrated their virtue and defined their central roles as wives and mothers in American homes. Women demonstrated their virtue and their piety through self-sacrifice. By sacrificing their own desires for the good of
their husbands and children, women could claim a certain moral power. Although the cult of true womanhood restricted women’s behavior by drawing strict boundaries around what constituted the conduct of a true woman, women themselves played a role in bringing about this change in the gendered construction of virtue. By embracing the self-sacrifice required of women, they could claim a place for themselves in the guardianship of public virtue, and use their elevated social and moral position to expand the opportunities available to women.\(^3\)

The causes of this “feminization” of virtue and the construction of nineteenth-century ideals of women’s self-sacrificing domesticity are interrelated and complex. Economic, political, and religious transformations worked together to accomplish the transition. The nineteenth-century identification of virtue with femininity marked a substantial departure from earlier political and religious constructions of virtue that had associated the quality primarily, if not always exclusively, with men. Among American Puritans, for example, personal virtue in the form of self-control, charity, faith, and temperance, was expected of both men and women. But with regard to public virtue, men bore the chief responsibility. In traditional Protestantism, public virtue was primarily understood in terms of patriarchy, and was considered an inherently masculine trait.\(^4\) Patriarchal authority, Puritans believed, would ensure order in their towns and communities as well as in each family unit, each “little commonwealth” of Puritan

---


\(^4\) Bloch, “Republican Virtue,” 140. Bloch describes how Anne Hutchinson had been urged to submit to the superior judgment of the “fathers of the commonwealth.” In addition, American Puritan thought was substantially influenced by the “Aristotelian notion of virtue, as always ‘united with rational principle,’” that “by definition favored men since men were deemed more rational than women.”
society. This traditional Protestant notion of public virtue combined with another influential strand of American thought, classical republicanism. Although virtue in the classical republican sense derived from a different source than Protestant virtue—from independent property and a balanced government, rather than from God—it, too, was an inherently masculine quality. In classical republicanism, independent (male) property owners worked together to pursue the common good. These property holders constituted the legislative branch of government that balanced the aristocratic Councils and the monarchy in the defense of liberty, and because of their independent means they could be free to pursue the good of society rather than their own self-interests. 6

By the eighteenth century, however, new understandings of virtue challenged these traditional masculine constructions. On the religious scene, American Protestants increasingly began to emphasize the emotional and experiential aspects of their faith. It was during this time that a growing number of ministers began to laud examples of female virtue and piety. Women’s excessive emotionalism, a trait that had long contributed to woman’s morally suspect nature, gradually came to suggest a heightened receptivity to grace, and female piety became an increasingly popular theme in Protestant

---

5 See John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). Although patriarchal authority dominated Puritan society, it is important to note that the roots of the eventual feminization of virtue can also be found in Puritan culture, and to the Protestant Reformation from which they sprung. Protestants elevated the role of the Christian family, and this new emphasis on family provided an important foundation for a positive assessment of women’s nature.

6 Bloch, “Republican Virtue,” 139. “In the classical republican tradition,” Bloch writes, the masculine attributes embedded in the concept of public virtue are even more pronounced than those in American Puritanism” (Ibid., 141).

7 The most profound shift in the gendered nature of virtue occurred between 1770 and 1830, according to Ann Braude, in “Women’s History Is American Religious History,” in David G. Hackett, ed., *Religion and American Culture* (New York: Routledge 1995), 97.
sermons. As the role of sentiment and affections increased in American Protestantism, the belief in certain traditional doctrines began to wane. Particularly objectionable to many Protestants was the Calvinistic doctrine of original sin. As commitment to this pessimistic doctrine declined, women’s role in the Edenic Fall likewise declined in significance, creating space for a feminine construction of virtue. Protestant conceptions of sin and virtue were not absolutely gendered, in that Protestants continued to deem both men and women capable of sin and redemption. The evangelical reform impulses of the 1830s and 1840s, for example, sought to redeem fallen men and women alike, and thereby bring about cultural transformation. Nevertheless, over the course of the nineteenth century, emphasis on women’s particular receptivity to the purifying power of God’s grace, and notions of their moral superiority and self-sacrificial character, were to become increasingly pronounced.

As the Protestant foundations of a masculine virtue were shifting, so, too, was the classical republican model of virtue. As economic conditions evolved, the ideal of independent property ownership became less tenable to growing numbers of Americans, shrinking the crucial social base necessary for a classical republican balance of power. With the rise of entrepreneurial capitalism, men openly pursued their own self-interest

---

8 Bloch, “Republican Virtue,” 146. Bloch also identified two other conceptions of virtue that emerged in eighteenth-century America, one influenced by Scottish Common Sense philosophy, and another evidenced in literary sentimentalism. Scottish philosopher Frances Hutcheson, for example, posited an innate moral sense located in the emotions that would lead to virtue. Literary sentimentalism, on the other hand, was not concerned with such matters of religion or epistemology, but it identified virtue as a predominantly feminine quality, and linked personal happiness with domestic relationships (Ibid., 146-147).

9 It is important to keep this point in mind. As powerful as the ideology of white, middle-class women’s moral superiority was in nineteenth-century America, it could be tempered by other, more egalitarian notions of sin and redemption that persisted in American Protestantism as well, particularly in religious reform and in the holiness movement. However, even in reform and holiness traditions, women often played leading roles, and were deemed particularly receptive to the transformative power of God’s grace.
rather than “the common good” in a new market economy. And so, with shifting economic circumstances came the need to alter traditional republican notions of virtue. If men were no longer pursuing the public good but instead seeking their own self-interest, a source of virtue must be found elsewhere. Seemingly far removed from the public marketplace where self-interest prevailed, American women could meet this need. Through feminine self-sacrifice, and insulated in the private sphere, women could provide the necessary virtue to ensure the well-being of society. While their husbands engaged in the rigors of the competitive market place, women could stay in their domestic spheres, influencing their husbands and sons and instilling virtue in the subsequent generations.¹⁰

Gradually, then, through economic, political, and religious transformations, women came to be seen as the morally superior sex. In a significant reversal, public virtue was guaranteed not by masculine independence, but by female dependence—by their very absence from the public sphere. Economic, political, and religious impulses worked together to relocate virtue primarily from the public to the private realm, and to associate it not with men, but with women. Accordingly, characteristics deemed feminine—such as tenderness, delicacy, passivity, and emotionalism—became central to women’s virtue. Perhaps the most important quality was a woman’s self-sacrifice, however, and the figure who most exemplified this quality was the Victorian mother. Setting aside her own needs for those of her family, the mother came to play an important ideological role in nineteenth-century America. The redefinition of virtue was thus

inseparable from the nineteenth-century elevation of domesticity and motherhood, a development that will be explored more fully in the following chapter.

By the middle of the nineteenth-century, then, the biblical woman who most accurately seemed to represent womanhood was not Eve, but Mary, the mother of Christ. Unlike Eve, who represented rebellion and deceit, Mary symbolized purity, obedience, selfless motherhood, and gentle feminine submission. It would be a mistake, however, to characterize the transition from Eve to Mary, and the accompanying transformation of virtue from masculine to feminine, as unconditional or absolute. Focusing exclusively on the power of the ideal of true womanhood can obscure the persisting legacy of Eve that continued to supply a script for womanhood. The popular identification of women with the temptress Eve did not completely disappear with the rise of nineteenth-century domesticity and a feminine construction of virtue.\textsuperscript{11} To the contrary, the ideal of true womanhood actually required a complementary shadow side, the image of the “fallen woman.” Although the notion of women’s virtue could empower women with a moral superiority that could be channeled into avenues far beyond the domestic sphere,\textsuperscript{12} the ideal of purity was a narrow ideal that was difficult, if not impossible, for many women to attain. Purportedly a model for an all-inclusive “womanhood,” in reality this ideal was accessible only to white, middle-class women who could approach the gentility, spotless

\textsuperscript{11} Braude, “Women’s History,” 97. It is also important to note that evangelical notions of male sin and virtue were not entirely displaced by Victorian constructs of female virtue.

\textsuperscript{12} In \textit{Bonds of Womanhood}, Cott describes how this cultural segregation of women’s roles contributed to a growing women’s consciousness in nineteenth-century America that was a necessary precondition for the development of the women’s movement. The evangelical notion of women’s moral superiority, moreover, empowered women to critique and work to control men’s behaviors. See also Braude, “Women’s History,” 97.
“purity,” and domestic identities perpetuated by the ideology. Women who could not, or would not, attain the ideal of virtuous womanhood because their race, economic position, or personal choices, felt the weight of the cultural expectations they failed to meet. Women who failed to live up to the high standards of sexual purity and moral superiority, and who did not exhibit the appropriate passivity and femininity, inhabited the shadowy realm of “fallen women.” There they would reap the punishment for their sisterhood with Eve.

The fallen woman was everything that the ideal woman was not—coarse rather than delicate, assertive rather than self-sacrificing, and, most importantly, sensual and tainted rather than pure. As the ideal of feminine virtue developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sexual purity played an increasingly important role in defining virtue. Associations of sexual purity with virtue were not entirely new. In ancient times and in the medieval era, the virtues had in fact been symbolized by virgins, and Catholic ideals of celibacy had perpetuated this association. With the rise of Protestantism, however, the significance of sexual purity receded somewhat as other virtues—like piety and frugality—increased in importance. In Victorian America, however, the centrality

---

13 In *Cradle of the Middle Class*, Ryan argues that these new domestic relations in fact played a central role in the construction of a new middle class. Women who could not achieve this ideal included working-class women and women of color. On working women’s experiences, see, for example, Stansell’s *City of Women*, and on African American women’s experiences, see Deborah Gray White’s *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).

14 Braude explains that, “While the shift toward positive views of woman’s nature is a major event in the story of American religion, it is crucial to remember that it remains by definition incomplete, that it is not a positive valuation of women qua women, but rather of an ideal that few women ever can attain” (“Women’s History,” 100).

15 As Braude has argued, the availability of both models of womanhood to nineteenth-century women necessitated a strong male authority to ensure that women’s weakness engendered purity and innocence, rather than deception and moral error (“Women’s History,” 103).

16 This is drawn from Bloch, “Republican Virtue,” 137.
of sexual purity reemerged, epitomizing the self-sacrifice, personal restraint, and innate virtue that had come to be expected of women. Because of the significance of sexual purity in defining a woman’s virtue, it seemed to some nineteenth-century theorists that a sharp distinction could be drawn between “virtuous” women and their “fallen” sisters, even going so far as to suggest that a physical and moral transformation took place as a woman “lost her chastity.” As Edward Westermarck described in his *Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, some had suggested that “in the moment when a woman loses her chastity her mind changes.”17 “She is a woman with half the woman gone…leaving her a mere instrument of impurity…” wrote William Acton in 1857.18 Such a woman, “with half the woman gone,” could be “lower, more degraded and viler” than any man, and was capable of even the “the most hideous crimes.”19 There seemed to be no gradations in a woman’s virtue. “In the female character there is no midregion,” commented one man in 1837, “it must exist in spotless innocence or else in hopeless vice.”20 Such distinctions were later bolstered by evolutionary theorists, who argued that female purity characterized advanced human civilization, whereas sensual and

17 Southard, *Attitude*, 89. Westermarck was quoting the Greek orator Lysias.


promiscuous women represented a primitive type of womanhood. Fallen women thus represented an abnormal femininity, a reversion to primitive practices, unworthy to be called women.21

Under the harshest applications of the Victorian ideology of female purity, then, once a woman had crossed the line between chaste and unchaste, there was no return. In contrast to traditional evangelical notions of redemption, unchaste women, unlike sinful men, seemed beyond the reaches of grace, incapable of redemption. Such unfortunate women had forfeited their claim to womanhood. Although efforts to rehabilitate “fallen women” by some evangelical reformers continued, the harsh condemnation such women received in the broader Victorian culture was not lost on women like Bushnell and Southard, who saw in that condemnation a moral and cultural hypocrisy.

The figure that most clearly embodied the nineteenth-century image of the “fallen woman” was the prostitute.22 Despised and shunned by most respectable Victorians, the prostitute nevertheless played an important role in the Victorian moral system as the guarantor of virtuous women’s purity. For while impeccable purity was required of “virtuous” Victorian women, far lower standards of sexual purity were expected of “respectable” Victorian men. Unlike women, who were considered “innately” virtuous and free of sexual passions in Victorian ideology, men were depicted as naturally lustful, with persistent sexual needs. Society’s fallen women, then, could absorb some of this excess, thereby protecting the purity of the virtuous women. In his influential History of

21 Hobson, Uneasy Virtue, 113. As Hobson writes, “That licentiousness and ‘coarse sexuality’ were most prominent among working class women was logical, according to Social Darwinist thought,” an expression of less civilized womanhood.

European Morals (1869), William Lecky had advanced this theory of Victorian morality, arguing that the immorality of the fallen woman protected the purity of the true woman. A prostitute, “the supreme type of vice,” was ultimately “the most efficient guardian of virtue,” Lecky explained. “But for her the unchallenged purity of countless happy homes would be polluted and not a few who, in the pride of their untempted chastity think of her with an indignant shudder, would have known the agony of remorse and despair.”

It was this “double standard” of sexual morality that expected and even condoned moral lapses on the part of men, while requiring nothing less than moral perfection from women, that became the target of a growing number of nineteenth-century women reformers. These reformers believed that the sexual double standard was one of the most pressing social injustices inflicted upon women, and that it constituted one of the linchpins of the patriarchal society. In both Britain and America, nineteenth-century reformers broke the Victorian “conspiracy of silence” surrounding public discussions of sexuality in order to address the injustice of the double standard. Over time a powerful social purity movement coalesced on both sides of the Atlantic. The movement would initially reflect many of the concerns of the women’s movement, although it would later come to encompass the more repressive anti-vice legislation of the likes of Anthony Comstock, and contribute to the development of social hygiene in twentieth-century America. A familiarity with the development of social purity thought in the United States is important for understanding the theological and social work of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard. All three women developed their consciousness of women’s subordinate

---

23 William Lecky, History of European Morals, Vol. II (New York, 1870), 283, quoted in Southard, Attitude, 90. Southard noted that “this long-held belief that women of vice were a protection to women of virtue is now considered to be the exact opposite of the truth.”
position in American society, and in Christianity, in the context of social purity thought, and Bushnell was herself an influential figure in the development of the social purity movement in the United States.

The social purity movement coalesced in the years following the American Civil War, although its roots could be found in the growing awareness of the double standard of morality in Victorian society that stretched back to the 1820s and 1830s. The early leading social purity activist against the sexual double standard was the Englishwoman Josephine Butler, with whom Katharine Bushnell was well acquainted. Hailed by British suffragists as the “great founding mother of modern feminism,” Butler maintained that women’s oppression could be traced to their “vulnerability to sexual servitude” that resulted from “the sexual double standard inherent in patriarchal culture.” In the 1870s Butler began a bold campaign to challenge this double standard. She did not focus her attack directly on the institution of prostitution itself, for such opposition generally took the form of the vilification of prostitutes that she hoped to reverse, but she instead took issue with the government regulation of prostitution.

Between 1864 and 1869, the British government had introduced and amended the Contagious Diseases Acts, regulations that prescribed the compulsory examination or imprisonment of prostitutes in order to protect British soldiers from venereal diseases. To Butler, the Contagious Diseases Acts were nothing less than legalized embodiments of

24 On the development of antebellum female moral reform, see Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, particularly Chapter Four, “Moral Suasion is Moral Balderdash.”
the double standard. Government regulation implicitly sanctioned the faulty view that prostitution was necessary in order to meet men’s sexual needs and preserve the purity of the home, she argued.\textsuperscript{27} The rights of prostitutes to their own bodies were sacrificed for the protection of soldiers to do as they wished, without physical consequence. And the compulsory physical examination of any woman suspected of being a prostitute poignantly symbolized the extent to which men controlled women in British society.\textsuperscript{28}

By the 1880s, British public sentiment was increasingly aligning with Butler’s viewpoint, but purity reformers were convinced that conservative attitudes toward sexuality and a “conspiracy of silence” were inhibiting a more radical reform of the double standard. They looked for a dramatic event that would galvanize purity reformers and swing public opinion to their side. That stimulus came in the form of the muckraking journalism of William T. Stead, a friend and supporter of Butler, and the editor of the \textit{Pall Mall Gazette}. In 1885 Stead published the first exposé of the modern vice trade, “Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon.”\textsuperscript{29} Stead’s exposé succeeded in inspiring the British social purity forces and awakening the British public to the injustices to women perpetrated in their communities.

On the other side of the Atlantic, however, public sentiment had yet to be aroused.\textsuperscript{30} American women reformers had eagerly read Butler’s writings and were aware of the public outrage elicited by Stead’s report, but the American public had not yet

\begin{itemize}
\item[{27}] Rosen, \textit{Preaching Eugenics}, 9.
\item[{29}] Pivar, \textit{Purity Crusade}, 132.
\item[{30}] Since the 1830s American reformers had been working against prostitution and had established a number of “rescue homes” for fallen women. But, with the exception of the Moral Reform Society, these efforts were largely localized. The social purity movement was a national movement that aimed at addressing the underlying social system that supported prostitution, and focused on government legislation affecting prostitution. See Ibid., 154.
\end{itemize}
awakened to the cause. Although social purity activists had met with a degree of success in the previous decade in preventing the American Medical Association from endorsing the government regulation of prostitution, it was an ongoing struggle to keep physicians from supporting such regulationism. \(^{31}\) Social purity proponents objected to prostitution in general, but following Butler’s lead they too focused on the government regulation of prostitution. To social purity reformers, regulation suggested the government’s sanctioning of prostitution, and represented an official endorsement of a sexual double standard that justified the social necessity of prostitution to satiate “male sexual necessity” or men’s “natural” lack of sexual restraint. Reformers believed that, in arousing public outcry against the evils of prostitution, they could help to ensure the defeat of regulationism, and, having convinced the public that prostitution was not a necessary evil, eventually bring about the abolition of the institution. But although reports of Butler’s and Stead’s work had reached America, many Americans believed that their own society had remained purer than European cultures, and that their own country had somehow escaped the degradation and moral decline of the Old World. \(^{32}\) American reformers set out to prove them wrong.

Members of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union worked to provide the spark the American purity movement needed by publishing an article on the “white slave

\(^{31}\) In the early 1880s social purity workers formed the American Purity Alliance. Established during an upsurge in American social purity sentiment, the association formed in order to oppose government regulation of prostitution. Many former abolitionists joined the organization, including William Lloyd Garrison, Lucy Stone, and Henry Blackwell. In the late nineteenth century, however, it was still common for articles in medical journals to place the blame for the spread of diseases on prostitutes, and the American Medical Association was close to embracing regulation. Social purity reformers focused their attention on a campaign to convince the medical profession of the social and moral problems of regulation, and in 1876 the Alliance succeeded in preventing the AMA from adopting regulationist policies. See Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene*, 2-3, 26.

\(^{32}\) Pivar, *Purity Crusade*, 136.
trade” in northern Wisconsin and Michigan in their journal, the Union Signal. They revealingly titled the article “Another Maiden Tribute.” But the article alone failed to stir up the public outcry they had hoped for, and in response, purity reformers published another article in the Union Signal calling for an investigation into the alleged vice trade. Katharine Bushnell responded to this request, embarking on her summer of investigations in northern Wisconsin and Michigan in 1888. In the same way that Stead’s investigations had aroused the British public, Bushnell’s exposé of the white slave trade in the northern lumber camps stirred public outcry across the United States. Initially many people found her reports, printed in the WCTU’s Union Signal and in Wisconsin papers, and reprinted in the New York World and in local papers across the nation, unbelievable. But Frances Willard defended Bushnell’s work, and other journalists who investigated her reports substantiated many of her findings. 33 Despite the governor’s dismissal of Bushnell’s reports, the state legislature of Wisconsin invited Bushnell to give an address on the situation, and they eventually passed legislation in an attempt to put an end to the “white slave trade” in their state. Mobilized by Bushnell’s work, American purity reformers called for a national vice commission in 1890, and in response to the northern Wisconsin and Michigan exposé, municipal vice commissions appeared in nearly every major American city. 34

Bushnell’s investigations had not only revealed shocking details of the white slave trade, but had also exposed a number of instances where state and local officials

33 Ibid., 137. Pivar cites an article in the Woman’s Journal (January 26, 1889): 1, along with a letter from C. B. Grant to Frances Willard, 5 January 1888, printed in Union Signal, January 26, 1888. See also Rosen, Preaching Eugenics, 116-117.

34 Pivar, Purity Crusade, 138-139. Congress did not respond to the call for a national commission, and so municipalities across the country took up the call. Willard’s “latest and greatest” quote is taken from Pivar, Purity Crusade, 10.
either turned a blind eye to the flourishing prostitution in their own jurisdictions, or, more disturbingly, actually sanctioned and regulated the trade. She had also uncovered, much to her dismay, the cooperation of local medical doctors in controlling the venereal diseases acquired by brothel inhabitants. In Bushnell’s opinion such doctors were not so much interested in public health, but rather in the lucrative financial rewards that this business brought to them, and for this reason it remained in their interest to see prostitution flourish in their districts. Bushnell’s lumber camp exposé finally succeeded in convincing the American public of the evils of prostitution, and it did much to galvanize the American social purity movement. This phase of activism also represented a significant shift in the focus of anti-prostitution forces in America. Reformers continued to support rescue homes for fallen women, as they had earlier in the century, but from this point on they increasingly turned to legal methods to curb the apparent state sanctioning of vice.

The WCTU played a key role in supporting social purity reform—Frances Willard called it the “latest and greatest crusade”—but the battle against government regulation brought together reformers from a variety of different backgrounds into a broad and powerful social purity movement. Women’s rights advocates, religious leaders, civil libertarians and social justice activists all united in opposition to regulation. Many female purity reformers opposed regulation on the basis of the egregious example of the sexual double standard exemplified by the government regulation and compulsory examination of female prostitutes, but not their male

35 Hobson, Uneasy Virtue, 150.
36 Rosen, Preaching Eugenics, 10.
customers. These reformers considered the male sex drive necessitating prostitution as “excessive” rather than natural, and they focused on the protection of home and family, and uplifting the nation’s morality.\(^\text{37}\) Other women’s rights activists feared that the institutionalization of prostitution would create a permanent class of “degraded women,” reinforcing traditional notions of women’s inferior status.\(^\text{38}\) Many religious leaders were unwilling to abandon their perfectionist faith that prostitution could be abolished, not merely regulated, and they, too, strongly opposed the apparent government sanctioning of the institution that regulation implied. Still other antiregulationists opposed regulation because of its inconsistency with the tradition of American liberty, and they joined women’s activists and religious leaders in rejecting the “police state” developed to administer regulation in European countries.\(^\text{39}\) Together, these various and at times overlapping strands formed a loose coalition united around a single issue.\(^\text{40}\)

The exposés of Stead and Bushnell succeeded in convincing physicians of the need to change their own attitudes toward prostitution. Rather than seeing prostitution as a necessary evil or even as a social good, many medical doctors came to the conclusion that it was instead a dangerous vice that the medical profession should not participate in through regulation. Central to this shift was the fact that a growing number of physicians had come to accept the healthfulness of male continence and restraint. By the late 1880s and 1890s, then, purity reformers found that they had come to have much in common

\(^\text{37}\) Ibid., 12; Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 150.

\(^\text{38}\) Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 150.


\(^\text{40}\) As Rosen points out, the social purity movement “cannot be called entirely feminist. It included individuals of both sexes who opposed women’s suffrage, employment, and higher education…Nevertheless,” she concludes, “feminism and social purity were very much intertwined, with members of each movement supporting causes of the other” (Ibid., 11).
with medical doctors with regard to their stance on prostitution and regulation.\textsuperscript{41} For a time, it seemed as if the threat of regulation had been contained.

In a relatively short period of time, purity reformers had shattered the “conspiracy of silence” surrounding public discussion of sexuality. They had successfully challenged expressions of the sexual double standard in law and medicine, and had strongly advocated a woman’s right to her own body.\textsuperscript{42} Pleased with their apparent successes in the defeat of regulationism, the social purity movement expanded to include additional goals. Not content with eliminating the regulation of prostitution, many reformers hoped to abolish prostitution itself. They expanded “social purity” to involve the reformation of prostitutes and the prosecution of their customers. They also promoted sex education, the censorship of pornography, and they advocated for raising the age of legal consent and for women’s rights to refuse intercourse within marriage.\textsuperscript{43}

The American social purity movement provided an important context for the work and thought of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard. Bushnell herself had been instrumental in arousing American public opinion on purity issues, and Southard, too, toured the country and published books on social purity. For all three women, social purity thinking shaped their theological reflections and social visions. While phrases like “fallen women” and “white slave traffic” sound strangely antiquated to the modern ear, it is important to realize that the social purity movement, and its crusade against prostitution and the sexual double standard, exposed essential inconsistencies in the

\textsuperscript{41} Pivar, \textit{Purity Crusade}, 149.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 255.
\textsuperscript{43} Rosen, \textit{Preaching Eugenics}, 11.
Victoria moral system. Furthermore, attention to issues of sexuality in general, and to 
prostitution in particular, helped to expand the purview of proponents of women’s rights 
beyond simply legal and educational inequalities to “a more radical and comprehensive 
view of women’s oppression within a total economic, political, and sexual power 
relationship.” From a social purity position, women like Butler, Bushnell, and Southard 
were able to begin to construct powerful and wide-ranging social critiques.

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were well aware of the double-edged sword of the 
Victorian idealization of women’s purity and moral perfection. Each of them had 
witnessed the lot of women who failed to attain the ideal, observing how one indiscretion 
could “ruin” a woman forever, while many men seemed to be granted the freedom to 
transgress the biblical injunctions for moral purity almost at will. They ardently opposed 
a construction of female virtue that condemned women who had failed to maintain the 
ideal of absolute purity. They clearly discerned that unrealistic religious and social 
constructions of feminine virtue rendered women vulnerable to oppression, and 
paradoxically gave new life to the legacy of Eve’s moral and spiritual weakness. “In 
sermons and lectures by learned and gifted men,” Southard often told audiences at her 
purity talks, “we have all heard flights of eloquence extolling the native purity and virtue 
of women, telling how she lives on moral heights man can never hope to attain. With this 
bright bit of sophistry goes a dark shadow, for we are told that when she does fall a

Theorists: Three Centuries of Key Women Thinkers (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 146. As 
Flammang writes in “And Your Sons and Daughters Will Prophesy,” the radical nature of the social purity 
critique is often overlooked today in part because of the conservative direction the movement took as it 
developed into an anti-vice movement. Stripped of the radical, woman-centered theological foundation 
offered by women like Butler, as well as by Bushnell and Southard, the movement devolved into a 
“superficial moralism” that was often more repressive than liberating (156).
woman goes to abysmal depths, lower than a man ever reaches.” 45 Southard condemned the common belief that a sin against sexual purity “has had some occult effect upon women that it did not produce upon men, making it useless to try to uplift them…” 46 In order to reject the legacy of Eve, then, the belief that “when a woman falls she goes lower than a man ever does,” Southard, along with Bushnell and Starr, found it necessary to denounce the other side of the purity equation, that “women are naturally better than men.” 47 Southard, for example, had harsh words for women who were “foolishly flattered by being set upon a pedestal of moral superiority,” and who accordingly had low moral expectations for men, but were “merciless toward a woman who takes a single false step.” 48

In rejecting common assertions of women’s moral superiority, Southard also discounted widely held notions of women’s special religiosity. As Southard noted, “men themselves are much given to declaring that women have in them a fine sense, not imparted to men, that tends to make them more religious than their brothers.” 49 She had heard many ministers argue that very point. Southard, however, dismissed that claim.

45 Southard, White Slave Traffic, 64. This book was a collection of purity talks she had been giving around the country. Southard explained that a belief in the “abysmal depths” of a woman’s fall reflected not her actual character, but the way that society treated a woman who took even one misstep. Men who sinned were welcomed back into society, but “for the woman of the street, no doors swing wide for her…One door is open, always open, and within that door she can at least find warmth and food and shelter…” By condemning “fallen” women, “Society pushes down thousands who might be saved” (Ibid., 77, 78).

46 Southard, Attitude, 89.

47 Southard, White Slave Traffic, 64, 75. The work of women like Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, and women before them, to “uplift” or “redeem” fallen women, was in itself a challenge to dominant cultural assumptions that such women were irredeemable.

48 Ibid., 78.

“The religious nature in the man is as strong as in the woman,” she asserted. Lower moral expectations, however, had effectively dulled the religious sense of many men.

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard all agreed that the sexual double standard was at the root of women’s social inequalities. Through their social reform work, both Bushnell and Southard had worked with “fallen” women, and their very efforts to “redeem” these women challenged dominant cultural assumptions that such women were irredeemable, and unworthy of the title “woman.” But all three were convinced that, in order for fundamental social reform to be achieved, the very roots of the sexual double standard had to be eradicated. They were not satisfied with simply “rescuing” fallen women, nor were they content to limit their activities to the political defeat of regulation. They believed that the ultimate basis of the sexual double standard could be found in the traditional Christian belief system. And until religious beliefs were fundamentally altered, they believed that the social and sexual injustices in America would persist.

For this reason, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard turned to theology. They were convinced that religious thought perpetuated the sexual double standard, and, in an attempt to alter people’s religious convictions, they turned their attention to what they considered the basis of Christian thought, the scriptures. Bushnell regarded her theological studies as “vital to the advancement of purity.” Southard, too, was convinced that “all living grows up out of thinking.” “As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he,” she wrote. The double standard of morality had led to innumerable injustices

---

50 Southard, White Slave Traffic, 72.
against women. Behind that double standard lay a “common belief in the inequality of the sexes,” and that conviction was rooted in Christian theology.\(^{52}\)

**Cha-yil**

In locating the source of women’s social and sexual inequities in the Christian Bible, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard agreed with many women’s rights activists who critiqued the Christian scriptures. But unlike “secular” or New Thought critics, they did not blame the scriptures themselves, but rather mistranslations and misappropriations of the biblical text. Having witnessed first-hand the injustices perpetrated upon women who fell short of the lofty ideal of purity, they looked to the scriptures to dismantle the moral foundations of those injustices. They rejected the Victorian ideal of virtuous womanhood, and they refused to believe that the Word of God truly supported such an unrealistic and ultimately destructive standard for women. Through careful exegesis and retranslation, they demonstrated how the ideal of virtuous womanhood, along with the sexual double standard, had long been perpetuated by faulty renderings of the biblical text. They sought to dismantle this erroneous theological foundation by retranslating and reinterpreting key concepts and passages, and they thereby hoped to undercut the roots of the present social evils.

Following her established method, Bushnell turned to the original Hebrew and Greek texts in order to decipher God’s true, inspired word on the nature of womanhood. She commenced with an examination of the English Old Testament texts that ascribed “virtue” to biblical women. Turning then to the original Hebrew, she began to uncover an

alarming trend. She discovered several cases in which translators had assigned an “unusual meaning” to a word whenever that word was used to modify a female. Cumulatively, Bushnell argued, these gendered translations constructed harmful and inaccurate biblical notions of womanhood. For instance, Bushnell closely examined the Hebrew word “cha-yil,” which, excepting four particular cases, had been variously translated “army, war, host, forces, might, power, goods, riches, substance, wealth, or valiant.” In the over two-hundred times that “cha-yil” appeared in the Hebrew Bible, it had always been translated to connote “force, strength, or ability.” Except, that is, in every case where it referred specifically to a woman. In each of those four cases, it was translated as “‘virtue’—i.e. chastity.”

Bushnell described the first case in which “cha-yil” modified a female, in an instance found in the book of Ruth. The Bible records how Ruth left her homeland and her family to accompany the mother of her late husband to a new land, refusing to abandon her mother-in-law and return to her homeland to remarry. Ruth is referred to as a “woman of cha-yil.” From the list of available meanings, Bushnell considered that “thou art an able woman,” or “thou art a woman of courage,” would reflect an accurate translation of the term, in accord with other translations found in the Old Testament. But it “almost” seemed to Bushnell as if “our English translators took no care” as to the precise language of the text when they rendered the phrase “thou art a virtuous woman.” Bushnell pointed out that not once did “cha-yil” refer to any moral characteristic other

53 Bushnell, GWTW, 623.
54 Ibid., 624, 633.
55 Ruth 3:11.
56 Bushnell notes that the “Septuagint Greek reads ‘Thou art a woman of power’ (dunamis) (GWTW, 625).
than that of strength or force. But here “man was praising woman, and ‘of course’ here is a reference to her reputation for chastity.”

The next mistranslation Bushnell identified could be found in the oft-cited final chapter of Proverbs, a chapter describing an ideal woman. The woman of Proverbs was praised, since “like the merchants’ ships, she bringeth her food from afar.” She “considereth a field and buyeth it,” while “strength and honour are her clothing.” Bushnell noted that the woman of Proverbs was lauded for her “general goodness and trustworthiness, energy, efficiency, enterprise, far-sightedness, early-rising, business capacity, gardening, muscular strength, weaving, benevolence, fore-thought, embroidery work, elegant clothes…honour, wisdom, kindness, piety.” But, Bushnell noted, “as it happens, no definite reference is made to her purity, or to her faithfulness to her husband in the marriage relation.” In summing up this ideal, the woman of Proverbs was described as “a woman of cha-yil,” which the English translators rendered as “a virtuous woman.”

“We must suppose,” Bushnell commented, “that the translators hastily concluded that they knew, without looking closely at the original, what sort of a woman” should be held as an ideal. “Who can find a virtuous woman?” undoubtedly represented the sentiments of the translators, she concluded, “but it does not represent the teaching of the original text.” “Virtue’ is of priceless value to woman, to be sure,” she conceded, “but her duty to her husband is not her only duty; all her life cannot be summed up in that one moral quality.” In the other two mistranslations Bushnell explored, she supposed that there must have been among the translators “an instinctive distaste, disrelish” for showing that

---

57 Ibid., 626.
58 Ibid., 629.
the Bible praised “a ‘strong’ woman, for doing “valiantly.””\textsuperscript{59} Again she insisted that “women prefer to know what the Bible says, rather than to be merely reminded of a favorite axiom among men.”\textsuperscript{60}

Bushnell recognized that critics might argue that “virtue” connoted “a summing up of all moral characteristics,” and must not necessarily refer to sexual purity. But she pointed out that the English Bible was translated for “the common folk,” and at that time “the vast majority” would suppose “virtue” to refer to the woman’s chastity.\textsuperscript{61} And although “virtue” might have a literal meaning of “manliness” rooted in the Latin \textit{vir}, which means “man,” she again argued that, in general, the English word “virtue” was understood not to describe “manliness,” but, among men, “‘morality’ in general,” and when used of women, to refer to “morality of one sort,” namely, sexual purity.\textsuperscript{62} Bushnell concluded that virtue, in the sense of sexual purity, was indeed “a quality of great importance to women,” but she contended that women would have been better equipped to guard that virtue had they been properly instructed from the pulpit, and if, through a more careful translation of such passages, they had been encouraged first to be “strong, in body, mind, and spirit.”\textsuperscript{63}

\begin{itemize}
\item[	extsuperscript{59}] Ibid., 630.
\item[	extsuperscript{60}] Ibid., 631.
\item[	extsuperscript{61}] Ibid., 279. Bushnell added with apparent glee that in this case the Septuagint translates the passage “A \textit{masculine} woman . . . more valuable is she than very costly stones.” She noted that Dr. Mingana concurs, commenting that “another point in your favour is that the Syriac text has actually a ‘strong, powerful, virile woman’” (Ibid., 630).
\item[	extsuperscript{62}] Ibid., 632. As Linda Gordon writes, throughout the nineteenth century previously general moral terms “such as ‘virtue,’ ‘propriety,’ ‘decency,’ ‘modesty,’ ‘delicacy,’ and ‘purity’ narrowed to “exclusively sexual meanings” (\textit{Moral Property}, 114).
\item[	extsuperscript{63}] Bushnell, \textit{GWTW}, 633.
\end{itemize}
Turning to the New Testament, Bushnell found a similar pattern of gendered mistranslations. For instance, the Greek word “sophron” was an adjective occurring four times in the New Testament. Twice it had been translated “sober,” once “temperate,” and, when referring to women only, it was rendered “discreet.” Bushnell cited a commentary written by Dean Alford to exemplify this conscious “sex-bias” in translation. Having established the meaning of “sophron” as “self-restraint,” Alford argued that “discreet” “certainly applies better to women than ‘self-restraint.’” For “self-restraint” implied effort, Alford wrote, “which destroys the spontaneity, and brushes off, so to speak, the bloom of this best of female graces.” Bushnell graciously thanked Alford “for thinking that women can practice self-restraint without effort,” but on behalf of Christian women she added that, “when we are reading our Bibles we prefer to know precisely what the Holy Ghost addresses to us, instead of finding between its pages the opinion of even the most excellent uninspired man.”

Another New Testament illustration of “sex bias” on the part of translators could be found in the case of “exousia,” a Greek word meaning “power.” There seemed to be no disagreement on its connoting “power,” Bushnell explained, for “its meaning is patent; there is no mystery about the word.” But, of the sixty-nine places the word appeared in the New Testament, in only one instance did it happen to be used exclusively to describe a woman’s power. And at once its sense was called into question. “It cannot be possible that women should have power!” Bushnell exclaimed, noting that in the margin of the

64 Ibid., 639. Another example of gendered translation can be found in the case of the Greek noun sophrosune, built on the adjective sophron. In Green’s small lexicon to the New Testament, she found that “the female meaning of the word is ‘modesty,’” which “precisely accords” with Bushnell’s point that the translators “seem to imagine that the same word has two meanings according to whether it refers to men or to women,” at least when looking at the Bible (Ibid., 640).
passage, the translators had written the longest note to be found in the entire Authorized Version of the Bible to explain “how Paul means that this ‘power’ must be abdicated by woman, in order that her husband may assume it instead.”

Additionally, Bushnell drew attention to the Greek word “kosmios,” translated as “well ordered, in both outward deportment and inner life,” except when referring to women’s dress, where it was rendered “modest.” And “hagnos,” meaning “holy,” translated as “pure” or “clear” five times, and as “chaste” three times, each time it qualified a noun of the feminine gender. Given this pattern, Bushnell questioned whether or not men also should be taught chastity. “These may be straws,” she concluded, “yet they all point in the same direction.”

Southard, although she did not retranslate the scriptures as Bushnell had, and although in her writing she focused primarily on the New Testament, agreed with Bushnell’s assessment. “No sex-distinctions were made on Sinai,” she said, referring to the site where the Ten Commandments had been given to Moses. “One standard of morality and one only was given to the race.” If it were the case that there were “two grades of moral beings, one superior, one inferior,” she wrote, “then it is manifestly unfair to ask both to conform to the same standard. The God of the Bible, who made both

---

65 Ibid., 641. Bushnell was referring to 1 Cor. 11:1-16, which she dealt with in detail in Lessons 29-31, Paragraphs 216-239. She reported how translators and commentators had added a number of words to the original text in order to procure the meaning that a woman was to yield her authority to her husband, rather than wield authority herself. The Bible, and St. Paul, Bushnell purported, “says nothing of this sort, but the Marginal Note, and the Bible Commentators teach it.” She could not resist adding the suspicious nature of this alteration, as it was “husbands, not wives,” who have “discovered this extraordinary meaning for St. Paul’s words” (Ibid., 218).

66 Ibid., 644. Here she cited 1 Timothy 2:9.

67 Ibid., 644.
sexes, evidently considered them morally equal when he made the same requirements of both for eternal life.”

The *Pericope de Adultera*

One of the central biblical texts to which Bushnell, Starr, and Southard turned in order to dismantle the notion of a sexual double standard was the well-known New Testament story of a woman caught in adultery. Historically, this portion of the scriptures was known as the *pericope de adultera*. The *pericope* (a Latin word meaning “excerpt”) recounted the story of an adulterous woman taken by a group of religious authorities to Jesus for punishment. The story, taken from the Gospel of John, contains only eleven verses:

> And every man went unto his own house. Jesus went unto the mount of Olives. And early in the morning He came again into the temple and all the people came unto Him: and He sat down and taught them.

> And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto Him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst they say unto Him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us that such should be stoned, but what sayst thou? This they said tempting Him that they might have to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground.

> So when they continued asking Him, He lifted up Himself and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her, and again He stooped down and wrote on the ground.

> And they which heard, being convicted by conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest unto the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

> When Jesus had lifted up Himself and saw none but the woman He said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee? She said unto Him, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

68 Southard, *White Slave Traffic*, 64.

69 John 8:1-11 (King James Version).
In this brief account Bushnell, Starr, and Southard found in the words of Christ himself a powerful rejection of the sexual double standard that had long plagued Victorian society. Jesus “refused to pass sentence” against the woman, Starr reasoned, “so long as her guilty paramour” was allowed to go free. Jesus “refused to approve a double standard. He rebuked the cry of His own and of subsequent ages, ‘Stone the woman and let the man go free.’” 70 “All through the ages,” Bushnell agreed, men had persistently maintained that two different standards of chastity applied to men and women. But in the pericope Christ himself had dismantled that double standard, insisting that “man must first show himself to be chaste before dealing with woman’s unchastity.” 71 “Christ’s blow was aimed at two standards of morality,” Bushnell wrote, “and at injustice and hypocrisy.” 72 Southard, too, identified the patent double standard exhibited by the accusers. She described the “hideous scene” where one finds “the woman sinner—they have prudently let the man escape—with judge, jury, witnesses, attendants, all men.” This patriarchal scene would be repeated “through the centuries.” 73 It was the same double standard that they regularly observed “work[ing] a bitter injustice to both men and women.” It “encouraged men to sin, knowing that their sin would be excused,” while at the same time “hurl[ing] to destruction multitudes of dazed, questioning girl-children for taking the first step in a sin they did not understand.” 74

70 Starr, Bible Status, 175. Starr pointed out the uniqueness of Jesus’ response. “…try to find one other religious man apart from Christ who did not discriminate against women—He never by word or deed, lent encouragement to the disparagement of woman.”

71 Bushnell, GWTW, 682.

72 Ibid., 687.

73 Southard, Attitude, 83.

74 Southard, White Slave Traffic, 58.
Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were alarmed, however, to discover that higher critics had launched an attack on the canonical validity of the pericope. In the Revised Version of the English Bible, the passage appeared within brackets and spaced off from the rest of the Gospel, accompanied by a marginal note explaining that “most of the ancient authorities omit John 7:53-8:11. Those which contain it vary much from each other.” This omission was a grave mistake, according to Bushnell. “Misinterpretations are bad enough,” she wrote, with regard to the exclusion, and “mistranslations worse.” And she had uncovered numerous instances of each in the course of her Bible studies. “But worse than either misinterpretations [or] misinterpretations are mutilations.”

Using a variety of methods, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard all argued ardently for the legitimacy of the pericope. In their opinion, the surprise was not in the fact that, over the course of history, a number of male scholars had questioned the authenticity of the pericope. Far more remarkable was the fact that these verses had survived centuries of male bias and manipulation to be available, in any form, to the present generation. To counter the claims of higher critics who had investigated the irregular appearance of the pericope in historical translations of the New Testament, Bushnell and Starr drew upon the writings of the conservative biblical scholar, John Burgon, Dean of Chichester. Bushnell claimed that biblical scholars who had concluded that the pericope was not found in the original text of the scriptures, such as the German Constantine Tischendorf, had selectively dismissed those ancient translations which did include the passage, on the

---

75 Bushnell, GWTW, 675. Bushnell cited Dean Burgon of Chichester’s, Causes of Corruption in the Traditional Text, Appendix 1.

76 Bushnell, GWTW, 674.
basis “that those that contain it prove thereby their own lack of authority.” Whereas Tischendorf cited eight uncial, or ancient texts, that omitted the *pericope*, Burgon criticized his methods, arguing that in fact several of those manuscripts were lacking the *pericope* simply because those particular pages were missing. Bushnell explained that such “evidence” would be akin to claiming that a certain hymn was not in the Church Hymnal simply because that page had been torn out of one particular copy.

Having studied the ancient texts, Burgon concluded that only three of the ancient uncial had omitted the *pericope*, and he argued that “two of these are demonstrably copies of a common original.” Only around seventy of the thousand or so cursive—the generally more recent biblical manuscripts—lacked the text. And Burgon found a satisfactory explanation for the occasional omission of the story. He described how the early Eastern Church had used the passage surrounding the *pericope* in the liturgy for the Festival of Pentecost, while the verses of the *pericope* were reserved for St. Pelagia’s Day. Burgon suggested that the early uncial and cursive that omitted the *pericope* were actually manuscripts prepared for the Church Lectionaries. He argued that it was impossible that the *pericope*, if inauthentic, would have been “so imbedded in the ancient Church readings, into the middle of the lesson for Pentecost,” that ancient Church authorities would have invariably written directions to skip the *pericope* for the purpose of the Lectionary readings. In other words, the Scripture reader “would not have been

---

77 Ibid., 677.
78 Ibid., 678. In order to compile the Pentecost reading, verses 7:53 and 8:1,2 were omitted.
79 Ibid., 679. Bushnell quoted Burgon to further prove this assertion: “Some of the ancient manuscripts of the Gospels are so marked on the margin as to indicate the portions to be used in church. At the beginning of such a portion, the Greek word for “beginning” (*arche*) is written, and at the end, the Greek word for “end,” (*telos*). But for the reading for Whitsunday (Pentecost), another Greek word is written at the margin of John 7:53, namely *hyperba*, “overleap, skip;” and at 8:12 a second Greek word signifying ‘recommence’ (*archai*), and lastly the usual *telos* at the end of the lesson.
directed to ‘skip’ something that had not previously existed there.” “No sincere inquirer after truth,” Burgon claimed, and Bushnell heartily agreed, could agree with Tischendorf’s findings.80

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard identified other reasons for the exclusion of the pericope from many ancient texts, and for the tendency of many modern theologians to dismiss the passage. Modern textual critics, for example, had argued that the passage contained words that could not be found in the rest of the Gospel of John. Bushnell concurred with this assessment, but argued that this did not imply that the passage did not belong in the book.81 The style of the writing was in fact much like John’s, she argued, and it was likely that he recorded the event decades after its occurrence. She suggested that it was possible that the woman in the narrative had written down the events herself, and had allowed John, “long after the event when none could identify her, to put it in his Gospel, for the encouragement to repentance of other sinning women.” Such circumstances would satisfactorily explain “precisely that mixed character” exhibited by the passage.82

But the most likely reason for the exclusion of the pericope, they all agreed, was the persistent unpopularity of its teachings. Even before the authenticity of the pericope had come to be challenged by modern critics, Bushnell suggested, its message had been

80 Ibid., 680. In Burgon’s own words, the textual notes “fully explain the adverse phenomena which are ostentatiously paraded by adverse critics” (Ibid., 681).

81 “The entire nine verses,” Bushnell reminded her readers, “contain scarcely any more [unusual words and expressions] than the first two verses of John 19; and no one has ever questioned the authenticity of the latter, where nine unusual words (for John) occur” (Ibid., 692).

82 Ibid. Bushnell also took issue with critics who claimed that the story was an interruption in the text. She cited Dean Burgon to assert the opposite, suggesting that “if this pericope is torn out of this place, either to be put elsewhere (some would place it at the end of the Gospel of John, others after Luke 21,--in accordance with a few ancient manuscripts), or to be thrown aside as discarded, then ‘ragged ends,’ he maintains, show where the violence has been done” (Ibid., 693-696).
rejected by the majority of Christian leaders. 83 “No one can pretend,” she asserted, “that anything more than lip-homage to the teaching of the pericope has ever been exhibited in the Church up to the present day, excepting in rare instances.” 84

The image of woman as temptress and sexual seductress had persisted throughout Christian tradition, and in the light of this unflattering view of woman, the pericope seemed to set a dangerous precedent. Was it any surprise, Bushnell asked, that many of the Church Fathers failed to mention the pericope in their commentaries? At a time when “the very face of the chastest woman” was perceived as a cause of corruption, the lesson of the pericope “was not palatable.” “How could the leniency of the Lord be accounted for by men who harshly put away from their midst the purest of women as a source of defilement of their imagination?” she demanded. They “did not care to teach that a fall in a woman was no worse than a fall in a man,—especially as they believed that every fall in man was due to some woman.” 85 Augustine himself had explained that men, “from fear lest their wives should gain impunity in sin, removed from their manuscripts the Lord’s act of indulgence to the adulteress.” 86 Ambrose, too, Bushnell added, had “intimated that danger was popularly apprehended from the story,” while Nicon, over

83 Bushnell noted that “we have only to read the discourses of some of the ‘Church Fathers,’ as Tertullian, particularly on the veiling of women, to see exhibited the same spirit of injustice to women” as could be found in Talmudic teaching and certain “pagan customs” that dealt cruelly with “the least indiscretion” on the part of women (Ibid., 683).

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., 691. Bushnell reminded her readers “of the days when monks fled to the wilderness, that they might never be defiled by looking upon the face of a woman; and when celibacy was so exalted that marriage was looked upon as a mild sort of adultery (Tertullian spoke of married women as ‘women of the second degree [of modesty] who have fallen into wedlock’), to understand these difficulties in the way of a preservation of the pericope” (Ibid., 685).

86 Ibid., 685. On Augustine, Bushnell is likely quoting from the work of Phillip Schaff. Bushnell described how men would prefer to omit the passage “lest it should be pleaded in extenuation of breaches of the 7th commandment” (Ibid., 686).
five hundred years later, “states plainly that the mischievous tendency of the narrative was the cause why it had been expunged from the Armenian versions.” Given such resistance to the teaching of the pericope, it was little wonder that some men had thought it prudent to remove the provocative passage from their copies of Scripture.

Perhaps the most persuasive argument for the validity of the pericope came not through the scrutiny of ancient texts, they suggested, but through an examination of the unique message of the narrative itself. In fact, the persistent opposition to the teaching of the pericope provided some of the strongest evidence for its authenticity. Given the record of mistranslations and manipulations when it came to women’s virtue in the rest of the Scriptures, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard claimed that the pericope had to be authentic, since no man would ever have invented it, or have allowed it in the canon, if it had been even intimated that there was any question as to its authenticity.

Bushnell argued that the biblical account of the woman taken in adultery self-evidently contained “the living truth of God,” as demonstrated by its “amazing vitality.” “What but truth could hold its own and progress through the ages with such adverse winds against it?” Bushnell asked. In her study of Jesus’ attitude toward women, Southard too was struck by the existence of this “priceless story.” It is not strange that there was some difficulty in keeping this bit of history in the records,” she explained. “Nothing in all literature strikes so straight at the double standard of morals, long

87 Ibid., 685.
88 Southard noted that although there was a general agreement that the pericope did not belong in the eighth chapter of John, there was “just as general acceptance” of the historicity of the “priceless story” (Attitude, 80). To support this claim she cited Charles Foster Kent, The Life and Teachings of Jesus, and Frédéric Louis Godet, John, vol. II, who, after a full discussion concluding that the narrative is misplaced, “states the general conclusion that ‘it could no more have been invented than any other feature in the inimitable life of Christ.’”
tolerated even in so-called Christian civilization.” In the cultural context of the infant church it was easy to see how Church leaders may have felt “that such a story was not good reading for the congregations.” Agreeing with Bushnell, Southard concluded that “the marvel is that it was retained at all.”89 Even higher critics had acknowledged the weight of this argument. Frédéric Godet, for example, having argued extensively that the narrative did not belong in that particular location in the Gospel of John, nevertheless added that “it could no more have been invented than any other feature in the inimitable life of Christ.”90

Appealing to her reader’s common sense, Bushnell contended the unlikelihood that anyone would have invented the narrative of the woman taken in adultery. “Where ever has existed the man in ancient times or modern,” Bushnell implored, “so jealous for the rights of women, so skilful in drawing a picture of absolute justice, and yet so unscrupulous in character, and so influential, as to have foisted this story upon the credulity of the Church[?]” How could “the ecclesiastical authorities,” who lived “so far beneath its principles of justice in dealing with fallen woman,” have allowed the story to persist, not daring to “wipe it out of existence”? she demanded. “No stronger proof than this is needed that it is a true incident in the life of our Saviour.”91

89 Ibid.
90 Ibid., quoting from Godet’s John, vol. II.
91 Bushnell, GWTW, 684. She cited the textual critics Westcott and Hort as “the chief ones in England to cast doubt on its authenticity, and yet they say: ‘The argument that has always told most in its favor in modern times is its own internal character. The story itself has justly seemed to vouch for its substantial truth.’” Drawing on the work of church historian Philip Schaff, Bushnell further contended the unlikelihood that the pericope was invented in the early Church, for the story itself “runs contrary to the ascetic and legalistic tendency of the ancient Church,” which, Schaff argued, “could not appreciate it” (Ibid., 685).
For Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, the historicity of the *pericope* was of utmost importance. The story not only dismantled any notion of a double standard of morality that had proved so damaging to the condition of women, but it also demonstrated Christ’s compassion for women. They dismissed traditional fears that the *pericope* condoned sin and moral laxity, arguing instead that it encouraged repentance and cultivated *true* virtue. The story would not “suit the views of men who are over-careful as to the prudent conduct of their wives, while loose in their own morals,” Bushnell acknowledged, but it would bring hope to “the fallen girl,” and to “the victim of society’s cruel injustices.” The basic principle of all morality was not women’s purity, she argued, but rather justice. And “there is nothing which destroys morality out of the human heart so effectually and quickly as injustice.”

Therefore, “no good was ever done, and no good can ever be done,” she claimed, “by legal enactments for the benefit of society, which, for reasons of ‘prudence’ omit principles of justice.”

**Gendered Virtue**

There was no justice in the Victorian moral system, they argued, and rather than cultivating morality, it encouraged and sanctioned vice. So, too, did the idea of particular feminine “virtues” perpetuated by Victorian ideal of true womanhood imperil the development of *true* virtue. In order to be virtuous, Bushnell argued, women needed to

---

92 Ibid., 688, 690.

93 Ibid., 690. “Here is where the great mistake is being made on the ‘woman question,’” Bushnell added. “Is it ‘prudent’ to allow women to do thus and so?—men ask themselves at every step of woman’s progress. The only question that should be asked is, Does justice demand this? If so, ‘let justice be done though the heavens fall;’ anything short of justice is mere mischief-making.”
“be strong, in body, mind and spirit.” But instead, women were taught from the pulpits to be weak, submissive, and “feminine.” Writing at the end of the Victorian era, Bushnell knew well the propensity of Christian churches to preach a model of womanhood that elevated women’s submission, passivity, and “humility.” “Servility and weakness are two contemptible vices,” Bushnell wrote, and contended that “they have been too often recommended to women clothed in the names of “humility” and “meekness,” to which virtues they are as opposed as north is to south.”

Bushnell, then, in direct opposition to many Protestant teachings on the subject, understood the common Christian characterizations of womanhood—as weak, inferior, and passive—to be abominations of biblical truth and rebellious sins against God. “When an expositor and preacher of the Gospel wanders out of his path of duty ‘to preach Christ’ as woman’s one example of conduct, and instead preaches ‘womanliness,’ he sets up an idol of his own creation for women to worship,” she wrote, and “he turns himself to folly.” With characteristic impudence, Bushnell added that “we imagine such expositors would have been pleased had God sent into the world, an additional female Christ, to set women a female example; but since God did not see fit to do so, women are under obligation to endeavor, as best they are able, to follow the ‘manly’ example of Jesus

94 Ibid., 633. If theologians had correctly translated and interpreted biblical passages, Bushnell argued, women “would have been far better equipped to guard their virtue,—since the ruin of girls is usually due to weak character and general unfitness to cope with the world.”

95 Ibid., 378, 379. Bushnell conceded that there have been male teachers who have shown the importance of “humility” and “meekness” in men as well as women, but these men have been the exceptions “as far as ‘the woman question’ is concerned.” She added that “in noting the general unfairness and unscripturalness of masculine expositors,” she did not deem it necessary to pause at each step to call attention to the exceptions to the rule.

96 Ibid., 391.
Christ, and leave the consequences with God.” This, she concluded, “is woman’s truly humble place. Any other is sham humility.”

In theory Bushnell advocated the same “virtues” for both men and women; but because of a long history of unbiblical ideals of manhood and womanhood, women needed to become more assertive and confident in order to achieve “true humility” and follow Christ’s model, while men needed to become less proud and domineering. She argued that Christ, as the “Second Adam,” exemplified true humility, in direct contrast to the first Adam’s overwhelming sin of pride. She reasoned that the very essence of Christ was his humility, since through his incarnation he had emptied himself and became human. The humility that Christ modeled should be attained by both men and women alike. This, Bushnell insisted, squarely contradicted men’s biblical interpretations of their relationship to women. Although Bushnell encouraged women to reject any imposed “meekness” and subjection forced upon them in the place of true humility, she did caution them not to imitate men and “sin their sin,” committing the same offense as men by vaunting themselves. However, she readily conceded that “we will be accused of this,

97 Ibid. Bushnell added that woman “must not sell her birthright…by a vicious self-effacement” (Ibid., 411).

98 In 1960 Valerie Saiving made this point in her influential article “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” [reprinted in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, WomanSpirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 25-42], which is often viewed as the beginning of modern feminist. In Sex, Sin and Grace: Women’s Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich (Washington: University Press of America, 1980), Judith Plaskow expands on this concept. Plaskow describes how male theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr had depicted “man’s” elemental sin as pride. But Plaskow suggests that self-abnegation, rather than pride, might be women’s chief sin.

99 Bushnell, GWTW, 382. She quotes William Law, who wrote “Pride and humility are the two master powers, the two kingdoms in strife for the eternal possession of man” (Ibid., 384).

100 This assertion she bases on conventional male interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11:10, where she argues an “artificial instruction” forbids men to wear “the sign of subjection” (a veil) because he is “the glory of God,” but which would veil women “in sign that she is under the power of her husband.” This “artificial construction,” Bushnell maintained, was in fact “inserted by those who wish it were in the Bible” into the marginal reading of the passage. See Bushnell, GWTW, 385.
at any rate, even if we should do no more than our duty and administer rebuke.”

It is important to note that Bushnell was not making a case for women’s inherent moral superiority, the social construct she was working to combat. “Let us repudiate, once for all…any desire to discuss, ‘Which is the greater in the kingdom of heaven, man or woman?’ as an unworthy question to raise,” she asserted. Instead, she was concerned with women’s ultimate destiny, which she believed had been established in the Garden of Eden, and could be found in the pages of the scriptures.

Not only, then, did Bushnell advocate the liberation of women, but she actually accused women of committing a grave sin against God by meekly submitting to their husbands and by allowing themselves to be subjected to men. To understand this radical redefinition of sin and virtue, it is important to return to the decisive moment in the Genesis narratives that Bushnell and Starr had constructed. Eve’s chief sin had not been in eating the fruit, but rather in forsaking God for her husband, and in following Adam out of Eden. In doing so, she was the first woman to forsake God for man, but she would not be the last. Women were moral beings, Bushnell argued, and as such they were to relate directly to God. If they were truly men’s subordinates, they would be nonentities, reckoned neither good nor bad, since morality and immorality alike had their origin in free choice. Women were responsible to God for the choices they made, and if a woman

---

101 Ibid., 386.

102 Ibid., 66. Although Bushnell openly disputed women’s moral superiority over man, by adhering to a reading of Genesis that depicted man’s sin against God as far graver than woman’s—a sin which echoed through history as man continued to blame and dominate woman, God’s ally—obvious qualifications must be placed on Bushnell’s claim that she had no desire to establish “woman’s superiority to man.”

103 This fact is the foundation for Bushnell’s assessment of marriage throughout history, and a key to understanding the subjection of women. “Eve was, then, the first woman to forsake her (heavenly) kindred for her husband,” she wrote in paragraph 123. “She reversed God’s marriage law.—‘Therefore shall a man forsake his father and his mother, and cleave to his wife.’
chose to renounce her will for another’s, then she was “base by choice.” A woman sinned by renouncing her will, and giving it over to another.\footnote{Bushnell, \textit{GWTW}, 466.} In a theological coup, then, Bushnell and Starr had turned the traditional notion of women’s sin on its head. And this redefinition of sin and virtue would be a crucial component in their efforts to bring an end to the religious, social, and sexual subjection of women. For centuries, Starr explained, women had been complicit in their own subjection because of their “strong religious instinct.” Since women had long been excluded from religious study and teaching, men had come to preach a “gospel of womanliness,” turning this instinct against them.\footnote{Starr, \textit{Bible Status}, 48-49.}

In redefining what constituted sin and virtue for women, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were taking aim at the Victorian ideal of “true womanhood,” with its emphasis on renunciation and self-sacrifice. “In all ages and among all peoples man has arrogated to himself the office of religious teacher,” Starr wrote. “From this vantage-point he dinned into woman’s ear the lesson of suffering and obedience.” Both “heathen priest” and “Christian cleric” convinced her that “God had appointed her pangs and decreed her subjugation.” “Accepting this, she bowed her head and nerved herself for the ordeal.”\footnote{Starr, \textit{Bible Status}, 48-49.}

“Without this appeal, or mandate, to her religious nature,” Starr contended, “man never could have effected the subjugation of woman.” And thus a religious understanding must lie at the root of her liberation, for as soon as “she divests herself of this belief, she will stand erect, look the world in the face, and assert her independence.” Starr was optimistic.

\footnote{Starr, \textit{Bible Status}, 48-49.}
that, in the 1920s, that time was finally upon women, and “the age of subserviency [was] well-nigh ended.” The time had come at last for woman to “think for herself,” a time when she was able to study for herself “the terms of the sentence imposed upon her.” When she accomplished this, Starr declared, undoubtedly speaking out of her own experience, “she will discover where man has erred and misinterpreted the teachings of Sacred Writ concerning her,” and see instead the “wondrous things in Divine law.”

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard all viewed Christ as the “great liberator” of women. The entire Scriptures, they believed, upheld the status of women and condemned the Victorian moral and social order, but Christ’s example in particular emboldened them. “He never by word or deed lent encouragement to the disparagement of women,” Starr wrote. He treated women as spiritual and intellectual beings, not as creatures seen exclusively in terms of their relationships to men, and he refused to condemn those women who had breached the moral standards of their day. The story recounted in the *pericope* was but one example of how Jesus treated women throughout his “entire human history.”

Although Christ’s example was inspiring, however, Starr, at least, was somewhat troubled by the fact he did not do even more to bring about women’s social and religious liberation. In the case of the woman taken in adultery, after all, she had to admit that although Jesus did not condemn the woman, he did seem rather aloof. Starr struggled with his reticence on the subject of women’s liberation, when she considered that a few well-chosen words might have had a revolutionary effect on the status of women in

---

107 Ibid., 49.
108 Ibid., 175.
Christian cultures. When confronted with the woman, however, Jesus said nothing. He only knelt and drew in the dirt.

“How may we interpret His silence on a living issue?” Starr inquired. She considered that his reticence could not have been out of cowardice, and must be attributed either to indifference or disapproval. Could Jesus be indifferent to the “happiness of one-half the human family?” she implored. The very thought “set the heart of womanhood to palpitating; Was Jesus indifferent?” She reflected that “He noted the sparrows, the ‘lilies of the field,’ and the ‘two mites which make a farthing,’ and here was a great question, reaching back to the gates of Paradise Lost, and stretching forward to the end of time.” A matter of such significance could hardly have been deemed unworthy of his attention, she concluded. The only possible explanation for Christ’s reticence, Starr determined, had to be his “disapproval of man’s self-imposed task to supervise woman.” Although he did not openly and directly rebuke the gender arrangements of his day, Starr resolved that “His daily deportment toward the sex was a standing reproof to the spirit of His age. He set at naught every man-imposed restriction on woman. He recognized no double standard: with Him there was no such thing as a preferred sex.” Jesus dealt “not with sexes, but with souls.” “No wonder,” Starr surmised, “when He walked the Dolorous Way to Calvary, women followed Him and ‘bewailed and lamented Him; But Jesus, turning unto them, said, Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for Me, but weep for yourselves and your children.’”

Since the world began, Starr considered, “founders, propounders, and expounders of religious cults have felt it incumbent on them to shove woman into a circumscribed

110 Starr, Bible Status, 176. “Verily, ‘never man spake like this Man,’” she added.
area, and with pointed finger to warn her not to trespass on the divine prerogative of man.” 111 Christ would have no part in that. He refused to prescribe for woman a sphere for her activity, or to impose upon her a particular task or role. Instead, he had come to bring redemption, to atone for the sins of humanity, and to put an end to the centuries of woman’s submission to man. In his life he rejected the double standard of purity imposed on women, and through his death he made possible woman’s ultimate liberation. The biblical prophecy that “women would be saved through childbearing,” which had at times been used to relegate women to her domestic role of wife and mother, should in fact be translated: “women would be saved through the childbearing.” 112 As God had prophesied in the Garden of Eden, the seed of the woman would crush the Serpent’s head; the birth of Christ would bring about women’s redemption. 113 But women were still waiting for their liberation. “When will things be made better?” implored Starr. “How long, O Lord! How long?”

Starr, Bushnell, and Southard were hopeful that the liberation of women was at hand. 114 Drawing on a rather obscure and “mysterious prophecy” relating to women, Bushnell looked to the Old Testament passage in Jeremiah translated “How long wilt thou go about, O thou backsliding daughter? For the Lord hath created a new thing in the earth, A woman shall compass a man.” But a more accurate rendition of the last phrase, (GWTW, 413).

111 Ibid., 174.
112 Ibid., 49.
113 Bushnell wrote, “…who shall specially conquer Satan, if not the sex to whom God gave the honor from the beginning of being in eternal enmity against Satan, in the promise, ‘I will put enmity between thee and the woman?’” (GWTW, 413).
114 In light of the many advances women had achieved in the course of their lifetimes this optimism is not surprising. Earlier women’s rights activists, too, had similarly pointed to women’s liberation as a sign of the approaching millennium. As Nancy Hardesty describes, this sentiment was evident in the declaration of the first National Woman’s Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1850 (Women Called to Witness, 42).
Bushnell insisted, was without an article: “woman shall compass man,” or, more literally, “female shall compass male.” Instead of “compass,” Bushnell suggested the more precise form of the verb, “lead about.” In her translation, then, the passage reads: “How long wilt thou keep turning away, O thou turning away daughter? For the Lord hath created [something] new in the earth, Female will lead male about.” In other words, Bushnell explained “it seems God’s design that the ‘new woman’ in Christ Jesus, shall no more ‘turn away,’ as did Eve, to her husband, but remaining loyal to God alone, and true to her destiny as the mother of that Seed,—both the literal, Jesus, and the mystical Christ, the Church,—shall lead man about,—out of the wilderness of the inefficiency of egotism into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”

The influence of social purity thought was clearly evident in the theological reflections of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard. They turned to the pages of the Christian scriptures to find the source of the social injustices perpetrated to women through the sexual double standard of morality and Victorian constructions of virtue. And there they found ample evidence of a long tradition of mistranslation and manipulation of the biblical text that implicated Christianity in the perpetuation of these injustices. They were convinced that, in order to achieve women’s social and sexual liberation, these religious foundations of women’s oppression needed to be cleared away. Reassessing the gendered nature of virtue was central to their project. In their rejection of the Victorian moral

115 The verb translated “wilt…go about” more precisely connotes “to turn [oneself] away, and the second verb, translated “backsliding,” also means “to turn,” and in fact was so translated in the previous verse, Bushnell explained (GWTW, 413).

116 Ibid. Bushnell appended a note explaining that “Prof. Mingana remarks here, ‘I do not believe that your translation is certain, although I feel convinced that the English version is here hopelessly wrong.’”
system, however, they would go beyond simply denouncing the double standard of morality. They would also reexamine, on a more practical level, traditional Christian views of family. In going back to the scriptures, they would reach the conclusion that truly Christian families would bear little resemblance to the prevailing Victorian family ideal.
Katharine Bushnell, Lee Anna Starr, and Madeline Southard vigorously condemned the double standard of morality that permeated the Victorian worldview, but they did not limit their social and theological critiques to the moral system underpinning American society. Rather, they saw the sexual double standard as only one piece—significant as it was—of the prevailing social order that they sought to overturn. Having denounced the double standard, they expanded their critique to the gendered social roles deemed appropriate for men and women. They took aim at the central components of the Victorian social order and, most pointedly, at the hallowed ideal of the Victorian family.

From their woman-centered theological vantage points they contested dominant cultural views of womanhood and family, critiquing traditional understandings of the institution of marriage as well as the Victorian idealization of motherhood. Rejecting Victorian family and gender arrangements, they instead offered religiously informed, and in many ways modern views of family and gender. In doing so, they would be among a small number of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Protestants to turn away from the Victorian arrangements without abandoning their Protestant faith, and to disassociate “traditional” family and gender arrangements from their presumed Christian roots.
Through their thorough opposition to the Victorian social order, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard provided the foundation for alternative Protestant models of family and society. They found that the religious and cultural underpinnings of the Victorian system ran deep, extending not only back through theological tradition, but also to influential modern scientific theories. But as well-educated and theologically sophisticated Protestant women, they were able to develop impressive critiques of the modern cultural, scientific, and religious views that sanctioned conventional social arrangements.

Their experiences in reform work had convinced them that characteristics commonly heralded as women’s virtues—weakness, passivity, and innocence—in reality left women vulnerable to the culturally sanctioned vices of men, so Bushnell, Starr, and Southard redefined women’s subservience as disobedience, and their self-assertion as virtue. By dismantling the Victorian construction of female virtue and reconstructing a new notion of the gendered nature of sin, they directly confronted the ideal of self-sacrificing womanhood that was central to the Victorian social and moral order. In doing so, they launched a sustained attack against the linchpin of that order, the patriarchal family, and the cult of domesticity that sustained it. In particular, they disputed the definition of women in terms of their social roles as wives and mothers.

In working to dismantle the cult of domesticity and the Victorian family ideal, they were assailing a powerful ideal that had long held sway in middle-class, white America. Much has been written about the rise of domesticity in nineteenth-century American culture, as historians have explored the political, economic, and gendered functions of the ideology. While aware of the domestic ideal’s far-reaching implications, Starr, Southard, and Bushnell all stressed the fundamentally religious nature of the
ideology. As Methodists, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were perhaps particularly attuned to the significance of the domestic ideal. As A. Gregory Schneider suggests in his study of the domestication of American Methodism, the Methodist belief system played an important role in establishing the dominance of domestic ideology in nineteenth-century America. It was no coincidence that what became known as the “Methodist Age” in American religious history was concurrent with the rise of American domesticity, Schneider explains. By 1850, Methodists outnumbered and influenced all other Protestant denominations, and it would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of domesticity in their religious worldview. Methodist literature was saturated with references to the central role the Christian home played in the Methodist faith, as well as to its importance in structuring broader culture according to the will of God. “The family circle is of divine origin,” proclaimed the Methodist Family Manual. It was not only “stamped with signal holiness and beauty,” but it also provided “an epitome of all rule, authority, and power.”

And no member of the family was more important than the mother, whose special virtue, innate religiosity, and delicate weakness placed her at the hub of the family circle. She occupied the private sphere of home, where her virtue was protected from the evils of the public sphere and where she was able to influence her husband and sons to be godly men and virtuous citizens of the republic. As American Protestantism shifted toward a

---


2 Schneider, The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), xxi. It is important to keep in mind that there were also competing or subversive strands within nineteenth-century Methodism, such as perfectionist and holiness impulses, that empowered many Methodist women to preach.
more affective faith based on religious experience, and as virtue increasingly became associated with femininity, women seemed “naturally” religious creatures, and the home gradually came to replace the church as the center of the Methodist faith.  

**Idol or Ideal**

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, however, contended that the Bible did not in any way support the elevation of the traditional family—and woman’s special place in it—that had typified Victorian culture. Instead, they identified the traditional family ideal as the root of many erroneous conventions that circumscribed women’s opportunities. They realized that within the Victorian social order women had been defined primarily and often exclusively in terms of their relationships with others. This flawed perception, they argued, encouraged the relegation of women to a restricted sphere of activity that contradicted the true picture of womanhood revealed in the Word of God.

They believed that women should no longer be seen primarily as creatures of relationships, but rather as persons with relationships, a conviction Southard clearly articulated in her work. For centuries, Southard argued, women throughout the world had been considered “the creature of her sex-relationships and of the resultant blood relationships.” As such, her status had been determined by her being “the wife, mother,

---

3 While the Methodists may have played a role in shaping the cultural ideology of domesticity, they were hardly its exclusive practitioners. See Ann Taves, *The Household of Faith: Roman Catholic Devotions in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) on Catholic ideals of domesticity, for example. On the general feminization of nineteenth-century religion, see Welter, “The Feminization of American Religion,” and Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977). As Schneider explains, “During the first half of the nineteenth century, American religion and, more generally, American literary and popular culture became ‘feminized,’” and thus he concludes that “simply to promote intuition and feeling as central to religious experience, as Methodism did, was ipso facto feminizing. Inherent in this feminized religion were the doctrines that home was woman’s sphere and that both were sacred” (*Way of the Cross*, 169).
daughter, concubine or mistress of some man,” but not as “a person in herself.”

Bushnell, too, noted that at every step, women had been taught to ask themselves, “‘How will this look, for a woman?’ As though woman should do everything with reference to her sex, rather than with reference to her God!’”  

“Man-conceived” religions, Southard observed, could extend women’s lack of individual identity even to the afterlife, creating a heaven where women had a place only in relationship to man.

Rather than protecting women, the social conventions that defined women in terms of their relationships to men harmed women, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard agreed. Revealing once again the centrality of social purity thought in their religious critiques, Southard argued that the different treatment accorded a woman, when viewed as a creature of relationships, and a man, when perceived as “a person in himself,” was most clearly demonstrated in matters of chastity. Familiarity with women who fell under the hard hand of the “law of chastity” had educated Southard on the spurious nature of men’s “protection” of women. “When men think of women as primarily the creatures of their sex relationships and of their blood relationships,” while denying them any sense of equality with men, “they may love their own women, their wives, their mothers, their sisters and their daughters,” Southard explained, and they might “go to great lengths to

---


5 Bushnell, *GWTW*, 395.

6 Southard, *Attitude*, 22. Here she cited the Earl of Cromer, who was referring specifically to Islam. Southard, Starr, and Bushnell believed that Christianity, too, had long provided for a particular view of women that largely defined her as a creature of “God-ordained” social and familial relationships. But, as Bushnell and Starr had argued in their analysis of the book of Genesis, it was not so from the beginning, and what God had truly ordained regarding women’s relationships was something far different from the present reality.

7 Ibid., 79.
please women who attract them and from whom they wish to secure favors.” But outside such circles, “they are rude to women with a rudeness that easily slips into cruelty.”

Far from elevating the role of the nuclear family and supporting a view of women as dependent upon men for their protection and for their identities, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard contended that a close examination of the Scriptures taught the very opposite. The strongest evidence of this reversal could be found in the teachings of Jesus, the “great liberator of women.” Rather than exalting the family ideal, he had some very hard things to say concerning family affection, Southard noted. He declared that he had come to set family members against each other, so that one’s enemies would be the members of one’s household. From the gospel of Matthew she quoted Jesus’ pronouncement that “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,” and also that “he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” And from Luke, she added Christ’s foreboding words that “If any man cometh to me and hateth not his own father and mother, his wife and children, and brethren and sisters…he cannot be my disciple.”

Rather than elevating family relationships, Jesus promised great reward to those who

---

8 Ibid., 100. “Women whose beauty or social position have always secured for them the courtesies of life from men,” Southard wrote, “do not dream what the poor, the old, the plain and unattractive women of the world, have suffered from this source.”

9 Southard, Starr, and Bushnell were not, of course, the first women to locate in Christian belief a source for individual identities and a basis for individual rights. Long after she had abandoned her Christian belief, for example, Elizabeth Cady Stanton still conceded that Christianity’s great contribution consisted in its foundation for “the right of individual conscience and judgment.” The reason that Christianity “took such a hold in the hearts of the people was because it taught that the individual was primary; the state, the church, society, the family secondary” (Stanton, Eighty Years and More (New York: European Publishing Company, 1898), 231. See also Stanton, “The Solitude of Self” Jan 18, 1892, in Ellen Carol Du Bois, ed., The Elizabeth Cady Stanton-Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writings, Speeches (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992).


surrendered all natural ties, Southard explained, and he was aware that his teachings could lead to the severing of those earthly ties.

“Could Jesus have meant this drastic teaching to apply to women?” Southard asked, well aware that it was commonly supposed that women’s primary duties were to “fulfill their feminine relationships.” She considered whether or not the masculine form found in the passages from Matthew and Luke might have connoted the limited masculine sense, rather than humankind in general. Most people had not, after all, “thought a woman’s religious affiliation as a vital matter except that it must conform to that of her husband,” Southard noted. She considered whether Jesus could have shared the typical Hebrew attitude on this matter. Could he possibly “believe women mentally capable of reaching conclusions and making decisions that might have such far-reaching results?” Southard asked.12

Her examination of the biblical accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings convinced her that he did indeed expect women to make such divisive choices. In fact, when he told of the strife accepting his message would bring to families in both Matthew and Luke, Jesus had given one illustration involving men, and two of women. “For I am come to set a man at variance against his father,” he proclaimed, “and the daughter against her mother and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”13 Starr, Bushnell, and Southard all cited Christ’s declaration that “he that doeth the will of my Father the same is my brother, sister, mother,” and here also Southard pointed to the two feminine examples. To her, these inclusions clearly demonstrated that “every woman, as every

12 Ibid.

13 Southard, *Attitude*, 52. Here she cited Matthew 10:34-7 and Luke 12:51-3. “In the last instance,” she explained, “one of the women would have to choose contrary to the views of the man in the family, he could not agree with both of them.”
man, must make the supreme decision, putting the will of God before every human relationship.” 14

While the Protestant faith had never entirely lost the radical individualist undertones inherent in the idea of the spiritual equality and priesthood of all believers, these impulses had been largely surmounted in nineteenth-century middle-class Protestantism by a kind of “religion of domesticity.” Southard, Starr, and Bushnell were not extreme iconoclasts or social anarchists—they did not seek to completely destroy the traditional nuclear family unit. But they did attempt to dismantle the ideology that endowed the family with unparalleled religious significance and that effected the cultural signification of woman as wives and mothers. Jesus did not come to destroy the family, Southard cautioned, but rather to establish it upon a “firm and wholesome basis.” Family affection needed both to be subordinated to individuals’ devotion to Christ, and at the same time enlarged to include “the household of faith,” or “all those who do the will of His Father.” 15

An important distinction should be drawn between Bushnell’s, Starr’s, and Southard’s discussion of family life, and a pragmatic exploitation of the domestic ideal by a number of women in the late nineteenth century. Women like Frances Willard celebrated and expanded the domestic empowerment of women by working to broaden the domestic sphere far beyond the walls of the home. As historians have demonstrated, 14  Ibid., 66.
15  Ibid. “He that doeth the will of my Father the same is my brother, sister, mother,” Jesus had declared. Southard noted that by using one masculine and two feminine terms, he clearly demonstrated that “every woman, as every man, must make the supreme decision, putting the will of God before every human relationship.” Starr, too, cited this passage (Luke 8:19-20) in her chapter “The Attitude of Jesus” (Bible Status, 169).
such efforts provided an important rationale for expanding women’s opportunities. Through “social housekeeping” and “municipal motherhood” women justified a wide range of reform work “for the sake of the home.” However, such rationalization for women’s expanded social roles was inherently limited by the domestic ideologies upon which it was based. 

Unlike the majority of American Protestant women, however, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard did not work to celebrate and expand the domestic roles assigned to women. Instead, they worked to dismantle the domestic ideology on all fronts, and attempted to reconstruct from a revised theological basis a new construction of Christian womanhood. They argued that women were required “to seek first the kingdom of God” before all else. Jesus considered them “responsible persons capable of self-determination,” and he demanded no less from them than he did from men.

Their personal experiences likely helped to position them against the nineteenth-century conflation of domesticity with Christianity. All three women remained single throughout their lives. Bushnell found companionship in her friend and frequent colleague Elizabeth Wheeler Andrew in what closely resembles the “Boston marriages”

---

16 On the empowering possibilities of the domestic ideology see, for example, Sklar, Catharine Beecher; Epstein, Politics of Domesticity; and Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992).

17 Southard, Attitude, 53. “The women of the early church understood and rose to this responsibility,” Southard noted, “a fact that mightily influenced the spread of Christianity.” On the subject of social relationships, Southard asserts that, despite his potentially revolutionary statements, “no one respected more profoundly the fundamental relationships of society than did Jesus. His first miracle was performed to round out the good cheer of a wedding feast…He declared that the distinction between male and female was divinely created and portended a divinely ordained union. Literature has no other portrayal of a father’s love ranking with His parable of the prodigal son. He thrilled with the rapture of the mother at her babe’s first cry. He suffered with the sisters at the death of their brother and with the mother who had lost her only son. He Himself rendered to Joseph and Mary the fine obedience of Jewish children to their parents” (Ibid., 50).
practiced by many of her female contemporaries, while Starr lived alone and turned to
family and friends for support. Southard, whose personal life is more fully revealed than
Bushnell’s and Starr’s because of the extensive collection of journals she left behind,
exhibited a profound personal struggle with the prevailing social ideals that offers an
interesting perspective on her published writings. Although she would write passionately
that women should be defined not by their personal relationships but as individuals, she
longed for the companionship of a “strong man” in marriage. And while she combated the
idealization of motherhood in American culture, she ached for a child of her own. 18 It
is probable that her personal struggles against the cultural norms that she had internalized
found expression in her scholarly and theological reflections on womanhood and cultural
gender roles.

Through an intensive study of Jesus’ interactions with women, for example,
Southard asserted that in fact in every instance recorded in the New Testament “where
Jesus reproved women, it was for failure to subordinate their feminine interests to their
interests as citizens of the kingdom of God.” 19 Against the cultural backdrop of his time,
Jesus’ actions were indeed revolutionary, she maintained. The scriptures demonstrated
that he “persistently set Himself against woman’s own belief that she was primarily a
female, a creature of domestic relationships.” Instead, Jesus “demanded of her that she

18 See, for example, Southard’s journal entries from 20 July 1919 and 1 January 1924. Southard’s
opposition to the idealization of motherhood and her refusal to see motherhood as women’s primary
religious duty, are consistent with a strong tradition within the holiness movement to subvert women’s
domestic duties to their higher Christian callings. Phoebe Palmer, for example, one of the leading
proponents of holiness teachings in America, developed her understandings of holiness in response to her
young daughter’s tragic death. The girl was Palmer’s third child to die in infancy, and she concluded that
she had loved her children too much, and had failed to place her commitment to God above her love for her
children.

19 Southard, Attitude, 53. She cites, for example, Jesus’ rebuke of his mother as a twelve-year-old
boy and again at the wedding at Cana, as well as the story of Mary and Martha, and Jesus’ rebuke of “the
mother of Zebedee’s children.”
realize herself to be a self-determining person, responsible for the exercise of the highest intellectual and spiritual faculties.”

**Woman’s Sphere**

The Bible, then, according to Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, in no way supported the traditional view of women that reduced their identities to that of mothers and wives, and relegated their activities to the domestic realm. To the contrary, they argued that those who advocated such a view of women were explicitly unbiblical. The Apostle Paul had actually advised women to remain unmarried, but they noted that this was a sentiment rarely if ever expressed by “ministers of the Gospel” and male theologians. Instead, these “prejudiced males” urged women to marry and take on the role of wife and mother, finding this a useful means to restrict women’s activities. Women who wanted to preach, for example, were unfailingly told to “get married,—the home is woman’s sphere,” in explicit contradiction to the instructions of Paul.

The very concept of a “woman’s sphere,” Bushnell, Starr, and Southard argued, was utterly unbiblical. Male expositors had convinced themselves that “Nature”—for they would not own to doing it themselves, Bushnell noted—had outlined a certain sphere for women, while men were at liberty to define their own “sphere.” They then manipulated biblical texts to reinforce this prejudice. Whatever seemed to support their

---

20 Ibid., 78. Southard cited Bishop Lightfoot. She added that “Jesus, far from denying family ties, yearned for this family fellowship in His own life. He felt that His mother could understand Him if she would subordinate her human love for Him enough to grasp and accept God’s will for Him. He greatly longed for her to do this” (Ibid., 66). Starr, too, cited the case of Mary and Martha to note how Jesus praised Mary for stepping “aside from the routine of domestic cares to devote herself to service in the kingdom which Christ had come to establish” (Ibid., 169).

view of “woman’s sphere” they exaggerated in the English translation, and that which would contradict their “masculine preconception” they toned down in translation. “This making use of ‘diverse weights and measures is an abomination in the sight of God,’” Bushnell contended. She was convinced that a careful reading of the Scriptures “would lead to remarkable revisions in the commonly-accepted ideas of woman’s ‘sphere.’”

Starr agreed that false biblical exegesis and male prejudice had long worked to convince women that their God-ordained sphere was the home. So much had been said in the past about “woman’s sphere,” she informed her readers, that it had become a “trite saying that ‘Woman’s sphere is home,’” but Starr vehemently rejected this notion. “Woman’s God-given sphere,” she wrote, “is as wide as the earth’s circumference, as high as the firmament and as deep as the sea.” The thought that women could inappropriately or rebelliously transgress the boundaries of their “sphere” was ridiculous, she argued. “Talk about a woman getting out of her sphere! She would have to get off the earth in order to do that. Every foot of this globe has been deeded to her as much as to man.” Those who said otherwise sinned not only against women, but against God. “Who is he,” Starr demanded, “that would dare build a fence about some dooryard and say to woman—‘Here is your sphere’?”

They were all aware, however, that many Christian men had done just that, and that challenging the mandate would likely incur spirited resistance. All three women had encountered difficulties in their own work, and they had learned that what they

\begin{footnotes}

\footnote{Ibid., 370. See also Lessons 77-79, “Sex Bias Influences Translators,” paragraphs 616-644.}

\footnote{Ibid., 468.}

\footnote{Starr, Bible Status, 21. “God did not invest man with dominion until woman stood at his side,” she reminded her readers, alluding to the second chapter of Genesis.}

\end{footnotes}
considered true obedience to God might contradict what was deemed legal or acceptable by earthly standards. Both Starr and Southard, it should be recalled, had run up against legal measures in their early temperance work and had spent time in jail, where their conviction of the righteousness of their cause only increased. Bushnell’s work in the lumber camps of Wisconsin, where brothels enjoyed the protection of the law and the support of “respectable” men of the community, and her struggles to change the British laws sanctioning the prostitution of Indian women and girls, had stripped away any respect she might have had for “man-made laws.” If a man or woman determines “to wholly follow the Lord,” trouble is sure to brew, she wrote, since truly following God would before long bring one up against “all sham customs and wicked human legislation.”25 In fact, she reminded her readers, one of the causes of “the peculiar animosity” expressed towards the early Christians was due to “the constant interference with domestic life” that ensued upon women converting to Christianity.26

**Scientific Authorities**

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard worked to dismantle the religious basis for women’s subordinated place in the Victorian social order, but they recognized that their task was more complicated than simply refuting the theological foundations of the Victorian family ideal. For in nineteenth-century America, two different yet interrelated authorities worked together to support the elevation of the Victorian family—both God and Nature. While religious thought presented the ideal as God-ordained, contemporary

26 Ibid., 319. She cited William Lecky on this fact.
scientific studies suggested an inevitable—and therefore moral—naturalistic progression of human history that had reached its apex in the Victorian family arrangement. During a time in which the authority of the Bible gradually lost ground to the authority of “science”—and where the difference between the two was not always clearly demarcated—both foundations of thought worked in tandem to enshrine Victorian social arrangements.\(^{27}\) Bushnell, Starr, and Southard needed not only to grapple with theological texts to combat the Victorian ideology, but they also turned to scientific works in an adolescent field of anthropology. In anthropological texts they sought purported historical and scientific “facts” to support their theological claims, while at the same time they used their theological commitments to formulate astute critiques of reigning scientific theories.

Nineteenth-century scientists frequently rejected the traditional authority of the Christian scriptures on matters of society and morality; those working in the burgeoning fields of anthropology and sociology instead turned to the past to discern the “natural” roles for men and women, and to discover the familial relationships purportedly established by nature. By 1870 this “scientific” examination of the sources of contemporary social arrangements was largely carried out by practitioners of the sociocultural evolutionary school of thought. John B. Lubbock, E. B. Tylor, and John McLennan articulated this perspective most clearly in their work. Formulating their ideas in the midst of the Darwinian revolution, all three men undertook their research during the years in which primary questions were indelibly shaped by Darwin’s theories. They all accepted the antiquity of humankind, and they looked to naturalistic processes to

\(^{27}\) During this time theologians increasingly turned to “scientific” methods, while scientists pursued their studies in order to determine moral conditions.
explain change over time. Most importantly for the purposes of understanding their impact on Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, all three men adhered to a “developmental” point of view, arguing that the character of human history was progressive rather than degenerative. Their historical and anthropological inquiries, then, were structured by their adherence to a naturalistic and progressive developmental model.28

While this commitment to human and social progress can be seen as a secularization of the religious theme of salvation, and would in fact be embraced by many Protestants as a form of millennialism, it is important to note that this progressive worldview in fact ran counter to the story outlined in the early chapters of the Genesis narrative. There the perfection of creation quickly gives way to the fall of humankind, which in turn is followed by tales of deception and murder, accounts of great human sinfulness wiped away by the flood, and of the dispersion of humankind following the rebellious construction of the Tower of Babel. The early biblical account suggested a degenerative model of human development, rather than a progressive one. Lubbock, Tylor, and McLennan broke ranks with other scholars, such as the British legal historian Henry Maine, on precisely this point.29

A key consequence, then, of the sociocultural evolutionary point of view was its implicit elevation of the nineteenth-century Anglo-American social, moral, and family structures. By definition, contemporary arrangements represented the apex of human development, and the modern European family seemed to represent the height of


29 One of the earliest statements of the sociocultural evolutionary position can be found in McLennan’s article on “The Early History of Man,” in which he challenged biblical chronology and made his case against a degenerative view of history in favor of a progressive view (Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, 169).
civilization. Scholars attempted to “trace up” the naturalistic development of sociocultural phenomena that culminated in the advanced “civilization” of the present day. And as we will see, tracing the development of morals, the social roles of women, and larger family structures were central to this project.

Lubbock, also known by his title Lord Avebury, well demonstrates the developmental progressivism of sociocultural evolutionary thought. He grew up in close association with Darwin, living only a mile from Darwin’s home. The eminent scientist became a kind of father-figure to Lubbock, and helped to nurture the young man’s interest in natural history, likely contributing to his gradual loss of religious orthodoxy as well. In his 1870 *Origin of Civilisation*, Lubbock relied on the observation of “the laws and customs of modern savages” in order to shed light on earlier stages of civilization. In his examinations of social institutions and cultural forms, including art, marriage, kinship, religion, morality, language, and law, he “traced up” each of these subjects from their “savage” origins to their present cultural manifestations in modern Europe. He depicted, for instance, how communal marriage gave way to marriage by capture, which in turn yielded to exogamy, or the tradition of marrying outside of the family or tribal unit. He also demonstrated how religion proceeded “from atheism to fetichism to totemism to shamanism to idolatry and finally to monotheism.” As historian George

---

30 See, for example, Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). In the positivistic and hierarchical world, the modern European family was understood to have reached the apex of civilization. Supported by the parallel findings of anthropology, Barkan and Bush write, “there was a scholarly consensus that moral progress accounted for the evolution of the modern, monogamous, sexual family. The more the family evolved, the less sexualized it became” (“Introduction,” 15).

31 This biographical information is taken from Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 150-151.

32 McLennan first proposed the term “exogamy” to describe the practice of marrying outside of the tribe, or the totem (*Primitive Marriage*, 1865).
Stocking points out, “the stages were not always clear-cut, but the descriptive process was essentially the same in every case.”

Tylor and McLennan also participated in the sociocultural evolutionary impulse in nineteenth-century anthropology. Like Lubbock, Tylor and McLennan stressed the progressive development of human history, as opposed to a degenerative model. In his *Primitive Culture* (1871), for example, Tylor challenged a degenerationist process of development, and he also attempted to establish the evolutionary development of religious ideas. And McLennan was widely known for his application of sociocultural evolutionism to the cultural institution of marriage. His major work, *Primitive Marriage* (1865), analyzed the origins and development of marriage. In contrast to previous social theorists such as Henry Maine, McLennan rejected the scriptural account of the origins of marriage, preferring to utilize naturalistic explanations. Central to McLennan’s methodology was the “doctrine of survivals,” the notion that “symbolic forms in the present represent corresponding realities in the past.” Using ceremonies and symbols, then, McLennan constructed a history of marriage. He argued that rather than exhibiting orderly and monogamous conjugal relationships, primitive society originally had been highly promiscuous. This disorderly promiscuity developed into a polyandrous and matrilineal society, since kinship could not be guaranteed through male lines due to the uncertainty of paternity. Marital relations thus advanced from their matriarchal origins through several stages that culminated in the orderly, patriarchal structures of Victorian society.

---

33 Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 155.
34 Ibid., 166.
35 Ibid., 166-167.
Unknown to McLennan, a similar thesis had been postulated by the Swiss scholar Johann Jakob Bachofen, in 1861. While reference to an age of female rule could be found as far back as classical Greece, Bachofen’s “Das Mutterrecht” (Motherright) was the first work to bring allusions of a prehistoric matriarchy from the literary and mythical realms into the purportedly historical and scientific. Bachofen had proposed the existence of a matriarchal age that had come to an end with the rise of the classical era. Together with the work of the British anthropologists, Bachofen’s thesis helped to establish the widespread acceptance of a matriarchal prehistory. American anthropologist and cultural evolutionist Lewis Henry Morgan, for example, further developed and popularized the idea of the matriarchate. Like McLennan, Morgan also suggested that this prehistoric matriarchy had been promiscuous, and proposed that it was only with the development of patriarchy that notions of property evolved, and that progressive development could occur.36 Friedrich Engels was influenced by Morgan’s thesis, and he in turn spread the theory to a generation of socialists, through whom it became available to a number of feminists who attempted to subvert its teleological patriarchy.37

Rooted as it was in an evolutionary framework, however, the idea of a prehistoric matriarchy largely confirmed the ethnocentric and self-congratulating ethos of those at the top of the Victorian social structure—Anglo-Saxon males. To understand the implications of this theory on the lives of nineteenth-century women, it is helpful to more carefully examine the reigning discourse of civilization. As historian Gail Bederman explains, this discourse was particularly powerful in the seamless way in which it

37 Ibid, 62. See, for example, the work of Matilda Joslyn Gage and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.
interwove ideas of gender, race, and millennial assumptions of social evolution and human progress. Advanced civilizations, for example, were thought to be marked by an increasing degree of sexual differentiation. Whereas in savage societies it was difficult to distinguish women from men by their appearance or their roles, civilized women were clearly discernable from civilized men. They were weak, delicate, sensitive to religious matters, and their activities were contained in the domestic sphere. Civilized men, on the other hand, were deemed “the most manly ever evolved,” models of strength and the natural protectors of women and children.

As Bederman describes, this discourse of civilization enabled Protestants to reconcile Darwinian evolutionary theories with a religious millennialism, returning order and purpose to a world shaken by the seemingly arbitrary and often ruthless nature of evolutionary development. In addition, this discourse helped Anglo-American Protestants negotiate the potential relativism introduced by comparative studies of cultures and religions, assuring them that, while diverse social arrangements and religious beliefs abounded, their own system represented the height of human development. This evolutionary millennialism intrinsic to the discourse of civilization served, then, to christen the Victorian moral system and patriarchal family structure as both the will of God and the culmination of naturalistic development. Victorian men and women represented “the most perfect manliness and womanliness the world had ever seen.”

This blending of scientific and religious authority left little room for dissent, and although Bederman demonstrates how the discourse of civilization was not totalizing, and could be

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 26.
altered by various individuals for counterhegemonic purposes, in its hegemonic form it served to maintain racial and gender ideologies by presenting white, male power as natural, inevitable, and God-ordained.\footnote{Ibid. Bederman demonstrates how the discourse of civilization was invoked in very different ways by Theodore Roosevelt, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ida B. Wells, and G. Stanley Hall. In \textit{Divine Destiny}, Carolyn Haynes discusses the interconnections of manifest destiny and domesticity in nineteenth-century American Protestantism, and also demonstrates how some people of color and “Christian feminists” were able to work within this rhetorical structure to contest the hegemonic arrangement.}

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were well aware of the power of this hegemonic construction to elevate and enshrine the nineteenth-century gender arrangements in the name of both God and Nature, and they set about to dismantle the construct on both counts. But they did not entirely reject the anthropological authorities. On the one hand, the work of sociocultural evolutionists such as Lubbock, Tylor, and McLennan, provided Bushnell and Starr with important clues as to how God’s will for women could have been so perverted into the family ideal of Victorian vintage. The anthropological writings offered hypotheses grounded in “scientific fact” as to how, on a practical level, the original equality of men and women at creation had been lost, and how over time women had been forced to submit to men’s rule. The most useful concept they gleaned from these works was the idea of a prehistoric matriarchy. Both Bushnell and Starr were well read in the literature of matriarchy, and they drew extensively, albeit critically, upon the seminal works.\footnote{In her discussion of matriarchy, Bushnell cited J. F. McLennan, W. Robertson Smith, Sir John Lubbock (Lord Avebury), Herbert Spencer, and E. B. Tylor, as well as Edward Alexander Westermarck and James Fraser. Bushnell had not actually read Bachofen, but explained his views from the writings of those who quoted him (\textit{GWTW}, 419). She discussed the idea of a matriarchy at great length. In \textit{Bible Status}, Starr wrote that “on one point scholars are agreed and that is that the matriarchal form of government prevailed at an early age among many tribes and races, and that it preceded the patriarchal” (Ibid., 60). Starr cited W. R. Smith, Eliza Burt Gamble, J. F. McLennan, Herbert Spencer, and others. Cynthia Eller’s \textit{The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won’t Give Women a Future} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), gives a brief history of the growing nineteenth-century consensus on a matriarchal prehistory.} Although they differed with evolutionary anthropologists and
sociologists on many particularities of the early matriarchate, they found the basic
outlines of humanity’s matriarchal origins highly compatible with their readings of the
book of Genesis. Most importantly, the idea of a matriarchal prehistory supported one of
their prime concerns—establishing the fact that “‘in the beginning’ woman was not
subordinate.”

But while they selectively accepted the explanatory power of a prehistoric
matriarchy, Bushnell and Starr rejected the broader framework of thought and
methodological assumptions that guided the sociocultural evolutionists. Their theological
commitments helped them to construct an oppositional degenerationist model that read
the development of patriarchy culminating in the construction of Victorian gender
arrangements not as the apex of civilization, but as a continuation of man’s original
rebellion against God.

As we have seen, Bushnell’s and Starr’s revised Genesis narratives structured the
way in which they viewed God’s original will for creation, and provided an explanation
for how events had diverged from their God-ordained path. The key moment of the
narratives was an event recorded only indirectly in the scriptures, Eve’s tragic decision to
turn away from her God and follow her husband out of Eden. This drastic mistake on the
part of the first woman constituted the centerpiece of Bushnell’s and Starr’s reconstructed

43 Bushnell, GWTW, 418. For example, she found the “strident evolutionists’” suggestions that
“the human family began in promiscuity, instead of monogamy” erroneous, for “the Bible plainly teaches
the latter” (Ibid., 421). See also paragraphs 420, 422, and 438. She did note, however, that neither Darwin
nor Spencer suggested that such promiscuity prevailed. Bushnell was also cautious in her use of the term
“matriarchate,” which she acknowledged as an exaggeration, “excepting as applied to small communities,
ocasionally.” Women had never governed men as men were currently ruling women, she explained, “but
there has existed a widespread equality of the sexes in early times” (Ibid., 421). Later she further clarified,
“the matriarchate does not convey to our minds the idea of a rule of women over men; it merely implies the
absence of an exclusive government by men,—the existence of that saner, righteous state, in which the
governing privilege is invested in the competent, without regard to sex” (Ibid., 458).
theological narrative. It provided the foundation for their social and cultural critique, and it was the lens through which they viewed subsequent human history.

It was in order to understand what happened after Eve left the garden that they turned to the work of anthropologists. They found the anthropological theories of an ancient matriarchate highly compatible with their theological understandings of the original condition of women. God had not created women to be subordinate to men, they suggested, but had ordained social customs of matrilocality and matriliney to protect women from men’s potential aggression. Their embrace of anthropological theories of a matriarchy, however, was firmly grounded in their interpretation of Genesis, and this theological orientation gave them an independent perspective from which to view the burgeoning scientific data, and allowed them to formulate a critical adaptation of the matriarchal origins of humanity. Bushnell and Starr opposed the sociocultural anthropologists on two significant and interrelated points. They objected to the characterization of the origins of human society as promiscuous, and they also strongly rejected any notion of inherent or demonstrable progress over the course of human history. Both of these objections were informed by their commitment to the biblical account of the beginnings of human history found in Genesis, as well as by their woman-centered sensitivities and sense of injustice in present social arrangements.

Neither Bushnell nor Starr could accept the original promiscuity of human social relations that was linked to a prehistoric matriarchy in the work of these anthropologists, as this directly contradicted the ideal of egalitarian and monogamous marriage established in Genesis. Additionally, having first-hand experience through their work with prostitutes and in the social purity movement of the hardships promiscuity
seemingly inflicted upon women, they could not accept that God would have intended such conditions in his original creation. But more importantly, they took issue with the evolutionary model of progress from a lower to a higher order, of which that ur-promiscuity was a part. A condition of primitive promiscuity was central to all of the major sociocultural evolutionists, and an age of wanton promiscuity seemed the furthest evolutionary distance from the monogamous family structure of Victorian society. 44

McLennan and other evolutionary anthropologists assessed the shift from female to male kinship, and the corresponding shift from a matriarchal to a patriarchal order, as evidence of evolutionary “progress.” Bushnell and Starr strongly objected to this characterization, which effectively elevated the present social order to the “apex of civilization.” Patriarchy was neither an advanced nor a moral condition, they argued, but was the fulfillment of the ominous prophecy given Eve, the culmination of millennia of man’s rebellion against God and consequent subjugation of women. McLennan’s “highway of progress,” Bushnell wrote, “is wet with woman’s tears and blood, and strewn with her shackles and prostituted virtues.” No woman, she asserted, could believe that this regression could be the will of God. 45

The “immense difference” between her own biblical perspective and that of evolutionists should not be underestimated, Bushnell stressed. Evolutionists had cast aside the early chapters of Genesis, “and would lead women to do the same declaring the Biblical teaching to be degrading to women,” she wrote. But Bushnell reminded her readers that what had proved injurious to women had been the “theological perversion of

44 Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, 204. Stocking writes, “by the sociocultural evolutionary mode of reasoning from opposites, it followed that the first stage of its evolution was one of ‘promiscuity in the connection of the sexes’—even to the point of systematic incest” (202).

45 Bushnell, GWTW, 489.
the real teachings of these early chapters.” In fact, she contended, the true meaning found in Genesis provided an invaluable foundation for the liberation of women, while the “teachings of the social evolutionists of the present day” would altogether undermine “the progress of womanhood.” 46

Although evolutionists had repudiated “the light to be found in the early chapters of Genesis,” Bushnell recounted, “we will not be so foolish, for we have most important information given us in those chapters.” 47 Far from representing progress, Bushnell claimed, the development of a patriarchal order was revealed in the Bible to be “a defiant going against God’s expressed will.” 48 Accomplished only through the most cruel, oppressive, and immoral methods, the transition had engendered “nothing but misery and social degradation” for men and women alike. 49 The purported “reform” that displaced female kinship with male kinship was in fact “the greatest ‘reform against nature’ this world has ever seen,” and was a “systematic defiance of nature’s laws and just claims.” 50 Evolutionists were wrong to depict “everything of the past as worse than the present,” for this would leave no space for the desperately needed, comprehensive societal reform that would bring about women’s liberation. 51

In their rejection of an original state of promiscuity upon which the evolutionary history of human progress was based, Bushnell drew on the revisionist work of

46 Ibid., 441.
47 Ibid., 438.
48 Ibid., 443.
49 Ibid., 511, 496.
50 Ibid., 511. Here Bushnell is undoubtedly playing off the title of her distant relative Horace Bushnell’s treatise against women’s suffrage, which was subtitled “The Reform Against Nature” [Women’s Suffrage: The Reform Against Nature (New York: Charles Scribner and Company, 1869)].
51 Bushnell, GWTW, 443.
anthropologist Edward Westermarck. Although little-known today, Westermarck’s 1891 *History of Human Marriage* offered a stark challenge to those who proposed a “primitive matrimonial anarchy.” Precisely because he continued to adhere to an evolutionary framework, Westermarck’s rejection of an original matriarchy and argument for the nonpromiscuous foundation of human society constituted a pointed critique of the Victorian social order. His conjecture that the roots of the modern family could in fact be found in an ancient monogamous family structure was “a subtle denigration of Victorian society, whose most celebrated institution, the monogamous family, was thus identified with the most savage of unions.” Westermarck was himself a social relativist and Free Thinker, who, according to historian Elazar Barkan, “negotiated his own sexuality through scholarly writings.” He advanced the “scandalous conclusion” that promiscuity, far from being located in the “savage” or prehistoric past, was in fact the result of the evolutionary process. Finding evidences of a greater respect for chastity in “the lowest tribes,” he attributed the apparent promiscuity of primitives to the “influence of civilization.” “It has been sufficiently proved that contact with a higher culture, or, more properly, the dregs of it,” he wrote, “is pernicious to the morality of peoples living in a more or less primitive condition.” But rather than denigrating promiscuity, Westermarck argued that “prudishness and repression connoted degeneration,” and claimed that “because sexuality was functional in evolutionary terms, it was unnatural to repress its manifestation.”

---

52 See Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 204.
53 Barkan, “Victorian Promiscuity,” 64.
54 Ibid., 63.
55 Ibid.
Although Bushnell and Starr did not share many of Westermarck’s motivations or his conclusions, they did participate in his critique of Victorian society. Influenced by social purity thought, they shared his characterization of Victorian society as degraded, and they eagerly mined his work to bolster their case against the sociocultural evolutionist paradigm. Together with Westermarck, Bushnell and Starr worked to expose the inconsistencies and moral conundrums raised by the reigning evolutionary theory of progress. A progressive understanding of history that placed Victorian culture in general, and the Victorian family in particular, at the height of evolutionary ascent enjoyed widespread acceptance during the second half of the nineteenth century. But that ideology was in reality wrought with internal tensions, and its self-congratulatory affirmation of the hegemonic order only thinly veiled the potential for relativism that its comparative methodology implied. Although snugly couched in the comforting teleology of the ultimate triumph of Victorian patriarchy, anthropological works amply demonstrated that the Victorian sexual and social arrangements were unique in human history.56

Confidence in their own superiority became increasingly susceptible as Victorians faced growing cultural ambivalence toward the end of the century. Eugenic theories emerged that suggested the vulnerability rather than the inevitability of the achievements of civilization, while open challenges to the Victorian ideal of womanhood by women’s rights proponents and the contradictory notions of women’s purity and women’s

56 Ibid. “Given the litany of eugenics at the time and the growing, pessimistic belief in their own decadence, the Late Victorians were not particularly inclined to be proud of this uniqueness,” Barkan writes. “Yet they did not doubt that, whatever the precise route from promiscuity to polyandry and polygamy, evolution was essentially progressive and led toward a superior, patriarchal order.”
sexuality intrinsic to Victorian culture would help to further unravel the apparent bulwark of a naturalistic, progressive advance of human society.\textsuperscript{57}

By rejecting any evolutionary concept of natural or inevitable social or moral progress, Bushnell and Starr reasserted a form of primitivism that was increasingly rare in Western thought. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries degenerationist models had been common. Mirroring the religious fall from an Edenic paradise, both religious and secular theories alluded to a primitive cultural simplicity from which European societies had fallen away. But by the dawn of the nineteenth century, “the traces of residual primitivism that still complicated the late-eighteenth-century concept of progress in civilization had been exorcised.”\textsuperscript{58} Meanwhile, Protestants largely revised their traditional degenerationist models of human history, embracing instead a postmillennialism that complemented and contributed to the concept of an advancing civilization.

For Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, however, the degenerationist model most clearly reflected their translation of Genesis, as well as present social convictions. By refusing to abandon the idea of a tragic fall into sin that distorted the course of human history, they were able to create a space for a coherent and sustained critique of their contemporary social arrangements. Rejecting the notion of human progress through history, they also implicitly rejected the distinction between savagery and civilization that

\textsuperscript{57} As Stocking explains, there was “a worm of ambiguity in the bud of ideal womanhood. Prisoners of their reproductive cycles, women were beings ‘both higher and lower, both innocent and animal, pure yet quintessentially sexual.’ A creature so constituted might be expected to be the subject of massive cultural ambivalence. The explicit cultural ideology idealized her ‘angel instincts’: she was ‘the hope of society’ on whom depended ‘the rightings of wrongs, the correcting of sins, and the success of all missions.’ But if the ideal wife and mother was ‘so pure-hearted as to be utterly ignorant of an adverse to any sensual indulgence,’ the alternate cultural image of the ‘fallen woman’ conveys a hint of an underlying preoccupation with the threat of uncontrolled female sexuality” (\textit{Victorian Anthropology}, 199).

\textsuperscript{58} Stocking, \textit{Victorian Anthropology}, 35; also see Ibid., 11.
underlay evolutionary thinking. From their point of view the antithesis was not between civilized and savage, but between obedient and disobedient societal responses to God’s intentions. And in this respect, “civilized” societies were as backward as pagan or “savage” cultures.

Bushnell and Starr, and to a certain extent Southard as well, were able to oppose the authority of scientists and the reigning anthropological paradigm largely due to their experiences with the other primary arbiters of cultural authority—the theologians who had defined centuries of “Christian tradition.” Unlike many liberal Protestants in America, Bushnell and Starr had been able to formulate a thoroughgoing critique of sociocultural evolutionists and their ethnocentric theories of the advance of “civilization.” All three women transferred their critical skepticism from their study of theology to the study of science. Convinced of the detrimental effects of male bias that had, through intentional and unintentional manipulations of the biblical text, distorted centuries of Christianity into an unjust and misogynistic tradition, they were unwilling to entrust an emerging group of male scientists with the authority to dictate women’s “natural” roles or her “natural” characteristics. Just as women translators and biblical expositors were needed to collaborate with men, Bushnell explained, so too were female scientists needed. Just as “the predominance of male expositors of the Bible” had misled centuries of Christians, so too would “the predominance of male expositors of scientific and archaeological facts” lead both the scientific community and religious people astray “as to their deductions from plainly demonstrable teachings of nature, ancient history, customs and the Word of God.”

59 Bushnell, GWTW, 447.
critical distance from evolutionary theorists and proponents of Anglo-Saxon “civilization,” but it would also carry over into the subsequent era of scientific thought, when eugenics would emerge out of the evolutionary thought of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{60}

**Marriage**

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard not only critiqued the prevailing gender system and social organization in abstract terms, but they also took aim at specific social institutions and idealizations that defined and restricted womanhood. The biblical account of Genesis and the New Testament depiction of Jesus’ ministry, together with the anthropological record that they selectively mined, provided them with a foundation for alternative constructions of family that countered the Victorian family ideal. One of the key cultural institutions that they challenged was the traditional marriage relationship.

All three women agreed that one of the greatest sources of woman’s subjection to man had been established, and was continually reinforced, in the marriage bond. “From the Stone Age to the present age,” Starr wrote, the wife “has been the chief sufferer from man’s mania to dominate woman…Law-books have been weighted with enactments calling for her subjugation; religion has spoken in almost every tongue and commanded that she obey her husband; custom has decreed that she take a back seat in the affairs of life,” she recounted. “Mankind has ever been intolerant of self-assertion on the part of the wife.”\textsuperscript{61} The legacy of Eve had permeated understandings of marriage over the centuries, and her presumed punishment echoed through theological, social, and literary history.

\textsuperscript{60} This subject is explored more fully in the chapter that follows.

\textsuperscript{61} Starr, *Bible Status*, 82.
“He shall rule, and she in thralldom live,” Dryden had penned, and Chaucer likewise expressed, “Women are born to thralldom and to penance/And to be under man’s governance.”

From the time of Eve women had suffered in their marital relationships, Starr and Bushnell claimed, yet women continued to repeat the sin of Eve by turning to their husbands. Marriage ceremonies evidenced this pattern, powerfully symbolizing “the wife’s obsequious relation to her husband.” Undoubtedly sensitized to this fact by her own mother’s public rejection of the traditional vows, Starr pointed out that in Christian cultures a woman’s status was ritualized by a bride approaching the hymeneal altar, “leaning on the arm of her father, who ‘gives this woman away’ as transferred property to the man she meekly vows to ‘serve, to honor and obey.’”

A wife’s dependency upon her husband was firmly entrenched in American culture, Starr explained. English common law, with its unjust and unbiblical understandings of marriage, had made its way to American soil and had taken root. The clergy had then put the church’s stamp of approval on the common law, which helped to accomplish the degradation of woman “over a large part of Christendom,” including the United States. Under common law a married woman was generally deemed incapable of making contracts, and all her property, real and personal, was vested in her husband.

“The Golden Rule,” Starr reflected, “applied to all mankind, but not to woman—especially a wife.” It was a “cruel fiction,” she reasoned, “for a man to stand at the

---

62 Ibid., 232.
63 Ibid., 82.
64 She described, for example, an instance in Virginia where woman’s wealth went entirely to her husband when they married, and after her death their daughter was left penniless when the husband remarried and exercised his “right” to dispose of the money as he saw fit (Bible Status, 368-9).
marriage altar and solemnly recite ‘with all my worldly goods I thee endow.’” when he
knew full well that he would be the “sole possessor of his bride’s earthly belongings.”

Not only did the law give to the husband a wife’s property when entering a
marriage relation, but through coverture it also gave the husband rights over all that a
woman earned while in the marriage. Starr fully sympathized with Elizabeth Cady
Stanton’s childhood sense of injustice at the American laws, recounting how young
Elizabeth had witnessed the appeals of “drunkards’ wives” who came to plead their case
before her father, a judge. These women had “toiled at the washtub to earn bread to feed
their half-starved children,” while their husbands collected their wages and squandered
them on alcohol. Upon hearing from her father that the law could do nothing for these
women, Elizabeth had determined to sneak into her father’s office to cut those laws out of
his law-books. But her father explained to her that only the legislature could overturn
those laws, inspiring his daughter to dedicate her life to the cause of women’s rights.

Starr reasoned that, under law, little separated a wife’s condition from that of a
slave, and in reality she became her husband’s “sexual servant.” A husband’s abuse of his
wife was sanctioned, and considered the husband’s right. The “most poignant feature” of
common law, however, was that it empowered “the husband and father to rob the wife
and mother of her offspring.” Starr, Southard, and Bushnell had all encountered situations
where women experienced the brutal consequences of this law. Starr recounted the story
of a minister’s daughter, alienated from her husband, whose child was by law granted to
the man. She was “inconsolable over the loss of her little one and became violently

65 Ibid., 367.
66 Ibid., 368-9. In “Appendix B” Starr included a copy of the Seneca Falls women’s rights
convention’s Declaration of Independence.
insane,” dying soon after. Starr knew another woman who divorced her husband “because of his shameless adulteries,” but then re-wedded him in order to be able to care for her daughter. When Starr met her three years later she was unable to recognize the woman, for “the suffering she endured had so wrought on body and mind that she was, apparently, verging on insanity—but she clung to her child.”67 Bushnell, Starr, and Southard argued ardently that such tortures were never meant to be.

In order to understand how marriage practices had diverged so dramatically from what God had willed at the creation of humankind, Bushnell and Starr again returned to the book of Genesis, and to the anthropological record. They reminded their readers how, immediately after separating Eve out of Adam, God had established the law of marriage, declaring, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife.”68 This was a “most interesting” interjection in the account of “ancient history” set forth by Moses, where God seemingly stepped forth “to address humanity directly and impressively.” Here God promulgated “for all time the duty of husband to wife, not of wife to husband,” they argued.69 And by reiterating God’s ordinance for marriage at the beginning of time, Jesus’ New Testament teachings “struck a blow at the whole patriarchal system of family life.”70

---

67 Ibid., 373-4.
68 Genesis 2:24.
69 Bushnell, GWTW, 44. Bushnell noted that while some scholars have attributed the words in Genesis 2:24 to Adam, in Matthew 19:4-5 Jesus “speaks of them as God’s own language.” While many commandments were “promulgated in masculine terms, though meant equally for both sexes,” such was not the case here. In the original Hebrew expression, “the word for ‘man’ is not the generic term meaning ‘mankind,’ it is ish, ‘husband,’ corresponding to isha, ‘wife’.”
70 Southard, Attitude, 148. “In the Hebrew as in all patriarchal families,” Southard added, “the exact opposite of this was true. The wife left her father and mother to cleave to her husband.” Here Southard cited Bushnell’s God’s Word to Women, where Bushnell “has shown in a masterly fashion what it has meant to womanhood to be torn from the natural protectors in early youth and carried off to the
But as Genesis records, Eve eventually left her creator for her husband in a reversal of the fundamental law of marriage that, both Bushnell and Starr contended, would prove to have profound effects on the status of women. In leaving the garden, Eve foreshadowed the dismantling of the original, God-ordained matrilocality, where a husband moved into his wife’s home upon marriage, and of matriliny, or laws of female kinship. God had intended that marriage would “disjoint man from his kin,” and not woman from hers, since a new wife kept under the protection of her own family would be safeguarded against abandonment or maltreatment at the hands of a malicious or irresponsible husband. God’s plan had no provision, Bushnell wrote, “for that sentimentality which talks of the loveliness of that devotion in a young bride which causes her to forsake her kindred to follow her bridegroom—all but a stranger as yet—to the ends of the earth.”

71 Bushnell, Starr, Southard, and countless other women who had worked in “purity crusades” and other female reform work knew well that “such devotion in a young bride” had led to the downfall of hundreds, if not thousands, of women. In her work in the United States, India, and China, Bushnell had repeatedly encountered women in “houses of shame” who recounted being misled by a “husband” who turned out to be “a mere slave trader.” The “natural protectors of the young”—their own families—should not relinquish their responsibility for protecting a bride until satisfied that the groom was trustworthy. “This,” she states, “was God’s ordinance in marriage.”

72 This is in harmony with J. Robertson Smith’s conclusions as given in Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia” (Ibid., 148-9).

71 Bushnell, GWTW, 489.

72 Ibid.; see also paragraphs 45-49, where Bushnell outlined the advantages of keeping women close to their own home as well as the evils inflicted upon women by their husbands, drawn from her experiences in India, China, and the United States. Starr also cited Genesis 2:24, explaining that a matriarchal system protected a daughter or sister from abuse at the hands of her husband or his kin, since he
Drawing on anthropological studies, both Bushnell and Starr identified wife-capture as an important step in the societal revolution that overturned a matriarchal social order. Bushnell referenced the work of McLennan to describe the preponderance of wife-capture in early times, while Starr cited Eliza Burt Gamble to explain how men who captured their wives escaped the conventional responsibilities of marriage. A captured wife had no rights of her own, and “her status was that of a sexual slave to her husband.” Over time, wife-capture “lowered the status of woman,” ultimately effecting “the degradation of the sex.”

Through Bushnell’s and Starr’s interpretation, the scriptures bore out this theory of social regression, for they found repeated evidences of remnants of matriarchy in Old Testament stories, as well as in New Testament language.

One New Testament example in particular provided powerful evidence of an original system of matrilocality and patterns of female kinship. Bushnell drew her was not able to take her away and mistreat her. See Starr, Bible Status, 70. On the social construction of these tales of seduction and abduction, see Judith R. Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 135.

Both Bushnell and Starr found that the biblical narrative supported the theory of wife-capture. Bushnell pointed to the sixth chapter of Genesis, and notes that “the first use of weapons of warfare was for the capture of women,” disrupting the laws of female kinship (GWTW, 55). Lamch, for example, “had inherited from Adam, through Cain, sensual desires which he did not choose to control,” taking women by force (GWTW 438). Both Bushnell and Starr also pointed to Deborah’s waging war against Sisera “for his crimes against women,” noting that after his death his mother “watches for her son’s return with the spoils of war,—’to every warrior a damsel or two’” (Bushnell, GWTW, 55; Starr, Bible Status, 72).

Bushnell drew attention to the fact that the scriptures refer to “whole cities and nations of people” with feminine pronouns, and she insisted that this practice was “not a mere meaningless human ‘custom’ observed by the Holy Spirit who inspired the word; it is a divine maintenance of the usage which naturally follows upon the law which God originally established, of reckoning kinship through females” (GWTW, 468). See also paragraph 64. “As another line of evidence of an original female kinship,” Bushnell wrote, “take the very common word for ‘brother’ (adelphos) and ‘sister’ (adelphe), used scores of times in the Greek Testament, and translated, in its collective and plural form, “brethren.” It applies to the ‘Seed of the woman,’ in the sense of the mystical body of Christ; the seed of the One who was born of woman. The word means literally, ‘from one womb.’ In profane Greek literature it dates from kinship through women. There is no related term in Greek answering to adelphos and implying kinship through men. At Athens, in early times, a man could marry a daughter of his father, but not of his mother,—just as Abraham did, Gen. 20:12: And for the reason that she was not his adelphe, nor he her adelphos” (GWTW 470).
readers’ attention to the Gospel accounts of the birth and lineage of Jesus, where it became apparent that humanity’s rejection of God’s will for marriage and kinship produced not only social problems, but theological conundrums as well. Bushnell had developed her Bible studies during the decades of the highly public confrontations between theological modernists and conservatives, or fundamentalists. One of the key “fundamentals” of Scripture that conservatives defended was the veracity of the virgin birth, the belief that Jesus Christ had been conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of Mary, while she was still a virgin. This tenet became one of the linchpins of orthodox Christianity in the minds of conservatives, connected as it was to a belief in the supernatural powers of the divine and to the unique divinity of Christ.

Part of the difficulty liberals encountered in accepting the virgin birth of Christ, Bushnell suggested, came about because of man’s subjection of woman and his overthrow of female kinship. Because kinship was no longer traced through the mother, “no place was left to record the unique generation of Christ Jesus.” The first promise of Christ, Bushnell reminded her readers, came in Genesis 3:16, when God had promised that the “seed of the woman” would crush the serpent’s head. But by setting aside female kinship, male conventions could no longer account for a redeemer “‘made of a woman’ (Gal. 4:4), without male agency.” “Man did not consider,” she explained, “nor

---

75 Bushnell, GWTW, 512. Here Bushnell cited James Orr, one of the contributors to The Fundamentals, on the importance of the virgin birth. She also recommends his book on the subject of the importance of the belief in the virgin birth to the Christian faith, preferring, “in this case, the language of a scholarly man to anything of our own, lest feminine prejudices might be alleged.”

76 Bushnell, GWTW, 495.

77 Ibid., 494.

78 Ibid., 223. In fact, understanding the rule of female kinship is central to understanding the promise found in Genesis 3:15, where God prophesied that “the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent’s head” (Ibid., 443).
did Satan intend he should,” that in cutting women from the genealogical records, “he would leave no room for the record in unquestionable terms, of the greatest event that could ever transpire in human history.” In the New Testament descriptions of the birth of Christ, “Joseph’s name—the name of one in no way related to Jesus Christ by ties of blood, must do duty as Jesus’ sole ‘parent,’ in the eyes of the law.”

Additionally, Christ’s New Testament genealogy went back to Adam, “the one person of the human race” who could not possibly be “in the line of the descendants of Eve,” in whose line Christ was promised. Men had so “weakened the value of the genealogical table of Jesus Christ,” that they found it necessary to insert a “foster father in the place of his only actual parent.” This insertion had made the entire notion of the virgin birth susceptible to a later generation of liberal scholars who would point out the inconsistencies of Christ’s purported lineage with apparent prophecies. Had female kinship persisted, Bushnell insisted, the “seed of woman alone” would clearly have been seen to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies, confirming rather than weakening faith. A belief in the virgin birth was not only “essential to Christian faith,” Bushnell maintained, but was also “essential to woman’s dignity.”

Bushnell stressed the fact that, by devoting a significant portion of her work to the subject of matriarchy and the decline of female kinship, she was “not turning aside from

79 Ibid., 497. Bushnell also pointed out that female kinship provided a much more reliable source than tracing lineage through males, since the latter “rests always for proof, on hearsay evidence; female kinship, on prima facie evidence. Uncertainty must always haunt the former; and that is the great reason why it should never have been made the basis of human records” (500).

80 Ibid., 498.

81 Ibid., 499. Bushnell also set out to demonstrate how “a virgin birth does not contravene physiological law, though it may be exception” (Ibid., 510).

82 Ibid., 510. It is interesting to note that A. Maude Royden, the British minister who pursued a woman-centered approach to Christianity, argued against the virgin birth on the basis of women’s experience.
legitimate Bible study, as regards woman’s place in the divine economy.” Understanding this history provided a crucial framework for comprehending numerous biblical incidents involving women, she argued, and ultimately for grasping God’s will for women.

“Nothing is of more importance to the Christian woman to-day,” Bushnell asserted, “than to understand that God did not Himself subordinate woman to man.” This conviction was crucial for understanding what God’s will for marriage actually was, and it provided Bushnell, Starr, and Southard with a solid premise from which to examine biblical pronouncements on the marriage relationship.

Traditional patterns of marriage in which a woman’s identity was subsumed in her husband’s were not only not supported by biblical injunctions, but were in fact antibiblical, they argued. But what, then, of the well-worn New Testament passages that seemed to sanction, and sanctify, woman’s submission to man? Bushnell, Starr, and Southard took issue with several conventional translations and interpretations of New Testament texts that had long been used to bolster arguments for a wife’s subjection to her husband. Starr contested the traditional translation of I Peter 3:6, for example, that represented the Old Testament figure of Sarah as the obedient and subservient wife of Abraham, rather than the “proud, imperious, Circassian beauty” that she was. Starr pointed out that in Genesis 21:12, God had commanded Abraham: “In all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice.” Starr observed that it was “fortunate for womankind in general that the Divine mandate was not counterwise,” since if God had told Sarah to hearken unto Abraham’s voice in all that he said, “the advocates of wife subjection would have seized upon it with avidity and held it up as a proof-text,” insisting that Sarah’s

83 Ibid., 450.
experience was meant to be an example to all women. But as it was that Abraham, not Sarah, was commanded to yield, expositors had regarded the event as an ‘‘exceptional case,’ intended to serve some inscrutable purpose of the Almighty.”

Starr went on to demonstrate how scholars had translated the Hebrew verb as “hearken” in the above passage, where Abraham was commanded to hearken unto his wife, whereas the eighty-nine other times the verb appeared in the Old Testament it had been rendered “obey.” In contrast, when the New Testament referred to the relationship between Abraham and Sarah, it used their example to support wifely submission, suggesting that women should submit to their husbands, “[just] as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord.” In this case, the primary definition of the Greek word translated “obey” was in fact “to listen” or “to hearken.” So, while in the Old Testament translators passed over the primary meaning of the verb “obey” in favor of the weaker “hearken” when it was required of Abraham, the New Testament translators opted for the secondary rendition of the Greek word for “hearken,” strengthening it into “obey,” when it applied to Sarah. Starr countered that a close reading of the Old Testament made clear that “Sarah was no servile spouse,” and she argued that “fairness should have required like treatment.”

This disparity in translation was only one example of the hermeneutical challenges facing women in the New Testament, as Starr was well aware. “For nineteen centuries,” she wrote, “the Pauline epistles have been the storm center in every

84 Starr, *Bible Status*, 64. Drawing on the work of Eliza Burt Gamble, Starr went on to demonstrate how “Sarah came from a land where matriarchy had a foothold” (Ibid., 65).

85 I Peter 3:6.


87 Ibid., 223.
controversy over the domestic and ecclesiastical status of woman.” Ephesians 5:22-24, for example, was one of the chief proof-texts for proponents of women’s submission to men. “Wives [be in subjection] unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord,” read the Authorized Version of Ephesians 5:22-24. “For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the Head of the church, [being] Himself the Saviour of the body.”

Starr noted that many men had “hugged [this passage] to their bosoms,” and “hidden it in their hearts; it has been their song by day and they have meditated thereon ‘in the night watches.’” But Starr found serious theological difficulties with traditional interpretations of this text. “Is the wife to revere her husband as Christ personified and submit to him as if he were Lord?” Starr asked. “Christian consciousness,” she insisted, “rebels against such thought,” for such devotion would constitute nothing less than idolatry, and would counter the repeated biblical refrain to worship and serve God only. “Under the precepts of God’s word no mortal may demand such homage,” Starr averred.

Was the apostle then teaching that a man was the spiritual head of his wife? Again, Starr encountered difficulties. “Does the spirit pass by the wife and guide only the husband?” she inquired. “Is the husband a mediator in his wife’s behalf…?” But the Bible stated that there was only one Mediator, Jesus Christ. “Was the veil of the Temple rent in twain ‘for men only’?” she demanded. When Jesus said “come unto Me,” was “the invitation limited to the male sex?” Any individual with mind unwarped by prejudice,” she insisted, could “readily see that the husband is not the spiritual head of his wife.”

---

88 The Revised Version contained a similar translation. The bracketed words were words not contained in the original text, and Starr accordingly argued for a much milder translation of the passage (Ibid., 245-6).

89 Ibid., 247.

90 Ibid., 248.
head. Women were directly responsible to God, and they owed God, not man, their obedience.

The memory of Eve’s tragic mistake to follow her husband rather than God demonstrated how, if a woman were to fully submit to her husband, the command would directly interfere with her primary relationship to God. As Bushnell had reminded her readers, “NO ONE can serve two masters,” and this warning applied directly to the marriage relation.91 Starr agreed, writing that “God never empowered any mortal to act as custodian of another’s conscience. Reformers have bled and martyrs have died because they would not surrender the right of self-determination in matters of religion,” yet upon marriage a woman was expected to hand over her will, her desires, her very identity to the man she would marry.92 But it was “neither her duty nor her privilege to give herself away to any human being,—in marriage or in any other way.” Woman could be neither a useful instrument in God’s hands nor “an efficient servant of His Church,” Bushnell claimed, “until she comes to understand that ‘she is not her own; she is bought with a price.’”93

If a husband was neither the spiritual nor the moral head of his wife, “his authority over her has well-nigh reached the vanishing point,” Starr concluded.94 And if Christ alone was to be woman’s pattern, Bushnell suggested, then women must reorient

91 Bushnell, GWTW, 127.

92 Starr, Bible Status, 249. Similarly, Bushnell referenced Leviticus 20:18 as “a law which punishes the wife, with the husband, if she should yield her will to his under improper conditions. This law necessitates the view that God holds woman as a free agent in the marriage relation…” (GWTW, 111; see also 302).

93 Bushnell, GWTW, 344. “There is no social redemption for woman until the chain that binds her to the lusts of her own, and of man’s flesh is broken,” Bushnell wrote, “and she maintains the inviolability of free-will, as her sustained attitude towards every human being, including her husband.”

94 Starr, Bible Status, 249. Headship or leadership should not depend upon sex, but upon “which one, husband or wife, knew best what to do” Bushnell wrote (GWTW, 550).
themselves against the prevailing notions of women’s duties and limitations. How should women act instead? Turning to the Gospel of John, Bushnell recounted that though “many believed in [Christ’s] name,” Jesus “did not commit Himself unto them, because He knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for He knew what was in man.”  

Cunningly playing on the gendered language, Bushnell advised, “Let women do the same; they have a very safe example to follow.” Women should not trust men and sacrifice their own selves to the point that their surrender to God alone be vitiated, she warned. “What! A woman not trust her husband!” she added in mock horror. Bushnell was well aware of the fact that conventional views of the ideal marriage relationship seemed to suggest that “every husband loves a trusting wife,” and that a wife should lean all her weight upon her husband. Anything less than this ideal, “any less trust than this,” it was assumed, “will bring discord into the family.”

Bushnell conceded the possibility for discord, admitting that quarrels may ensue unless a wife trusts her husband to “this idolatrous extent.” But she reminded her readers that Christ himself said, “I came not to send peace, but a sword.” Bushnell believed that family concord could be best preserved without a wife’s idolatry of her husband; “but if not, let discord prevail.”  

Her own experiences had convinced her that “to be humble and obey God alone will surely bring tribulation to any human being, sooner or later.” It would only be a question of time before encountering a human law that contravened God’s laws. “We are often told that the days of persecution are past and ended,” she noted. But they have ended only because people have accepted “man’s laws as God’s

---

95 Bushnell, *GWTW*, 392.
96 Ibid., 392.
whole will.” National laws and social customs, however, such as the assumption that “the laws of a husband must be met by unquestioning obedience by the wife,” should not be confused with the will of God. “It is as true to-day as it ever was that ‘traditions,’ i.e., man-made laws, ever ‘make void the commandments of God’ at all inconvenient points, and it ever will be so.”

Starr, who dealt in detail with each Pauline pronouncement regarding women, contested the undue importance that had been given these sections of the scriptures over the centuries. “Opponents in particular,” she noted, had “exalted these writings to first place in every discussion of the subject,” and had elevated the Apostle Paul “to the position of supreme arbiter of every mooted question.” Together with Genesis 3:16, the Pauline epistles had become “the ‘stock in trade’ of such as seek to stay woman from the path of progress, and to perpetuate her age long restraint.” “Down through the centuries,” Starr explained, the Christian church—and Protestants in particular—had clothed the Apostle Paul with infallibility, while Paul himself never made such a claim. In fact, the authority of Paul often seemed to trump the authority of Christ himself. Expositors had found the need to “tug and wrench” at the words of Jesus in order to bring them in accord with the writings of Paul. “Why not reverse the process?” Starr inquired. Instead, centuries of theologians had interpreted the Pauline pronouncements to effect “the perpetual tutelage of woman,” using the scriptures to argue that a woman “must ever

97 Ibid., 397.
98 Starr, Bible Status, 232, 235.
99 Ibid., Bible Status, 235, 239.
be the ward of man”—either of her husband or her father. According to their interpretation woman “must ever be a minor; ever under the governance of man.”

Although Christians had long boasted that Christianity had manumitted woman, this was in fact far from the truth if one looked at traditional interpretations of Paul’s writings, Starr suggested. “Instead of liberating her, it has riveted her chains,” keeping her in “perpetual vassalage” from the cradle to the grave. Like Bushnell, Starr argued that traditional interpretations of the Scriptures excluded women from Jubilee, and denied that Christ had set women free. Starr was compelled to reject this line of thought as antichristian.

Divorce

For Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, a critique of the conventional marriage relationship also extended to a reassessment of the desirability and morality of divorce. Their views on the subject were somewhat fluid, reflecting the changing circumstances of American women as much as changing religious perspectives. Starr, for example, had originally achieved a degree of celebrity due to her unfl拒不ing opposition to divorce. As a young minister in Paris, Illinois, she had staunchly refused to perform marriages for divorcees. A 1905 newspaper article reported how Starr believed “divorce to be a growing evil which can be combated by clergymen refusing to marry divorced

---

100 Ibid., 241. See also Ibid., 251, where, with regard to manipulations of Paul’s writings by revisers working on the Authorized Version, Starr wrote of translators “who manipulated the Sacred Text and made it express thought not in the mind of the author—notably passages relating to women….”

101 Ibid., 241. She wrote this in particular reference to I Cor 11:3.
persons.” The early opposition to divorce had been grounded both in a conviction that divorce harmed women more than men, and in the scriptural words of Jesus, who was recorded as saying that “what God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” Over time, however, Starr, Bushnell, and Southard would all come to doubt the modern application of this biblical injunction.

As Southard explained, when Jesus spoke those words, he had been opposing the practices of some Jews of his day who allowed a man to divorce his wife “for any trifling thing, if she had burned his dinner, if he felt he had ceased to care for her…” Jewish divorce law was founded upon the patriarchal family structure, and granted the husband, as head of the family, the ability to divorce his wife at pleasure. Jesus’ pronouncement against divorce needed to be heard in this context. “No one questioned the right of the husband to divorce his wife in the time of Jesus,” she explained. It was only the precise terms that were in question. Jesus’ response, that husband and wife were not two separate entities, but were joined together in one flesh, and were not to be separated by any man, startled everyone who heard, including his disciples.

102 Nashua Reporter (Iowa), June 22, 1905. “Miss Starr has been in the gospel ministry ten years,” the reporter explained, “and in that time she says she has officiated at many weddings. In but one instance she has deviated from her rule not to marry a person who has been absolved from a marriage contract by legal action. In that instance the ceremony had practically commenced before Miss Starr learned that the woman was divorced. She immediately caused the proceedings to be postponed until she learned that the divorce had been obtained on the ground of desertion, and that the wife had been unable to secure trace of the husband who had wronged her. Considering that this constituted scriptural grounds Miss Starr proceeded with the ceremony.”

103 Matthew 19:6.

104 Southard, Attitude, 149. Jesus wanted to make clear, Southard explained, that in the Old Testament Moses had allowed for divorce “because of the hardness of your hearts.” Since men would cruelly do away with women who did not please them anyway, Southard explained, Moses allowed for divorce. Southard explained that a wife’s “right to sue for divorce” was “absolutely unknown to the Biblical law,” and Jesus refused to endorse a system of divorce rooted “in the constitution of the patriarchal family (Ibid., 151-2). Southard cited David Aumen, Jewish Encyclopedia, Vol. IV, 624-5, on Jewish divorce law.
Southard explained that Moses had only permitted divorce, according to Jesus, because of the people’s “hard, cruel hearts, that cared nothing for the suffering of women.” The bill of divorcement required by Moses offered women a small amount of protection. If one was familiar with customs of the time, Southard wrote, two important points emerged from this discussion. The first was the proposition that “by marrying another woman a man would commit adultery against his own wife.” Under both Roman and Jewish law, Southard explained, there was no concept of a man committing adultery against any woman; only a woman’s husband could be wronged in the act. The second striking comment was Jesus’ statement that a woman commits adultery if she divorces her husband and marries another man. Jewish women, Southard explained, could not divorce their husbands. Christ, however, recognized this possibility. In both cases, then, he put men and women on the same basis, and held each to the same standard.

Southard concluded that Jesus’ teaching must be seen as “strongly opposed to the easy, careless divorce common in some sections of the world today.” However, she was quick to add that it was not probable “that Jesus ever expected His words to be made into secular law.” His words communicated the highest ideal of Christian marriage, but they were not meant to apply to the broken reality of many marital relationships, she insisted. Even in “Christian” lands, she wrote, there were great numbers of people who were not Christians, and the state was responsible for legislation for Christians and non-Christians alike. For the reality of such situations, provisions must be made. Southard suggested that one could surmise from Jesus’ general attitude that “He would have approved of equal rights for men and women in the enactment and administration of the marriage and
divorce laws of the State.” Any other condition would be “grievous injustice.” She also suggested that the larger number of divorces in their own time did not in truth “so much indicate moral decline, as that the women will not now endure the kind of treatment they once helplessly submitted to.”

Bushnell likewise critiqued the modern application of Jesus’ prohibition of divorce, but on a slightly different basis. Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19, “therefore what God hath joined together, let not man put asunder,” she pointed out, rested on the premise established in the preceding verse, that in marriage “a man shall leave his father and mother…” Traditional, patriarchal marriage had reversed this original marriage ordinance. And as long as the church expounded a faulty view of marriage, Bushnell argued, it was pointless to attempt to enforce the stringent terms of divorce taught by Christ. Until the patriarchal distortion of the marriage relationship was corrected, holding to this standard would only increase suffering, she contended.

Over time even Starr became convinced of this fact. She had seen too many women unable to escape from damaging relationships, and rather than condemning women for resorting to divorce, she began to urge women to consider the option. In her concluding chapter of The Bible Status of Women, Starr recounted a number of stories of women mistreated by their husbands, including one story of a “devoted Christian woman, young and beautiful” whom she knew personally. This young woman “immolated herself

---

105 Southard, “The Christian Message on Sex,” 145. She explained that in India, for example, legal divorce was “practically impossible,” but men routinely enjoyed a number of concubines in addition to their wives.

106 Ibid., 146.

107 Bushnell, GWTW, 63.

108 Ibid. “The Church will never effectually enforce the conclusion of that statute,” Bushnell explained, “while it defies the premises upon which it rests.”
by living with a husband who was a moral leper.” The man “wasted his substance in riotous living,” leaving the woman with little support. Starr “advised her to seek divorce, assuring her that God’s law released her.” In response to changing social conditions, then, and with women’s well-being as their central concern, all three women came to support the availability and, in some cases, the moral sanctioning of divorce in modern America.

**Motherhood**

If their views of marriage diverged in significant ways from those of the majority of Victorian Protestants, their perspective on motherhood was even less conventional. In the early twentieth century many Protestants advocated the continuation of—or the return to—traditional Victorian constructions of motherhood and womanhood. As a growing number of women argued for their “emancipation,” many people feared the social upheaval that would undoubtedly ensue upon the dismantling of the traditional family unit. Conservative Protestants were particularly vocal in advocating the crucial position of women in the family, although they were not alone in this sentiment. “If woman saps the foundation of the family, how can society and the state continue to stand?” asked the editors of *Our Hope*. “The pillar of the family” was the headship of man, and if the husband was the pillar of the family, then the mother was its heart. Both the head and the heart seemed threatened. “Truly perilous times are upon us,” the writer concluded.

---

109 Starr, *Bible Status*, 373-4. The woman, however, refused, and “with downcast eyes, and in almost inaudible tones,” explained that she endured it all for the sake of her son, of whom she feared she would lose custody in the case of a divorce.

The mother played a central role in the Victorian family, and in the broader social order, a fact demonstrated in the idealization of motherhood that characterized Victorian thought. It was through her role as mother that a woman most completely exhibited the feminine ideal of self-sacrifice. As a virtual embodiment of domesticity, the ideal mother encapsulated the best moral qualities of womanhood. Situated in the space of the home, the mother was characterized primarily by her self-denial. A mother subordinated her own desires to those of her family, and loved even when that love failed to be returned. In the words of historian Gregory Schneider, the ideal mother “would sacrifice every material, mental, and emotional resource to the point of ‘self-immolation.’” 111 It was precisely this self-sacrificing character that made a mother’s love divine. For just as Christ emptied himself and suffered a torturous death on the cross for the sake of others, so too did mothers suffer for the well-being and redemption of their families. 112 In a religion centered around the acute suffering and powerlessness of the Savior of humanity, self-sacrifice could serve as a paradoxical, though necessarily limited, form of empowerment. While many American women followed the lead of Frances Willard, expanding the responsibilities of the mother heart far beyond the walls of the home, the ideology paradoxically granted selfhood only on the condition of self-denial. 113

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were well aware of the pitfalls that accompanied women’s claim to power based on motherhood. As single, childless women they were

111 Schneider, Way of the Cross, 175. Schneider surveyed a wide variety of Methodist literature on the family in his study of the domestication of nineteenth-century Methodism.

112 Ibid.

113 Schneider, Way of the Cross, 207. As historians have amply demonstrated, the image of moral motherhood central to nineteenth-century domestic ideology could provide the rhetorical position to extend women’s sphere far beyond the walls of the home. In the name of “social housekeeping” or “municipal motherhood” women organized for social and political change ranging from temperance reform and social purity causes to woman suffrage.
perhaps better able to formulate a critique of the idealization of motherhood than were other women. Starr, for example, also made the connection between a mother’s suffering and the suffering of Christ on the cross. But in her estimation, women suffered far worse than one crucified. Although victims of crucifixion could “sometimes agonize for days before death releases them,” wives have “through the ages…suffered the tortures of crucifixion, from the altar to the tomb, rather than be separated from their children.” This was neither a noble nor an empowering suffering that women had been forced to endure; it was unjust, unbiblical, and injurious to women, society, and the church.

The idealization of motherhood offered a powerful support of the traditional family structure, but if that failed to convince women to take up their roles as mothers, another, conflicting rationale was also available in the Protestant tradition. The legacy of Eve persisted even in the midst of this idealization of virtuous womanhood, and if women could not be persuaded to accept their roles as mothers because of the glory that would accompany their self-denying existence, they could be commanded to fulfill their roles as an enduring punishment for the sins of Eve. This punitive tradition was based on a mistranslation of Genesis 3:16, Bushnell explained. Customary renditions depicted God cursing Eve after the Fall with the words “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children…” Not only had Bushnell argued that the proper subject of the sentence was not God, but “a snare,” or Satan, but she had also insisted that the Hebrew word translated “conception” was incomplete. A more proper translation would be “thy sighing,” as it was in fact rendered in the Septuagint.114

114 Bushnell, GWTW, 121. Bushnell explained that the word was spelled “HRN” in Hebrew, but the Hebrew word for “conception” was spelled “HRJWN.” The word in Genesis was two letters short of the word for “conception,” and “all Hebrew scholars know this.” Bushnell cited G. J. Spurrell, author of
Translated as “A snare hath increased thy sorrow and thy sighing,” the verse no longer supported the mandatory role of self-sacrificing motherhood. Aware of the fact that interpretations of this passage had “wrought terrible havoc with the health and happiness of wives,” since it had been so read as to “rob woman of the right to determine when she should become a mother, and to place that right outside her will, and in abeyance to the will of her husband,” she urged women to “demand a very different rendering” of the text.115

As Bushnell’s critique clearly demonstrates, she, along with Starr, Southard, and the vast majority of late-nineteenth-century women’s rights activists, advocated “voluntary motherhood,” or a woman’s right to control her pregnancies through the power of periodic abstinence. Although a commitment to the principle of voluntary motherhood did not necessarily—and frequently did not—result in the support of artificial means of birth control among women reformers, the assertion of a woman’s right to her own body even within the marriage relationship constituted a powerful, and extremely significant development in the women’s rights movement.116

A faulty translation of another text further perpetuated the notion of motherhood as a divine calling or command. In the New Testament book of I Timothy, Paul had written, “But she shall be saved through her childbearing.”117 This text had been

Notes on Genesis, who wrote that “it is an abnormal formation which occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament,” as well as Brown, Briggs, and Driver, the “highest lexical authorities,” who “call it a ‘contraction, or erroneous.’” The complete sentence should then read, “A snare hath increased thy sorrow and thy sighing.”

115 Ibid. See also paragraph 127.


117 I Timothy 2:15, Revised Version.
construed in various ways to link women to their domestic duties by centuries of male theologians. As Bushnell pointed out, however, many women were not saved through giving birth, but rather died in the process. And she rejected as absurd the suggestion put forth by some theologians that women would be “saved from their sins and go to heaven if they bear children.” If such were the case, “then the childless widow, the old maid, and the barren wife” were “all on the broad road to perdition,” while “the reckless mother who omitted the preliminary marriage ceremony” was on the narrow way that leads to eternal life. Bushnell rejected the proposition that women could be saved “merely by the animal process of giving birth to children.”

Other theologians had argued that the meaning of the passage was that women would be saved through their proper exercise of their domestic duties. By bearing children and rearing them, women could set aside their rebellious ways and fulfill their Christian calling.118 Rejecting such interpretations, Bushnell instead translated the text as “woman shall be saved by the childbearing, by the birth of Christ, who would usher in the social as well as the spiritual redemption of women.119 Motherhood conveyed no mysterious or spiritual power upon women; it was simply a biological process of reproduction no different than that carried out by female animals. Woman’s true

118 Variations on this interpretation abound. See, for example, William E. Vine, The Epistles to Timothy (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1925), 23, and R.C.H. Lenski, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus & Philemon (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1937), 573. On this verse Lenski writes, for example, that “‘Childbearing’ includes the rearing of the children, which means Christian rearing to every Christian woman. Paul has in mind what we read in his other letters: the Christian family and home, the mother surrounded by her children, happy in these outlets for her love and affection, in this enrichment of herself and for them, Eph. 6:1, etc.; Col. 3:20. ‘By way of childbearing’ speaks of the highest ideal of Christian (and even secular) womanhood.” This interpretation remains widespread among twenty-first-century evangelicals.

119 Bushnell, GWTW, 343.
redemption would be brought about through Christ, and not through her domestic activities.

Southard was most explicit in her rejection of an elevated domestic ideal of motherhood supported by gendered interpretations of Scripture. In *The Attitude of Jesus Toward Woman*, Southard turned to the example of Christ to critique the association of domesticity with Christian womanhood that had long held sway in American culture. She aimed her most forceful blows at the celebration of motherhood that had increasingly defined women’s identities and perceived roles. To test this idealization of motherhood, Southard examined the relationship of Jesus to his own mother as recorded in the Gospels—a relationship that contradicted at nearly every turn any notion of the idealization of a mother’s role. “Few things have so surprised and puzzled students of the life of Jesus,” she observed, “as His treatment of His mother.” She cited Thomas E. Miller’s recognition that it seemed “somewhat remarkable” that “on every occasion in the active ministry of Jesus where Mary plays a part she receives a measure of rebuke from her divine Son.” Walter F. Adeney, too, had reached a similar conclusion, discovering that “every time Mary appears in the history of her Son it is to receive some thrust of pain.”  

Southard argued that no single instance could be understood on its own, but that only in examining all together could the full picture be revealed. In each case, she explained, Mary as mother could be seen “taking precedence over Mary the disciple.” And Jesus, contrary to what many (particularly men) might expect, found no satisfaction in this arrangement, only keen disappointment. In fact, Southard suggested that in every

---

instance where Jesus expressed dissatisfaction with a woman in the New Testament, it was for her failure to subordinate her “feminine interests” to her interests as a citizen of the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{121}

Examining one of the first instances of Christ rebuking his mother, when Mary had chided her son for staying behind at the temple in Jerusalem and causing his parents grave concern, Southard described the young Christ’s surprise at his mother’s lack of understanding. He was puzzled that she would fail to realize that he would be found not with his earthly parents, but that he instead would be about the business of his heavenly Father.\textsuperscript{122} Mary’s second rebuke came at the wedding celebration in Cana, where Jesus performed his first miracle.\textsuperscript{123} When the wine runs out before the party has come to an end, Mary tells her son to do something. “Woman,” he replies, “what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come.” Seemingly unaffected by his rebuke, Mary tells his disciples to do whatever Jesus tells them, after which he turns six pots of water into wine.

Many scholars had puzzled over Jesus’ rebuke of his mother, since he complied with her request and performed his first public miracle. But biblical scholar Frédéric Godet had observed that in the Gospels Jesus often replied more to the spirit of words spoken than to the words themselves.\textsuperscript{124} Such was the case in the story of the wedding at Cana, concluded Southard. For while Jesus granted his mother’s request, his response to her resembled “the Boy’s cry of hurt surprise” when she had failed to understand him

\textsuperscript{121} Southard, \textit{Attitude}, 53.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 55. See Luke 2:46-51.

\textsuperscript{123} Southard discussed some of the possible reasons for Mary’s request of her son considered by Plummer, Lange and Schaff, and Adeney, but dissented from the suggestion of Chrysostom (who, according to Southard, was “always doubtful about women) that Mary desired “through her Son to render herself conspicuous and gain credit from His miracles.” See Chrysostom, \textit{John: Vol. XIV}, 74, of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Ibid., 57-58).

years before at the temple. She was concerned with a social embarrassment, while he was about to embark on his public ministry that would be filled with difficulty and ultimately come to a tragic conclusion. Some scholars had noted how Cana represented Jesus’ “passing from human to divine relationships.” One observed that as he accepted his ministry “old things had passed away and all things had become new,” after which “He owned no human kinship, and none but spiritual ties bound Him to the children of men.” Another wrote that at this point “Mary was losing her Son.” But Southard argued that if this were in fact the case, it was not an inevitable separation, nor was it the will of the son. She contended that Jesus intensely desired that his mother, “so dear to Him through natural relationship,” would “accompany Him in spirit” into the great adventure his to which his first miracle opened the way. “He longed,” she wrote, “at this crucial moment in His career, for His mother to be less absorbed in the progress of a feast and more concerned to grasp the inner meaning of that strange future just now opening before Him.”

That Mary failed to understand her son’s ministry is further evidenced by the fact that soon after the wedding at Cana, she and Jesus’ brothers disappear for a time from the Gospel accounts. When they eventually reappear, they are unable to approach Jesus because of the crowds surrounding him, and word is sent to Jesus that his mother and brothers desire to speak to him. Apparently they had heard of Jesus’ casting out demons, Southard wrote, and they feared that he may have been of unstable mind. But Jesus replied, “Who is my mother? And who are my brothers?” Then he looked over the

125 David Smith, The Days of His Flesh, 54, quoted in Southard, Attitude, 59.
127 Southard, Attitude, 59.
crowds and stretched his hand toward his disciples, saying “Behold my mother and my
brethren! For whosoever will do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my
brother and sister and mother.” Both Southard and Bushnell cited this verse, which not
only provided for them the key to understanding Jesus’ relationship with his mother, but
also, more broadly, the intended role of familial relationships.

Mary’s troubled and anxious mother-love was not to be commended, Southard
reasoned, but instead signified that Mary had “lost spiritual fellowship with her Son,” and
could not support him in his vocation. A tie of kinship more binding than blood had
superseded the mother-son relationship, and his gentleness would not soften the severe
rebuke for those who challenged this new reality.

Throughout his ministry, Southard explained, Jesus experienced disappointment
in his family’s misplaced intentions, and she recounted the “occasional glimpse of how
keenly Jesus felt the separation from His family.” At Nazareth, for example, he had
“declared a prophet was not without honor save in his own country and in his own
house.” “It was not from some height of unmoved calm,” Southard claimed, “but from
the depths of pain in His own heart that Jesus stated so often the renunciation of father,
mother, brothers, sisters, wife, children that His followers would find necessary.” Agreeing with Alfred E. Garvie, she found that his mother’s failure to understand him
“must have been a very severe trial,” and must have instilled in him a desolate loneliness

---

128 Ibid., 59-62. In constructing an account of this scene, Southard drew on passages from
down the heavenly light, and who was speaking in behalf of the truth, not in behalf of His sex, or any other
sex,” wrote Bushnell of Jesus, when he uttered these thoughts on family found in Matthew 12:50. Bushnell
also cited Matthew 23:9, where Jesus declared, “Call no man your father upon the earth; for One is your
Father, which is in heaven.”

129 Southard, Attitude, 63.

130 Ibid., 65.
reflected in his pronouncement that “foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head.”

Many male commentators had overlooked this fact, approving of Mary’s misdirected mother-love. “Even so fine a spirit as George Matheson,” Southard noted, “utterly misconceives” the matter of Mary’s relationship to Jesus. The Scottish theologian considered her mission to have been “not the guidance of His spiritual nature, but the guidance of His physical nature.” But Jesus longed for his mother’s sympathy, Southard pointed out, and rebuked her for anything less. And perhaps he lived to see the spiritual ties connect him with his mother, she surmised. Accounts of his crucifixion placed her at the cross, describing how Jesus gave her into the care of his disciple, as well as at Pentecost, when she would be united with her son in a spiritual family.

Jesus’ opposition to an overvaluing of the mother’s role was apparent not only in his relationship with his own mother, but in another poignant example as well. From the Gospel of Luke, Southard described “a certain woman out of the multitude” who lifted her voice to say to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bare thee and the breasts which thou didst suck.” “A certain woman out of the multitude”—and for what a multitude was she spokesman!” Southard remarked. “Blessed the woman who brings forth and suckles a great man,” Southard continued, but “let others train his mind, walk in the company of his soul, she may rest content in the physiological fact of reproduction.” It was exactly this widespread cultural sentiment, however, that Jesus rebuked in his response, “Yea,

---

rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it.”134 “He assented to the
blessedness of physical motherhood, but He would not have her rest content with that.”
“No fulfillment of biological function however important, no relationship growing out of
that fulfillment, even to motherhood of the Messiah, can take the place of the soul’s
responsibility to God.” In this sense, Jesus “forever puts woman under the same direct
responsibility to God as is man,” and her motherhood could not serve as a substitute for
that. Jesus was insistent that “women should let nothing, not even their devotion to their
offspring, come before their responsibility as persons to a personal God.”135

Bushnell, Southard, and Starr all worked to dethrone the role of motherhood, to
strip it of its religious import, and to reduce it as much as possible to a biological process,
rather than elevate it as a moral condition.136 An example of this can be found in
Southard’s discussion of Jesus’ rebuke of “the mother of Zebedee’s children.” Found in
Matthew 20:17-22, the story recounts how this mother came with her sons to Jesus, and
asked that Jesus would grant that her two sons would sit, “one on thy right hand and the
other on thy left in the kingdom.” But Jesus answered curtly, “Ye know not what ye ask.”
Southard pointed out how the woman here was introduced not as Salome, as she was
elsewhere in the New Testament, but as “the mother of Zebedee’s children,” defined here
by her “ambition as a mother” more than as a citizen of the kingdom. Many
commentators on this text had considered her maternal affection and ambition “if not a

134 Southard, Attitude, 69.
135 Ibid., 104.
136 Like Bushnell, who reduced motherhood to “an animal process,” Southard acknowledged that
“as the female of the species woman has certain relationships associated with the biological function of
reproduction” (Ibid., 15), and observed that “Human beings have the same biological processes as other
animals” (Ibid., 14). What distinguished humans from animals was personality, which was largely being
denied women.
laudable at least a natural quality in mothers, to be treated with the utmost leniency.” 137

But Southard took issue with this interpretation, noting that Jesus did not hold to such a view. “This attitude found short shrift at the hands of Jesus who Himself had suffered so intensely from the renunciation of family ties,” she observed. Although there was a “marvelous and beautiful unselfishness of motherhood,” Southard insisted that “every great virtue is shadowed by its special vice,” and that “even so holy a thing as motherhood is not an exception.” And the “pride of unconsecrated motherhood” had through history done much harm. “When the desire for the success of one’s own offspring makes one willing to trample roughshod over the rights of others’ offspring,” Southard explained, the beauty of motherhood became perverted. A mother’s ambition for her children, like that of the mother in the narrative, “was only selfishness one degree removed.” 138

“The family exists for ends beyond itself,” Southard quoted from James Strahan. “It is for the preparation and equipment of personalities for the service of God and man.” 139 Parenthood, Southard argued, expanding the role to include mothers and fathers, did play an important societal role, and was “intended to have an ultimate and spiritual meaning.” But that end was achieved only “when the parent, taken out of self-centered first by its own child, passes from that to tenderness for all children everywhere, and through them for all humanity.” If parenthood or motherhood failed to achieve this goal

137 Ibid., 70-71.
138 Ibid., 71. Southard cited Henry Dummond’s theory in The Evolution of a Mother that “all altruism in the human race had its original beginnings in the instinct of motherhood.”
139 Strahan, in Hastings’ Encyclopedia, Vol. V, 727, quoted in Southard, Attitude, 65. “It was part of the tragedy of Jesus’ life that He was not understood by His own brethren, and that He had to assert in unequivocal language His independence of the interests and obligations of His former home.” Strahan continued.
in some sense, “this pure spring of living water may fall back into its own pool to become stagnant and fetid.”

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard worked to demythologize motherhood at a time when many Protestants, and many American women, continued to idealize women’s roles as mothers. A number of women’s rights activists had found that an elevation of women’s maternal roles could justify their greater involvement in community and political affairs, and they therefore promoted women’s maternal identities. Further strengthening the idealization of motherhood was a widespread scare around the turn of the century among many white Americans, who feared that their own fertility was not keeping abreast of the growing population of “new” immigrants who appeared to be flooding the country. A good share of the blame for this failure to reproduce was placed on the shoulders of white, middle-class American women, who were not fulfilling their maternal and domestic roles. As the next chapter will discuss, powerful scientific, cultural, and religious reasoning worked together to re-enshrine motherhood in the early twentieth century, and reaffirm traditional Victorian gender and social arrangements. This confluence of events inhibited the reception of Bushnell’s, Starr’s, and Southard’s reassessment of conventional Protestant views of motherhood, family, and society. Ultimately, the revisionist theologies they produced, and the alternative arrangements of

140 Southard, *Attitude*, 71-72. Southard concluded her discussion of “the mother of Zebedee’s sons” by noting that Salome turned out to be one of the watchers at the cross, and was likely also present at Pentecost, when she and her sons “received the purifying baptism that cleansed from their hearts desire for place and position.” It was possible that her request was in fact granted, in a way “she would have shrunk from as did Mary, before the larger insight came. For her one son was the first of the Twelve to suffer martyrdom, the other outlived all the others, and bore his full share of banishment and pain” (Ibid., 72).

141 For a discussion of the development of “maternalist” social policies in the United States, see Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*.

142 Kern, *Mrs. Stanton’s Bible*, 83.
gender, family, and society that they offered, would fail to accomplish the widespread social and religious changes they had envisioned.

But their failure to affect widespread cultural change should not detract from the significance of their projects. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard crafted incisive critiques of the Victorian social order, exposing the weaknesses of both religious and scientific justifications for conventional constructions of gender, sexuality, and morality. They attacked the ideal of self-sacrificing womanhood, and they contested the morality of a family structure and broader social order based upon that faulty ideal. They proposed instead that a truly Christian, truly moral social order would be based upon self-determining women and men. They did not fear the economic and social changes that seemed to threaten the conventional family. Rather, they looked with optimism to the possibility of new family arrangements that would allow women the freedom essential to their own happiness, and open up the possibility for a more authentic social morality. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were able to construct a comprehensive view of women’s oppression, and provide a new framework bringing together their Protestant beliefs with modern understandings of gender, family, and society.
In many ways the views of gender and family that Katharine Bushnell, Lee Anna Starr, and Madeline Southard advanced seem surprisingly modern. Although they succeeded in articulating a Protestant alternative to the social arrangements of Victorianism, however, their views never took firm root among a large number of American Protestants, or among American women. At the turn of the twentieth century, these three women had looked ahead with great optimism to the changes they foresaw in gender relations, sexual arrangements, and religious teachings. They were confident that, with the greater educational opportunities available to women and with the growing support for women’s rights in America, the time had come for women to add their voices to the centuries of male theologians who had shaped Western Christian tradition. They were optimistic that women translators, commentators, and theologians could fashion a new Christianity for a modern age, a religious belief system that would contribute to women’s liberation rather than suppress and impede women’s advancement. The new, woman-centered Protestantism they worked to create would serve as the foundation for a new American society, they had hoped, one in which women would no longer be defined by their domestic relationships or restricted in their personal pursuits by false biblical teachings.
But as the twentieth century wore on, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard would not see their woman-centered Christianity firmly established in American Protestant circles, nor would they see their views of gender and family embraced by a significant number of American Christians or American women. Instead, they would find themselves increasingly isolated from a society that failed to unfold according to their reformist dreams.

In order to understand the successes, as well as the ultimate failures of their projects, it is necessary to place Bushnell, Starr, and Southard in the complex and often confusing context of changing constructions of sexuality and morality in early-twentieth-century America, as well as to examine the shifting nature of American Protestantism at this time and to appreciate Protestant responses to modern configurations of gender and family. In order to address these issues, this chapter situates Bushnell, Starr, and Southard within three related social contexts: the displacement of social purity forces by social hygienists and the growing professionalization of twentieth-century reform; the rise of modern feminism and new frameworks of sexuality; and developments within American Protestantism that inhibited an acceptance of a woman-centered religion and alternative constructions of family.

One example in particular, taken from Bushnell’s career, can begin to illuminate the shifting values and powers in American society that contributed to the marginalization of reformers like Bushnell, Starr, and Southard. In the middle of the First World War, Katharine Bushnell found herself face to face with two government representatives who had come to Oakland to meet with her because of the protests she had launched against the United States’ newly inaugurated policies concerning the spread
of infectious diseases. In the context of the general population’s enthusiastic support of
the war effort, the government had initiated a set of policies aimed at protecting the
health of soldiers, known as the “American Plan.” As soldiers gathered at military bases
around the country before going overseas, prostitutes also gravitated toward these
locations, arousing concern over the spread of venereal diseases. The government
responded with new wartime measures aimed at guarding America’s soldiers from the
contaminating potential of the prostitute’s body. Under the American Plan, a woman
merely suspected of being a prostitute could be forced to undergo a compulsory physical
exam, and infected soldiers were asked to report women they suspected of infecting
them. In stark contrast to earlier reformers’ depictions of prostitutes as innocent, or at
least sympathetic, victims of male lust, in the exigencies of wartime provisioning
prostitutes came to be seen as social pariahs, conduits of disease, and as dangerous threats
to the nation’s security.¹ For Bushnell, the issues at stake seemed clear. Once again,
government regulation implicitly endorsed prostitution, upheld the sexual double
standard, and promoted the state-sanctioned subordination of women. Gravely alarmed
by the regulatory policies introduced under the American Plan, Bushnell began to protest
the new measures “from the day the first meeting [was] held,” in 1917.² Reluctantly
setting aside her biblical studies, she began publication of a pamphlet titled “What’s
Going On,” in order to alert the American public to “Certain Social and Legal Abuses in
California That Have been in Part Aggravated and in Part Created by the Federal Social

¹ See David J. Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene*, xv.
² Bushnell to Dummer, 12 April 1920. Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.
Hygiene Programme.” She saw the legislation as a serious threat both to women’s rights and to public morality.

As Bushnell pointed out, soldiers “often lied to avoid trouble and blamed women for their actions.” Moreover, Bushnell claimed, at issue were the basic, constitutional rights of women. “Produce all male citizens walking about the streets of New York at night,” she wrote. “Give them police court examinations to find out what their past has been. Publish the facts with their names attached in all the newspapers that everyone of their women acquaintances might read it, and hear the cry about individual liberty that will arise.” Bushnell had battled these very issues, it seemed to her, in the lumber camps of northern Wisconsin and Michigan, in Chinese brothels and “vice dens,” and in British army cantonments throughout India. She felt that the injustices perpetuated by the American Plan were hardly new, even if they were now being advanced as patriotic measures in the new environment of wartime euphoria. Government regulation did nothing more than graft “modern hygiene onto medieval policies,” Bushnell contended, treating women as men’s chattel. Even national security could not justify the injustice.

And so Bushnell found herself in the presence of government representatives of the Interdepartmental Social Hygiene Board. Accustomed to taking on government

---


officials when it came to issues of purity, Bushnell assertively commenced the interview with an examination of one of the man’s credentials. As he was a lawyer, and not a doctor, Bushnell first asked him if he was familiar with “Judge Sheldon Amos’ large law book on the Regulation of Vice.” But “he had never heard of it.” Then, she asked “if he knew the valuable work by Benjamin Scott, City Chamberlain of London. No, he had never heard of that, etc., etc.” To Bushnell, it was “deplorable” that the United States government would “institute nation-wide methods, born of inexperience, to quell diseases spread by vice, and, professedly at least, to rehabilitate prostitutes,” in “total ignorance” of the vast literature going back to the time of Napoleon chronicling the successes and failures of European countries’ attempts to implement such legislation.6 Confident that her own nineteenth-century investigations, together with the work of Josephine Butler and other social purity reformers, had dispelled the mythical benefits of regulationism, Bushnell was astonished that anyone could disregard their sound conclusions and set out to commit again the errors of the past. Exasperated, she dismissed the ignorant representatives at the end of their meeting, and continued with her protest work by appealing to higher levels of command. She wrote a letter to the secretary of the Navy to warn him that “the infringement of women’s constitutional rights would breed social unrest in the country,”7 and “three times over” she sent personal letters or pamphlets on the subject “to the President of the United States, every member of his Cabinet, and every senator and member of the House of Representatives.”8

7 Pivar, Purity and Hygiene, 214. Pivar cites a letter Bushnell wrote to Josephus Daniels on May 17, 1919 [Josephus Daniels Collection, Container 463, Alcohol and Vice Control, Library of Congress].
8 Bushnell, Brief Sketch, 26-27.
Bushnell was not the only one, however, to leave the meeting frustrated and dismissive. The two representatives were taken aback by Bushnell’s vitriolic response to their seemingly reasonable request that she lend her support to the government’s American Plan. “Her voice trembled, her hands shook, and she acted altogether like a fanatic, or insane person.” Unaware of the long history of antiregulationism, and of Bushnell’s pivotal role in the movement, the two visitors did not realize the incongruous nature of their request. Clearly amused by the older woman’s response, they quickly dismissed Bushnell as a “crank without many supporters.”

How had Bushnell gone from being a nationally known figure and a respected leader in the widely popular social purity movement, to a “crank without many supporters,” in only two decades? For in their assertion that Bushnell was “without many supporters,” the government representatives were, in fact, quite accurate. Bushnell had been the “lone American woman” to oppose the American Plan at its inception. To Bushnell’s surprise and dismay, the egregious injustices that appeared obvious to her were lost on others. In England, where Bushnell and Andrew were still “household names” among older purity reformers, and where “social hygiene” had remained truer to the social purity foundations of Butler’s path-breaking work, Bushnell’s “What’s Going On” aroused widespread interest and action. British reformers circulated more than 29,000 copies of Bushnell’s pamphlet, and Maurice Gregory, one of the leading British social purity proponents, considered the pamphlet instrumental in defeating similar

---

9 Ethel M. Walters, M.D., to the Surgeon General, December 15, 1919; T.A. Storey to C.C. Pierce, Assistant Surgeon General, September 22, 1919, National Archives, RG 90, quoted in Pivar, Purity and Hygiene, 214.

10 Pivar, Purity and Hygiene, 212. Bushnell “immediately criticized the plan and alerted Maurice Gregory to what the British considered American neo-regulationism.”

324
regulatory measures in England.\textsuperscript{11} In the United States, however, Bushnell’s protests failed to elicit the public outrage that she had expected. Although certain British organizations supported her work, she had “very little sympathy…on this side of the water.”\textsuperscript{12} Her appeals submitted to United States government authorities were “summarily dismissed,”\textsuperscript{13} and, as far as Bushnell could see, her cause was “completely beaten.”\textsuperscript{14}

Bushnell was only partly aware of the profound cultural changes that had been taking place in America in the opening decades of the twentieth century—changes that would affect the reception of her own life’s work, as well as the contributions of other reformers like Starr and Southard. Most immediately relevant to Bushnell’s situation, significant transformations had occurred in American attitudes on issues of purity and social hygiene. But inseparable from these institutional and ideological changes were more fundamental cultural transformations in understandings of science, constructions of sexuality, and the nature and role of religion in American society.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid. The British regulatory measures were known as “40D.”

\textsuperscript{12} Bushnell to Dummer, 12 April, 1920. Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. Bushnell received financial support from The Friends’ Purity Association and British Association for Moral and Social Hygiene. Her British contacts also provided her with information on purity issues in Britain and on the Continent. “They are very faithful in keeping me supplied with the British literature on this subject, and even send me reports of the Executive Committee meetings of the British Moral and Social Hygiene Association,” of which she was an honorary vice-president. Bushnell noted that she had served as a member of the International Executive Committee of the Hygiene Association, headquartered in Geneva, for a number of years.

\textsuperscript{13} After the war the U.S. Public Health Service “attributed the majority of stories about injustices to women as originating with ‘panderers, shyster lawyers…and others who derived a revenue from commercialized vice’” (Pivar, \textit{Purity and Hygiene}, 215). Pivar cites Lydia Allen DeVilbiss, Surgeon Reserve, \textit{Address on National Health Legislation of Interest to Women before the Convention of the National Woman’s Party, Washington, D.C., February 17, 1921} (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Public Health Service, n.d.). 2. Bushnell was able to incite a small public outcry against the compulsory examination of prostitutes under the American Plan in San Diego, but the women reformers who opposed the measures were dismissed as uniformed (Pivar, \textit{Purity and Hygiene}, 215). See also Bushnell, \textit{Plain Words to Plain People} (n.p.: 1918, History of Women Collection, Reel 961, No. 9937).

\textsuperscript{14} Bushnell, \textit{Brief Sketch}, 27.
Although astonished by the extent of the transformations, Bushnell was not entirely unaware of the profound changes that had occurred in the American social purity movement with the rise of social hygiene. By the dawn of the First World War, a vast gulf divided the earlier social purity values from the policies promoted by the “neo-regulationists” supporting the American Plan. Nineteenth-century social purity activists, inspired by a perfectionist faith in the potential to reform individuals and society, had objected to the very existence of prostitution in modern society. As a crucial step in the eventual abolition of prostitution, they had first taken aim at the government regulation of prostitution. Social purity reformers passionately rejected regulation because it seemed to embody the pernicious assumptions of gender and society that supported the oppression of women and the institution of prostitution. Not only did regulationism implicitly sanction prostitution by treating it as a necessary evil—or even as a social good—social purity reformers claimed, but it also plainly exhibited a double standard of morality by regulating and prosecuting female prostitutes in the interest of protecting their male clientele. Social hygienists, however, were reintroducing regulationism, seemingly oblivious to the harmful ideological and practical consequences of their actions.

In order to understand how this radical shift came about, it is helpful to return to the height of the nineteenth-century social purity movement. As the century came to an end, antiregulationist purity reformers seemed to have won the day. After years of activism, public debate, and national campaigns, purity reformers had pointed out the flaws in current regulatory practices so effectively that they had convinced the majority of regulationists to reconsider their stance. Members of the medical profession had largely conceded that regulation was not as effective as they had hoped it would be, and
had begun to embrace many of the basic tenets of purity reform—following the lead of many women activists by becoming increasingly aware of the double standard and expecting men to exhibit a degree of moral restraint.\textsuperscript{15}

The success of the purity reformers in instilling physicians with a sensitivity to the injustices of the double standard had been due in part to a number of women medical doctors like Katharine Bushnell and Elizabeth Blackwell. Through activism, and by appealing to scientific premises, they were able to convince medical doctors of the social and moral dangers of regulation that they perceived. In doing so they were instrumental in helping purity activists to gain the support of growing numbers of physicians. Elizabeth Blackwell, the first female physician in America, was also one of the leading spokespersons for a “Christianized medicine” that explicitly rejected the philosophical materialism evident in nineteenth-century science.\textsuperscript{16} Blackwell urged the establishment of a “moral medical board” that would combine Christian ideals with the practice of medicine,\textsuperscript{17} and she was convinced of women’s integral role in that enterprise. Blackwell believed that women medical doctors had a “glorious moral mission” to fulfill. They were not simply to follow “the lead of male physicians,” and imitate “their methods and practices.” Rather, women physicians could bring a “new and vitalizing force” to the profession “by recognizing the inseparable connection of the double elements of human nature, i.e., the soul and the body.” It was this calling, the development of “the moral

\textsuperscript{15} Pivar, \textit{Purity Crusade}, 259.

\textsuperscript{16} Pivar, \textit{Purity and Hygiene}, 43. Blackwell graduated from Geneva Medical College in 1849. Pivar compares Blackwell to the earlier Transcendentalists, who likewise “rejected philosophical materialism as a foundation for nineteenth century science and medicine.” Blackwell “suggested that as science reached beyond phenomena to causes, it relied upon symbolization. If symbols became rigid and abused, she cautioned, they led to evil and destructive action.” See Elizabeth Blackwell, \textit{Christianity in Medicine: An Address Delivered before the Christotheosophical Society}, December 18, 1890, 6-8.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
aspect of the physician’s noble work,” that furnished women physicians with their special
task in a progressive society,” Blackwell maintained. 18

This view of science and medicine, and of women’s special roles in infusing both
with a moral sense, was clearly reflected in the goals of the social purity movement.
Women like Bushnell and Blackwell, who were both active participants in women’s
reform work and committed Christians, and who adamantly maintained that social,
environmental, and moral factors were crucial to modern medicine, rose to prominence in
this era. They, and other women like them, enthusiastically worked to bring together
morality and medicine, and they encouraged both the medical and moral reexamination
of traditional attitudes toward sexuality in the context of their purity work.

They were not isolated crusaders in this pursuit, for a number of nineteenth-
century physicians joined in their cause. While some medical and scientific professionals
believed that scientific advances, together with public funding, could successfully combat
contagious diseases, many physicians remained convinced that personal responsibility
and environmental factors continued to play an important role in public health, and that
religious values should be considered. 19 Over time, however, this blending of Christianity
and medicine would begin to break down, as the balance between the two tilted
increasingly in the direction of the scientific, over the religious. 20 This shift was

18 In an article in Medical Woman’s Journal (November 1944): 29, Bushnell quotes from a letter
Blackwell wrote to her lamenting that a number of younger women physicians no longer understood their
calling in these terms.

19 Pivar, Purity and Hygiene, 101.

20 Even Blackwell had understood the need to appeal to a broad range of interests. Although she
worked from an explicitly Christian perspective, she recommended substituting “human” for “Christian”
when making effective public appeals (Pivar, Purity Crusade, 166). See Blackwell, “Christianity in
Medicine,” in Things to Come, ed. G.W. Allen (London: Eliot Stock, 1892), 69. In a letter to Bushnell,
Blackwell acknowledged that the view of Christian medicine that she shared with her “brave medical sister,
facilitated, somewhat paradoxically, by the growing acceptance among members of the medical profession of the weaknesses in regulatory policies. As they adopted some of the antiregulationists’ arguments, the lines began to blur between regulationists and their opponents, and the distance separating social purity reformers from the scientific community decreased.\textsuperscript{21} Pleased with this new détente, many reformers, too, increasingly turned to science to discern proper attitudes toward sexuality and morality. In doing so, the older arrangements between religion, science, and morality—arrangements that gave weight to the voices of women reformers—began to break down.

By the turn of the century, then, the relationships between medicine and social reform, and between science and morality, were very much in flux.\textsuperscript{22} With the older system of government regulation effectively challenged, newer arrangements began to emerge that would complicate traditional assumptions of the role of religion, the state, and the medical profession with regard to prostitution. Social purity increasingly gave way to social hygiene, and in the course of this transition, the voices of many women’s rights activists would gradually become submerged in the competing moral frameworks.

Although Bushnell had largely retired from her public social purity activism in the early twentieth century in order to concentrate on her biblical studies, she continued to observe subtle but significant changes taking place in the movement.\textsuperscript{23} According to Bushnell, understanding the institutional history of the social purity and social hygiene

\textsuperscript{21} The majority of regulationists also worked with purity activists to halt the traffic in women and children for the purposes of prostitution, further blurring the distinctions between regulationists and antiregulationists (Pivar, \textit{Purity Crusade}, 26).

\textsuperscript{22} Pivar, \textit{Purity and Hygiene}, 101.

\textsuperscript{23} Although she focused on her biblical research, she did continue her investigations into prostitution in northern California.
movements was central to comprehending the astonishing changes that had taken place by the time of the First World War. Bushnell had been active in social purity even before the founding of the American Purity Alliance (APA) in the early 1880s. Aaron Powell had become the first president of the association, and later in the decade Bushnell herself had become a vice president, although the majority of her work was done abroad. After Powell’s death in 1900, O. Edward Janney succeeded Powell as president. Janney occupied a middle position in the transformation of purity to hygiene. He was an advocate of the “Christian Medicine” Blackwell had advanced, and he continued to promote the close ties between religion and medicine that Blackwell and Bushnell espoused. But he also worked to professionalize the social purity movement. As a physician himself, he helped to usher in a new professionalism, but while he did so he continued to respect the voices of the women reformers who had been instrumental in the movement’s initial success. But even under his guard, significant changes were taking place in the movement.

During Janney’s tenure as president the organization’s name was changed to the American Vigilance Association, and, in 1914, the group merged with the American Federation for Sex Hygiene. This new organization became the American Social Hygiene Association. It was not long after this merger before Janney was “ousted” from the organization, with Charles William Eliot taking his place, and with William F. Snow as its Secretary. The leadership of these two men revealed the dramatic changes that had been unfolding. Both Snow and Eliot worked to further elevate the authority of

---


25 Pivar also cites John Harvey Kellogg, superintendent of the Battle Creek Sanitarium, and Mary Wood-Allen, superintendent of Social Purity for the WCTU, as examples of figures who worked to reconcile medical issues with religious belief (Purity and Hygiene, 43).
physicians in social hygiene, but in Bushnell’s opinion it was Snow who wielded significant influence in the organization, and it was he who represented how far the social hygiene movement had departed from its early anti-regulationist purity reform roots. Already in 1910, after all, as a professor at Leland Stanford University, Snow had argued in the pages of the *Monthly Bulletin of the California State Board of Health* that “venereal diseases should be notifiable, there should be cooperation between police and health boards in the inspection of prostitutes, and hospitals established for those found infected.” These suggestions were very close to the regulationism social purity activists had long opposed.

Bushnell was right to identify Snow as one of the key figures in changing the direction of the movement. According to historian David Pivar, Snow “led the social hygiene forces in redefining and reconfiguring power relationships, insuring physicians were in the ascendancy.” Their social power diminishing, religious and women’s groups subsequently “assumed supportive roles within the emerging coalition.” Although Snow continued to pay lip service to the role of religion in supporting public health, it was clear that “any tensions between medical and moral issues related to venereal diseases or sex relations” would be resolved by social hygienists, rather than religious leaders or

---

26 Ibid., xiv. Charles William Eliot, first chairman of the Am Social Hygiene Association, believed that preventive medicine was a defense against alcoholism, prostitution, and war. Eliot shifted the responsibility for social hygiene to physicians.

27 Pivar agrees with Bushnell’s assessment. Pivar writes that “By 1916, Wm F. Snow was the unchallenged administrative officer of the [American Social Hygiene Association]…” (Ibid., 130).

28 Bushnell to Dummer, 30 June 1920. Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. Bushnell felt it necessary to share with Dummer “a little of the inside history of the American Social Hygiene Association,” in order to work through the confusion surrounding the neo-regulationism of the American Plan.
women’s organizations. 29 The full extent of these transformations was not readily apparent to all observers at the time, since Eliot and Snow continued to employ much of the vocabulary of social purity reformers. The meaning with which this familiar vocabulary was endowed, however, had changed considerably. 30

Whereas in England “social hygiene” continued to respect many of the principles developed by Butler in the social purity movement, including a sensitivity to the sexual double standard and a concern for women’s rights, in America “social hygiene” came to embrace a very different set of values. Pivar suggests that “social hygiene” in fact “became a euphemism for sexual regulation and the control of venereal diseases.” 31 As social hygienists gained power, they proceeded to narrow the scope of what constituted public health, in contrast to the broadening array of environmental and moral issues embraced by late nineteenth-century social purity reformers. Social hygienists also elevated scientific knowledge above religious notions of morality, and they increasingly turned to secular leadership. 32

29 Pivar, Purity and Hygiene, 201, 142. Pivar writes that, “on the periphery of power in an emerging urban-industrial society,” the “feminist/purity movements…had limited influence” (Ibid., 139-140).

30 The rhetoric that remained the same included professed opposition to the double standard of morality, demands for increased self-control on the part of men, support of marriage and the condemnation of prostitution (Ibid., 201).

31 Ibid., xiv.

32 As Pivar notes, Paul S. Boyer, in Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), traces these currents back to the 1850s, “as urban planners’ positive environmentalism reflected the gradual move toward secularism.” Morality increasingly became implicit, rather than explicit, in plans for improving the urban environment (Purity and Hygiene, xv). Lori Ginzberg locates similar shifts much earlier in the history of moral reform, identifying the 1850s as a decade of change as female reformers abandoned moral suasion and embraced more “scientific” or “efficient” methods. This shift was expedited by the Civil War, during which time female reformers looked to more efficient and professional models to meet the wartime demands. “If benevolent women (and a few men) sought in the 1830s and early 1840s to control male passions by infusing the male realm with female virtues,” Ginzberg argues, “the Civil War gave a new generation an opportunity to reverse completely that rhetoric” (Women and the Work of Benevolence, 173). It is difficult to precisely identify this shift,
On the surface, then, the early social hygiene movement professed to advance social purity aims, but simply in a more professionalized, scientific manner. Believing they had successfully convinced the majority of medical professionals of the dangers of regulationism, a number of purity reformers and women’s activists happily cooperated with the new social hygienists. In doing so, however, the purity reformers increasingly ceded their social power to the “expertise” of hygienists. Over time, the “old lights,” as Pivar explains, “lost their earlier role as movers and shakers.” “Forced to the periphery with muted and silenced voices,” these purity reformers and women’s activists gradually relinquished their power. With the purity voices muted, attention to women’s rights, and particularly to the injustices perpetuated by the double standard, diminished. Prostitutes had generally been sympathetically addressed by purity reformers, who, though opposing the existence of prostitution, had nonetheless championed the rights of prostitutes in the face of government regulations that perpetuated the sexual double standard. But among social hygienists, prostitutes came to be seen as “pariahs charged with spreading syphilis into the nation’s bloodstream.”

As emphasis shifted to the scientific causes of disease, attention to the social conditions and moral frameworks perpetuating prostitution and the spread of disease decreased in significance. Hereditarianism, or the scientific quest to locate the physical and hereditary sources of characteristics or diseases, edged out the environmentalist or moral explanations that had dominated nineteenth-century motivations for social reform. Accordingly, the careful study and erudite pronouncements of professional elites began to

particularly when considering the work of the WCTU, but it is clear that an emphasis on morality and female benevolence continued to give way to more scientific and professional impulses throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.

33 Pivar, Purity and Hygiene, xiv-xv.
take the place of widespread public debate and social activism of reformers surrounding issues of sexuality. Building on the hereditarianism of the late nineteenth century, the rise of eugenics in the early twentieth century further diminished environmentalist explanations of social or physical conditions.

It was, in fact, under the leadership of Eliot and Snow that the social hygiene movement became linked with eugenics. As early as 1911, Eliot had revealed eugenic leanings. In Bushnell’s home state of California, social hygiene and eugenics became particularly intertwined. In 1909 the state had passed legislation approving the sterilization of inmates of state institutions, a move that led the way for eugenic sterilization in the nation. By 1929, 6,255 of the state’s inmates had been sterilized. One of the outspoken opponents of eugenicist arguments was Bushnell’s longtime correspondent Ethel Dummer. Both Bushnell and Dummer worked to counter eugenicist and hereditarian explanations for social and sexual behaviors, but they were clearly in the minority at a time when eugenic thought was taking root among a growing number of Americans.

Although social hygienists claimed to be carrying the mantel of earlier social purity reformers, those who were attuned to the actual motivations of hygienists—motivations skillfully cloaked by hygienists’ utilization of purity vocabularies—sensed the dramatic changes that were taking place. As Pivar summarizes the transition, a “gradual ontological shift from religious/theological to social science justifications for

---

34 Ibid., xv.
35 Ibid., xvii.
36 Ibid., 148.
37 Ibid., 155. David Starr Jordan played an important role in the campaign for eugenic sterilization.
reform” occurred, driving a wedge between “old school” and “new school” activists.38 As an “old school” reformer, Bushnell responded “with shock and wonderment” to the twentieth-century developments in social hygiene. She was incensed that Josephine Butler’s name was invoked by hygienists who seemed to wage a war against prostitutes during the First World War, who insisted on punishing women for the sake of protecting men.39 Bushnell stood firm in her opposition to the neo-regulationism of social hygienists, and she battled the hereditarian and eugenic arguments that they advanced at the expense of a thorough critique of the social and religious sources that continued to create an environment in which prostitution flourished, and the oppression of women was deemed acceptable.

In particular, Bushnell took issue with the tendency among social hygienists to label prostitutes “feeble-minded.”40 Inscribed in this new, “scientific” diagnosis were gendered distinctions very similar to gendered constructions of “virtue” in Victorianism. Among men, feeblemindedness was associated with criminal behavior, or the failure to succeed economically, but among women, feeblemindedness was “defined almost exclusively in sexual terms.”41 In 1915, a spokesperson for the American Social Hygiene Association estimated that at least half of the prostitutes taken into custody were mentally

---

38 Ibid., xv.
39 Ibid.
40 Bushnell to Dummer, July 5, 1922. Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.
41 Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 52-53. As Kunzel points out, the category to replace feeblemindedness—sex delinquency—was similarly gendered. Delinquent boys were generally considered thieves and criminals, while “female delinquency was virtually synonymous with sexual impropriety” (55).
defective. Bushnell, in contrast, believed that any deficiency in such women was more likely the result of “abuse in sexual matters by men,” than in any “inherited condition.”

By reducing prostitution to a medical issue, however, social hygienists effectively erased the role of social, moral, or religious factors that contributed to a culture of prostitution. The responsibility for contagious diseases, then, came to rest squarely on the “feeble-minded” or “defective” young women—women who infected strong young American soldiers, women who were genetically disposed toward prostitution, who had no claim to constitutional rights, and who needed to be controlled for the social good. The shift to scientific and hereditary explanations for social behavior not only dramatically affected the perceived value of social reform work, but it also undermined the role of theological belief in shaping moral behaviors, and diminished the relevance of the woman-centered revisionist work of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard. In 1927, for example, Southard would assess that “today the purely naturalistic thinking” that had no place for “sin,” or moral responsibility, was undermining people’s moral foundations.

---

42 Pivar, Purity and Hygiene, 157.
43 Bushnell to Dummer, 15 March 1920. Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. “The horrible compulsory examinations,” Bushnell wrote, “are much more against nature than mere intercourse, and in the end have a much more deleterious effect upon the moral nature of women, dehumanizing them, and ushering into our civilization a hitherto unknown and most difficult problem for us to solve.” Although while investigating in northern Wisconsin and Michigan Bushnell had heard reports of “girls who really belonged in institutions as feeble-minded, but whom the authorities had left adrift” being procured for prostitution, and thought such rumors should be investigated, still she insisted that “it is just as important that we should not accept the stupid assumption that prostitution proves feeble-mindedness.”

44 Southard, “The Theology of Women Preachers,” Woman’s Pulpit 3, no. 7 (December 1927): 3. People could “gaily…step across any laws that lie athwart their desire, for they hold these laws as stuffy Puritan concepts that violate the psychological and biological necessities of their natures.” It should be noted that Starr did not explicitly condemn eugenic thought. Of the three women, she had been the least involved in the social purity movement, and did not have the same sensitivities as Bushnell and Southard had developed. At the very end of her Bible Status of Woman, in fact, Starr draws on eugenic thought to argue that the “degradation of one sex unavoidably effects the degradation of the other also,” to support her call for women’s equality (389-90). At one other point she uses “an argument that should appeal to the student of eugenics,” that “if Eve were inferior to Adam, or vice versa, then God, at the beginning,
Disagreements over prostitution and the hereditary or social factors compelling women to become prostitutes had a divisive effect on the women’s movement. It is important not to see the increasing dominance of scientific diagnoses of individual pathologies over moral explanations of social conditions, and the accompanying professionalization of social work, as the triumph of “masculine” scientific and professionalizing forces over the “feminine” approaches of women reformers. As Regina Kunzel has demonstrated in her study of the “problem” of unwed mothers during this period, many women in fact took an active role in this professionalization. In the case of maternity homes, for example, professional female social workers edged out evangelical women reformers in an “embattled and protracted transfer of power.” A similarly contested struggle for power took place over the meaning of prostitution, so that by 1920 any consensus concerning prostitution—a cause that had long united women’s activists from a variety of backgrounds—had vanished. In that year, Avril de Sainte-Croix introduced a resolution at a meeting of the International Council of Women condemning government regulationism. Although members of the council passed the measure, they did so only after amending it with a statement that the majority of prostitutes were of provided for the deterioration of the race” (Bible Status, 25). In both of these instances, eugenic thought appears a supplemental argument, and does not appear to be integral to her reasoning.

I do not want to characterize the shift from moral to scientific rationale for social conditions as simply one of religion vs. science. As will be explored later in this chapter, many Protestants eagerly embraced scientific teachings, and they enthusiastically worked to promote social hygiene (Pivar, Purity and Hygiene, 224).

45 Kunzel, Fallen Women, 3-4. Lori Ginzberg would locate the roots of this professionalization in the Civil War era, when women involved in benevolent work promoted a new discipline and efficiency that downplayed gender imagery. “Increasingly,” Ginzberg writes, “male values were viewed as necessary to control and limit a female effusion of emotion, sensibility, or passion; either those sensibilities would submit to law and system or they would become entirely ineffective, even dangerous” (Women and the Work of Benevolence, 173).
defective mentality. Women reformers were also divided when it came to chemical prophylaxis. While some women began to suggest the role prophylactics could play in helping women to gain control of their own bodies, many women continued to see artificial means of contraception as potential tools for the state control of women’s bodies. As it turned out, these disagreements within the women’s movement over the value of prophylactics did not simply reflect the growing influence of professionalization among American women. Such tensions were symptomatic of more profound ideological and generational divides that were becoming evident among American women.

**From Paragon of Virtue to Victorian Prude: Changing Constructions of Sexuality**

The displacement of social purity reformers with the rise of scientific social hygienists and professionalized social workers contributed to the increasing marginalization of women like Bushnell, Starr, and Southard. But other related factors also played a role in their declining cultural significance. In many ways the world of the 1910s seemed a different world entirely from that of the late nineteenth century. “On or about December 1910,” as Virginia Woolf memorably captured the general sentiment, “human character changed.” Broader cultural transformations, as well as related developments specific to the women’s movement, contributed to the gradual erosion of

---

46 Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene*, 158.
48 Quoted in Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 1. As Stansell describes, American moderns believed that “the old world was finished”—the “world of Victorian America, with its stodgy bourgeois art, its sexual prudery and smothering patriarchal families, its crass moneymaking and deadly class exploitation” (2).
support for many women reformers, enabling Bushnell, and women like her, to be written off as nothing more than “cranks.”

Central to the cultural transformations in early twentieth-century America was a profound shift in popular conceptions of human sexuality. Inspired by European scientific studies of sexual behavior that reached American shores in the 1890s, and influenced by the actual behaviors made possible by advances in women’s independence brought about by their access to education and their greater participation in the work force, a new generation of women began to construct alternative understandings of sexuality.49 By the early 1900s, a second generation of “New Women” was coming of age. Turning their backs on Victorian notions of womanly propriety and sexual restraint, these women instead embraced sexual expression, linking sexuality “with identity and with freedom.”50 Whereas the previous generation of New Women had promoted sexual purity, speaking out against the double standard and founding rescue homes and settlement houses, a new generation of “sex radicals” congregated in the small cafes and inexpensive apartments of Greenwich Village, New York, and experimented with the freedoms offered by a new sexual framework.51 In charting out new models of social relationships, these bohemians rejected the Victorian arrangements of separate social spaces for men and women. They created a “third space of reciprocity,” where men and women related to one another as “metaphorical sisters and brothers,” carrying on, in Gertrude Stein’s words, a “life

---

49 Influential sexologists included Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and especially Havelock Ellis.
50 Smith-Rosenberg, “New Woman,” 292.
51 Ibid., 284.
without a father.” Rather than separating the worlds of male comradeship and female affection that had encouraged a perpetual “battle of the sexes,” the artists and writers of Greenwich Village elevated relationships between men and women.\(^{53}\)

Among these sex radicals were a number of women who openly defied Victorian constructions of sexuality and morality, who explicitly rejected traditional depictions of women as passionless and chaste. These women embraced sexual pleasure, and advocated women’s right to sexual experimentation and the pursuit of pleasure outside the bonds of monogamous marriage. In 1912, a number of these women formed the group “Heterodoxy,” with the stipulation that any woman who joined “not be orthodox in her opinions.”\(^{54}\) Out of this radical movement emerged a new term, “Feminism,” that described a rather loosely formed but distinct set of ideas. Feminists offered a new model for women’s emancipation. They joined with other women in their effort to secure the vote, but for Feminists the vote was simply a means to a larger end, a “complete social revolution.” They sought “freedom for all forms of women’s active expression, elimination of all structural and psychological handicaps to women’s economic independence, an end to the double standard of sexual morality, release from constraining sexual stereotypes…”\(^{55}\) Feminism, an invention of “the newest of New Women,”

\(^{52}\) Stansell, *American Moderns*, 226. Stansell provides this quote from Stern, who thus described her relationship with her brother Leo. Stansell considered the phrase an apt “epitaph for a generation” (7). The quote is drawn from Martin Green’s *New York 1913: The Armory Show and the Paterson Strike Pageant* (New York, 1988), 67.


\(^{54}\) Sara Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 167.

\(^{55}\) Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 15. Feminism “burst into clear view” at that point in time, according to Cott, “because it answered a need to represent in language a series of intentions and a constituency just cohering, a new moment in the long history of struggles for women’s rights and freedoms…Despite the early muddle,” Cott explains, “the very rapid and intense gravitation toward the
represented a radical break with the New Women who had acted as leaders in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century woman’s movement. “We have grown accustomed…to something or other known as the Woman Movement,” expressed one modernist. “That has an old sound—it is old,” she reflected. “But Feminism!” Feminism contained a “troop of departures from the established order of women’s lives.”

In stark contrast to the broader women’s movement, this small but influential group of Feminists jettisoned ties with Christianity and rejected conventional moral standards. While a certain degree of “secularization” in the American women’s movement can be traced to the decline of religious rhetoric evident in the public discourse of the late nineteenth-century movement in the wake of the Woman’s Bible controversy, the majority of women active in the movement continued to support the general teachings of the Protestant faith. Feminists, however, did not fear to condemn religion publicly—traditional Christianity in particular—for the male dominated, conservative hold religious beliefs had demonstrated on public morality and social norms in America. As one young Feminist expressed, “Am I the Christian gentlewoman my mother slaved to make me? No indeed.” “I am a poet, a wine-bibber, a radical; a non-

——

56 Edna Kenton, “Feminism Will Give—Men More Fun, Women Greater Scope…,” Delineator 85 (July 1914), 17, quoted in Cott, Grounding of Modern Feminism, 15.

57 Cott, Grounding of Modern Feminism, 36.

58 Many early twentieth-century women believed that publicly critiquing Christianity would do them more harm that good. This was one factor of the general conservative direction the movement would take in their quest for suffrage.
church-goer who will no longer sing in the church choir or lead prayer meeting with a testimonial."

Freed from the constraints of traditional Christian morality, these women departed from the previous generation of women reformers in identifying sexual freedom as one of their central tenets. Drawing on the work of sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and the psychological theories of Freud, they argued that the active pursuit of sexual pleasure was not immoral, but rather “normal” and healthy for women. The ostensibly moral restraint and inhibitions required within the Victorian sexual framework were in fact injurious to proper health and sexual expression. This new, scientifically grounded theory effected a dramatic cultural reversal; the self-control that once led to salvation was transformed into a harmful “repression” that led to “damnation” in the form of ill health. The new “religion” of sexuality found a receptive audience early twentieth-century America. In an era that increasingly recommended the pursuit of pleasure and the attractions of consumption, along with an almost mythical faith in science, this new morality offered a powerful challenge to traditional arrangements.

---

59 Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 36. Cott quotes Genevieve Taggard, “a student at UC Berkeley in the 1910s, already a socialist familiar with the literary radicals in San Francisco [quote taken from her biography in *Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. Edward T. James and Janet Wilson James (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), Vol. III, 422]. Another example Cott cites is Sara Bard Field, a woman who had secured a divorce from her husband, a minister, against his will. Responding to a friend’s lighthearted inquiry whether she “believed in prayer and if so would she invoke a deity (‘to follow the conventional habit of men’) at an upcoming suffrage meeting,” Field replied that she had “quite the prayer-business some years ago” and “had no speaking acquaintance with any deity and hence could not supplicate him her or it.”

60 Stansell, *American Moderns*, 241. As Margaret Bendroth points out in “Religion, Feminism, and the American Family,” 192, sex radicals like Emma Goldman and Crystal Eastman understandably found little common cause with evangelical Christian women. By the 1920s, Bendroth concludes, “It seemed no longer necessary, or perhaps truly possible, to be both a Christian and a feminist.”

61 As Gordon points out, Freud himself “was inclined to view repression as the inevitable cost of human progress.” American sex radicals, however, “transformed Freud’s ideas into support for a campaign against sexual repression” (*Moral Property*, 125-6).

62 Ibid., 121.
A younger generation of sex radicals lived out their convictions, endowing their “assault on sexual respectability” with the “nature of a crusade,” in the words of one Greenwich Village resident.63 They worked out their new philosophy “as ethical predispositions,” experimenting with new challenges to traditional morality.64 As Floyd Dell remarked, the moderns were moving the world “night by night, a little nearer to freedom and Utopia.”65 Even “talking publicly about sexuality matters—erotic exchanges, configurations of partners, and the attendant emotions of passion, jealousy, humiliation, rapture—became seen as political in itself,” according to historian Christine Stansell.66

Identifying active sexuality with health and pleasure, rather than with physical danger or sin, constituted a “sexual revolution” with far-reaching social implications.67 Radicals like Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman, for example, criticized the role the traditional family ideal had played in constraining women’s sexual freedoms, and they worked to undercut the power of traditional constructions of morality. They proclaimed women’s right to control their reproduction without sacrificing their sexual expression. Birth control could allow unrestrained sexual expression without the fear of unwanted


67 As Gordon notes, whether or not they are identified as a “revolution,” the changes in early twentieth-century sexual behavior and attitudes that are frequently associated “with the flappers, jazz, and speakeasies of the 1920s,” actually “began in earnest before World War I” (*Moral Property*, 128). What “constituted the very essence of this revolution,” according to Gordon, were changes in women’s sexual behavior. In “the first decades of the twentieth century the significant change was that women were claiming some small part of the sexual freedom men had long enjoyed” (130).
pregnancies. Sanger’s highly publicized crusade for birth control understandably alarmed many conservatives, who rightly identified in it the potential to separate sexuality from reproduction, and they feared that traditional family bonds would be thereby weakened.

As radical as this revolt of early-twentieth-century sex radicals might seem, in some ways elements of their new views of gender, sexuality, and morality might be seen as extensions of nineteenth-century reform efforts. Although the advocacy of artificial means of birth control was a new development, Victorian women reformers had long been united on the principle of “voluntary motherhood,” arguing for a woman’s right to determine the number and timing of her pregnancies through periodic abstinence. Although they advocated “purity,” they denounced the sexual double standard, and condemned views of virtuous womanhood that allowed no redemption for a “fallen” woman. But crucial differences between nineteenth-century reformers and twentieth-century feminists can be traced to the transformation in underlying sexual frameworks.

---

68 Ibid., 128.
69 In her crusade for birth control, Margaret Sanger, too, recognized the antagonism between Christianity and modern feminism. She met the opposition head-on, strategically associating restrictive and narrow-minded religious morals with Catholicism during a time of widespread anti-Catholic sentiment. Sanger was eventually able to win the support of mainline Protestants to her cause, and in 1931 saw the cautious public endorsement of birth control by the Federal Council of Churches. See David M. Kennedy, Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), and Kathleen A. Tobin, The American Religious Debate Over Birth Control, 1907-1937 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2001).
70 Gordon, Moral Property, 57. As Gordon explains, “To today’s readers it might seem that a principle of voluntary motherhood that rejects contraception is a principle so theoretical as to create little real impact. What gave it substance was that it was accompanied by another, potentially explosive conceptual change: the reacceptance of female sexuality. . .”
71 Even among reformers, however, the vast majority of women continued to support views of women’s special motherhood function and their sexual purity as avenues for greater social authority (Ibid., 59).
Like nineteenth-century social purity reformers and women’s activists, modern feminists identified sexuality as one of the key sources of women’s oppression. But, unrestrained by traditional Christian beliefs and unfettered by the social and economic constraints of Victorian culture, they differed in their proposed remedies to the social and sexual inequalities of the Victorian system. Unlike traditional reformers who, like Christabel Pankhurst, championed “Votes for Women and Chastity for Men!”, twentieth-century feminists abandoned the appeal to women’s moral superiority, sexual purity, and respectability, and instead affirmed women’s sexuality and argued for the need for women to fulfill their sexual desires free from social, political, or religious restraint.72

Whereas modern feminists and twentieth-century sex radicals stressed the pleasure inherent in sexual relations, nineteenth-century reformers had been closely attuned to the potential dangers that sexuality posed for women.73 In the nineteenth

---

72 See Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 42. Unlike Christabel Pankhurst and other evangelical women’s rights advocates who wanted “Votes for Women and Chastity for Men,” Cott describes how Feminists “marched off the path long trod by women critics of the double standard,” urging “a single standard balanced in the direction of heterosexual freedom for women.” This “transvaluation of values,” which “erase[d] the boundaries between the ‘pure’ and the ‘fallen’ woman,” “explo[ded] the understructure of conventional society.” As Cott describes, this was in stark contrast to the pattern among the majority of older suffragists who “hastened to disavow any connection between the vote for women and sexual promiscuity,” having fought anti-suffragists insinuating just that for decades (44).

century, reformers were aware that sexual activity could harm women in many ways. Unwanted and potentially dangerous pregnancies, contagious diseases, and sullied reputations could result from sexual relationships. Within a Victorian social order that separated men and women into distinct spheres and spaces, nineteenth-century temperance and social purity reformers frequently developed an antagonistic world view that highlighted men’s potential to harm women. Temperance reformers repeatedly highlighted the harm that alcoholic husbands could inflict upon their wives and children. And in the case of prostitution, social purity reformers drew attention to the potential harm that men could inflict upon women in destroying their reputations and their health. Through their various reform efforts, female reformers frequently found themselves working to protect women from bearing the brunt of men’s moral shortcomings.74

Appreciating nineteenth-century women’s overarching awareness of the dangers inherent in sexuality is necessary in order to understand the seemingly contradictory stance many women took with regard to contraception. The vast majority of nineteenth-century women’s rights activists promoted voluntary motherhood, the right of women to control their reproduction through periodic abstinence. However, very few of these women supported artificial means of contraception. They opposed contraception because they believed that its availability would further discourage men from taking responsibility drawn from the tradition of natural rights and also, at times, from the Christian scriptures, was advanced by Angelina and Sarah Grimké, and by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. A feminism of fear flourished in the years after the Civil War, and is most closely associated with Frances Willard and the temperance movement. And the feminism of personal development, stressing the need for freedom from restraints in order for women to flourish as individuals, became more widespread in the 1890s and into the twentieth century.

74 As Gordon notes, “Clearly, there was hostility toward sex here. Though several historians have observed that many feminists hated sex, they have failed to perceive that feminists’ hostility and fear derived from the fact that they were women, not that they were feminists.” In the context of physical danger that accompanied sexual activity for women, “to ensure voluntary motherhood was a most significant feminist demand…” (Moral Property, 63).
for their sexual behavior. These women feared that contraceptive devices would sever too thoroughly the relationship between sexuality and reproduction, consequently threatening women’s marriages and undermining the family. As historian Linda Gordon explains, the single most compelling reason for men to marry women seemed to be the fact that children were frequently the product of sexual intercourse. And in the social and economic milieu of the nineteenth century, “women needed marriage more than men.”

The majority of American women activists lent their support to social purity campaigns because, in the context of the Victorian sexual and family system, “which had made men’s sexual freedom irresponsible and oppressive to women,” they believed that “increasing, rather than releasing, the taboos against extramarital sex was in their interest.” Social purity reformers were not the only women, however, to oppose artificial contraception. Most nineteenth-century sex radicals—free-lovers and utopians—also rejected contraception. They, too, embraced many of the Victorian constructions of womanhood, including women’s idealized role as mother and her place in the domestic sphere.

---

75 Ibid., 3.
76 Ibid., 66.
77 When considering the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for voluntary motherhood but rejection of contraception, Gordon argues that “we must discard the twentieth-century association of birth control with a trend toward sexual freedom. The voluntary motherhood advocates of the 1870s aimed to enforce their sexual morality. Achieving voluntary motherhood by a method that would have encouraged sexual license contradicted the felt interests and ethical commitments of the very group that formed the main social basis for the cause—middle-class women. Separating these women from the early 20th-c feminists, with their interest in sexual freedom, were nearly four decades of significant social and economic changes and a general weakening of the ideology of the ‘Lady’” (Ibid., 67).
78 Ibid., 69. Free-lovers and suffragists largely accepted the Victorian gender system, Gordon writes. “Even the free-lovers rejected only one facto—legal marriage—of the many conventions that defined women’s place in the family.” They clung to the cult of motherhood, and ‘did not challenge conventional conceptions of woman’s passivity and limited sphere of concern. In their struggles for equality women’s rights advocates never suggested that men should share responsibility for child-raising, housekeeping, nursing, or cooking…”
maternal power as valuable attributes in their quest for greater social power, and were unwilling to sacrifice that elevated status.\textsuperscript{79} Even among those who resisted Victorian constructions of virtue and the idealization of motherhood, a sexual framework highlighting the potential danger in sexuality often persisted.

This influential, antagonistic view of the danger sexuality posed to women was not easily replaced by one that emphasized women’s capacity for sexual pleasure. Even as twentieth-century sex radicals, sociologists and sexologists defined women as sexually expressive and recommended women’s active pursuit of sexual pleasure—a model often echoed in modern movies and pulp magazines—many women’s activists continued to espouse the older ideals. They persisted in depicting women as innocent and vulnerable objects of men’s passions, and advocated sexual restraint rather than sexual fulfillment.\textsuperscript{80} As a result, the newer model of sexual pleasure did not fully supersede the former. Rather, both conflicting frameworks coexisted in the early twentieth-century discourse of sexuality in America.

For the first generation of New Women, this modern emphasis on sexual freedom was foreign, and in many cases it contradicted their own life’s work. The liberation championed by a new generation of women’s activists directly countered the convictions that had shaped the previous generation of women’s reform. Having labored to protect women from the dangers of sexuality and to guard the women’s movement against associations with “free love” and promiscuity, the older generation watched with dismay

---

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 59.

\textsuperscript{80} Romance novels also continued to depict women as innocent and vulnerable. “The changing discourse marks the waning influence of moral reformers and the rise to cultural power of manufacturers of mass entertainment and academic social scientists,” Meyerowitz writes. “It also highlights a larger change in the portrayal of women in America, from the Victorian angel to the sexy starlet” (“Sexual Geography,” 288).
as a younger cohort embraced a new set of values. Reaching their fifties and sixties by the 1920s, members of the earlier generation “with few exceptions would not or could not alter their Victorian romantic vocabulary” and embrace the new emphasis on sexuality.\footnote{Smith-Rosenberg, “New Woman,” 284. As Gordon points out, “Separating sex from reproduction did not automatically spell liberation for all women.” Even among women who embraced contraception, many “remained suspicious and even alarmed by the sexual revolution that seemed to be licensing sex outside of marriage, overemphasizing sex altogether, and pulling women out of domesticity…” (\textit{Moral Property}, 210).}

By the 1910s and 1920s, then, a rift had developed between the two groups that embraced contrasting understandings of sexuality, and, consequently, of women’s liberation.\footnote{Smith-Rosenberg gives the example of “Jane Addams’s and Lillian Wald’s political alienation from Crystal Eastman—a cofounder of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and a co-worker in social-justice causes—because of what they considered Eastman’s sexual flamboyance” to illustrate the “serious political consequences” of this split (“New Woman,” 284).}

A number of suffragists and established women’s rights leaders expressed their reservations in the face of the changing sexual standards. They objected to promiscuity for the sake of women. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, for example, believed that it was in women’s best interest to decrease the social emphasis on sex. She argued that the “New Morality” that touted women’s active sexual expression actually reinforced male supremacy, and played into the hands of “oversexed” males. Gilman claimed that Freud was popular because he gave “scientific” approval to man’s “misuse of the female.” Rejecting the cultural hostility to all things Victorian, she contended that denouncing sexual excess as unhealthy did not amount to “Puritanism.”\footnote{Gordon, \textit{Moral Property}, 162.}

Gilman shared the feminist critique of Victorian family arrangements, and, through her analysis of the economic and domestic conditions that subordinated women, she had become the leading theorist of the early-twentieth-century women’s rights
movement. However, she remained convinced, along with many other suffragists, that sexual promiscuity would do women more harm than good. Sexual equality in and of itself, she argued, in the absence of pervasive cultural reform, would fail to bring about liberation for women. Carrie Chapman Catt, leader of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), was likewise dubious that sexual reform alone could effect fundamental societal change, and she believed that sex radicals were claiming too much as the result of one thing.

Increasingly, however, the voices calling for sexual restraint lost their cultural power. Based on an ideology that seemed to make more sense in the cultural landscape of Victorian America, these reformers appeared out of touch with developments in modern America. The separate spheres of Victorian society blended together as men and women shared the same social spaces at amusement parks, movie theaters, and even in the workplace. The cultural authority of reformers gradually gave way to the powerful new “truths” conveyed through mass entertainment and the academic social sciences.

As cultural circumstances changed, a powerful interpretive invention emerged that further marginalized the voices of those who resisted the newer model of sexuality and its emphasis on women’s sexual expression and indulgence. The dramatic reversal in

---

84 See, for example, Gilman’s Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution (1898), and The Home, Its Work and Influence (1903), where she proposed communal kitchens and professionalized housework.

85 Gordon, Moral Property, 123, 161.

86 Ibid., 163. It is interesting to note that, like Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, Gilman turned to religion to offer a more comprehensive vision for social reform. See His Religion and Hers: A Study of the Faith of our Fathers and the Work of our Mothers (1923).

87 As Gordon explains, “the defeat of this anti-sexual revolution orientation, as part of the decline of the whole feminist movement, was the inevitable death of a worldview outmoded by social and economic changes as well as a setback for women.” Gordon points out that “many of Gilman’s fears about the antiwoman aspects of the New Morality were confirmed” (Moral Property, 123).

the cultural values assigned to promiscuity and restraint produced a powerful backlash against Victorian morality in what one historian has termed the “myth of Victorian repression.” Labeling Victorian morality as unhealthy and “repressive,” proponents of this myth contributed to the vilification of women who continued to urge sexual restraint rather than affirming women’s sexual desire. Such women seemed outmoded by the 1920s, and they were effectively discredited in part through the powerful cultural image of the “prudish Victorian matriarch.” In his 1932 novel *Ann Vickers*, Sinclair Lewis vividly described such a woman. “She believed in purity. She had, possibly as a result of fifty-five years complete abstinence from tobacco, alcohol, laughter, sexual excitement, and novels, a dark bagginess under her eyes, and twitching fingers.” As the antithesis of the flapper, the prudish Victorian matron’s defining quality was her sexual frigidity.

In the context of the 1920s and 1930s, women’s self-control and sexual restraint—the treasured virtues of the preceding generations—had come to be defined as pathological. The first generation of New Women had become an object of ridicule and scorn. Modern science contributed to this transformation as well, as female activists and unmarried career women came to be seen as sexually deviant, constituting an

---


91 Simmons, “Modern Sexuality.” 165. Simmons cites a description of such a woman by Ben B. Lindsey and Wainwright Evans in *Companionate Marriage* ([New York: 1927], 117-23). “Sex to me seems a horrible thing,” she revealed. “It seemed so to my mother before me. She said the Bible teaches that it is evil, and that its only excuse is for propagating the race.” Such women, Simmons notes, “were pictured as attempting to control men by withholding sex. They ignored male sexual rights.”
“intermediate sex.” For the earlier generation of women coming of age in Victorian America, heterosexual relationships had generally been deemed incompatible with a woman’s career. But in the new world of the early twentieth century, where men and women increasingly occupied the same social spaces, women’s work and intimate heterosexual relationships no longer could be considered incompatible. With the rise of companionate marriages, and their promises of heterosexual intimacy and mutual support and fulfillment, women no longer had socially legitimate reasons to reject marriage and heterosexual relationships. The intimate friendships between women, and the “Boston marriages” often found among women reformers like Bushnell, took on a different, and deviant, meaning in this changed cultural context. New scientific theories defined such female relationships as pathological “perversions,” casting new suspicions on the close relationships that had long contributed to female solidarity. Such relationships now seemed to threaten the “normative” heterosexual ideal. As Linda Gordon concludes, “the sexual revolution was not a general loosening of sexual taboos but only of those on nonmarital heterosexual activity.” As such, the new sexual system “did much to break patterns of emotional dependence and intensity among women.”

92 Smith-Rosenberg, “New Woman,” 246, 265. Smith-Rosenberg writes that as early as the 1890s “male physicians and social critics initiated a new wave of attacks upon the respectability and legitimacy of the New Woman.” They faulted New Women for their “unnatural” rejection of men, and adopted categories of European sexologists—particularly those of Havelock Ellis—to scientifically establish these women’s deviance (265).

93 Stansell, American Moderns, 249. As Stansell describes, women of Jane Addams’s generation saw work as “the redemptive force that would save them from their mothers’ fate, and heterosexual passion was a treacherous lure away from one’s chosen destiny.” For the next generation, however, “with the supposed emergence of a sphere where men and women mingled in all sorts of meaningful ways, work no longer obviated the possibility of heterosexual love. Rather, the release of female expression in work, feminists believed, could create playful, inventive partnerships.”

94 See Smith-Rosenberg’s discussion of “mannish lesbians” and the labeling of female relationships as pathological perversions in “New Woman.”

95 Gordon, Moral Property, 131.
contributed to “the invention of heterosexuality,” women who did not comply with the new expectations of heterosexual intimacy were labeled sexually deviant, disruptive to the social order, or simply dismissed as hopelessly outmoded “prudes” or “cranks.”

As historians have long argued, this rejection of “prudery” and the larger Victorian sexual system was not an unequivocal victory in the struggle for women’s liberation. Although many feminists joined in the attack on prudery, which they considered to be part of the system of women’s oppression, the consequences of this reassessment could have a detrimental effect on the lives of many women. The image of the Victorian “prude” proved a powerful tool in discrediting the arguments against the newer understandings of sexuality voiced by an older generation of women reformers. In silencing these voices, however, the myth contributed to the dismantling of the protections against male sexual power that reformers had worked for decades to construct. As Christina Simmons explains, the “myth of Victorian repression rehabilitated male sexuality and cast women as villains if they refused to respond to, nurture, or support it.” And, “by identifying women with Victorianism and men with a progressive and realistic understanding of sex, it confirmed men’s sexual dominance as normative in modern marriage.” Thus, while the new sexual discourse was, in some ways, a rejection of Victorian “repression,” if by repression is meant “a code of conduct limiting sexual activity,” in reality the myth of Victorian repression was a calculated and largely successful “attack on women’s control over men’s sexuality.” Consequently the apparent “liberation” celebrated by sex radicals could be seen as a “new form of regulation,” one


97 As Gordon explains, “prudery was a historical moment in a struggle between women’s attempts to defend their interest in familial fidelity and men’s attempts to preserve their traditional sexual privileges” (*Moral Property*, 122-3).
“grounded in a male perspective,” establishing new rules of conduct, and reflecting
“primarily fears of female power.”

Over time many radicals were in fact to discover, through their own frustrated experiences, that sexual freedom did not necessarily provide the key to unlock the systematic oppression of women that persisted in American society. There proved to be a “dark edge to sexual modernism,” persisting inequalities that pervaded the sexual relationships that were supposed to liberate women. As Christine Stansell explains, “the structures of sexual modernism proved highly elastic in their ability to accommodate elements of the old sexual hierarchies.” Even within seemingly egalitarian frameworks, male privilege endured. 

One of the primary sites of enduring inequalities was the home. Despite the celebrations of egalitarian marriages and the breaking down of distinctions between men and women, childcare and other domestic duties generally remained the responsibilities of women, even in the most “progressive” of marriages. The “third space” of mutuality seemed not to extend to the domestic sphere.

Historians of the late twentieth century have often wondered at the shortsightedness of radicals who had “somehow imagined that the assertion of female sexuality could erase deeply rooted male supremacy in the culture and in the economy.”

---

98 Simmons, “Modern Sexuality,” 158, 170, 171.
99 Stansell, American Moderns, 267, 227.
100 See Ibid., 258-260. As Stansell notes, domestic life remained traditional “in all but superficialities.” What made matters worse for modern women was the disappearance of Victorian servants who had long helped middle-class women bear their domestic burdens. “The irony is that the material burdens of domesticity increased at the moment when feminist women rejected domesticity altogether and embraced work in the world instead” (Ibid., 259). These modern women faced extreme difficulties as they attempted to keep “egalitarian partnerships afloat as they juggled the demands of what we now call the double shift of work and family,” difficulties that were not openly acknowledged and discussed (Ibid., 260).
These women, it seemed, “failed to recognize the infiltration of sexism into sex itself.”101 Holding onto an “ingenuous faith that sexual inequality could be willed away by virtue of courage, hard work, and alliances with well-meaning men,” they failed to realize that “they lacked the real economic and institutional power with which to wrest hegemony from men and so enforce their vision of a gender-free world.”102 And because of their idealization of the liberated new model of womanhood and their determination to downplay the differences between men and women, they had no sound basis from which to critique the situation.103

But the limitations of the new sexual framework that surface in historical retrospect were not readily apparent at the height of the “revolution,” and the myth of Victorian repression—with its central character, the Victorian prude—remained a powerful cultural script.104 It is in the context of these contested sexual frameworks, and

101 Gordon, Moral Property, 163. “Did they believe that power relations ceased to exist in beds,” Gordon asks, “that men shed their culturally determined attitudes and expectations at the bedroom door? Even the most socialist of these birth controllers, those who well understood that women’s powerlessness was the product of a total economic and social discrimination, failed to recognize the infiltration of sexism into sex itself.”


103 Stansell, American Moderns, 262. “The play of feminism had paradoxical effects,” Stansell explains. “The positive outlook and putative towering self-confidence of the free-loving woman became a seductive model of action, will, and sexual agency, but these ascribed powers left women little room to address their actual needs and difficulties. It was rare for women to give back as good as they got when they talked about sex” (Ibid., 307). “Glamourous representations of free womanhood,” Stansell continues, “so attractive to women deprived of the idealizations of Victorian culture, seem to have cramped women’s ability to speak for themselves…Their was a critique of patriarchal values that ended by sacrificing its most compelling practitioners” (Ibid., 308).

104 Both Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Christine Stansell remind present-day critics that an overly critical view of the radicals’ apparent short-sightedness is inappropriate. Though “We can learn much from their errors—and their successes,” Smith-Rosenberg writes, “Our very first lesson must be to understand and not to blame them” (“New Woman,” 296). More pointedly, Stansell reminds us that our expectations that early-twentieth-century women should have acted otherwise are at root “anachronistic, framed in the context of our own knowledge, not theirs. None of these women had an experience of an even faintly integrated world. They had no basis from which to foresee the traps of inequality that willed equality could harbor…Our shrewdness is indebted to their naïveté” (American Moderns, 248; see also 262, 267).
the silencing myth of Victorian repression, that the legacies of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard must be placed.

In the late nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth century, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard had been comfortably situated within the world of women’s reform work. They had attained positions of leadership in the temperance movement and in social purity work, and were optimistic that a “new era” of womanhood was upon them. As the new century wore on, however, they found themselves increasingly distanced from the new centers of influence in the women’s movement, and in American society in general. Along with the burgeoning authority of science, the rise of consumer culture and mass entertainment further destabilized Victorian social arrangements and ideologies, and challenged the authority of women reformers. A new generation of New Women rejected the perspectives of their mothers and looked to different authorities for their own social visions. As a new understanding of sexuality emerged among American women radicals, and, gradually, in American culture, and as social purity gave way to social hygiene, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard increasingly occupied the margins, rather than the centers, of the women’s movement. Geographically separated from the Eastern and urban centers of the new Feminism, they seemed only vaguely aware of their diverging paths. They continued to work diligently at their chosen tasks, accustomed to opposition and not surprised by the loneliness that often attended their pioneering vocations.

105 Although they fit securely in the world of reform work, they were pioneers in many ways. Katharine Bushnell was one of the earliest female medical doctors, Lee Anna Starr faced much opposition to her ordination to the ministry, and M. Madeline Southard, following her stint as a militant temperance advocate, became a pioneer in the quest for ecclesiastical rights for women.
Although in many ways Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were falling out of step with a new generation of women’s leaders, they did, in fact, have certain goals in common with early-twentieth-century feminists. Like Sanger, Goldman, and Gilman, they believed that the traditional, patriarchal family, together with the sexual double standard, constituted the chief obstacles to women’s social emancipation. They, too, were convinced that women’s social inequalities could not be sufficiently addressed in the political sphere alone. And like many modern feminists, they identified traditional, patriarchal religion with the suppression of women. But instead of abandoning Christianity, they advocated a thorough, woman-centered reinterpretation of the traditional faith.

As committed Protestants, educated in religious studies and equipped with sophisticated theological or linguistic skills, they remained confident that Christianity not only could, but must be reformulated in order for true liberation to become possible for American women. While the broader women’s movement increasingly abandoned the attempts of the previous century’s women to reassess and reshape traditional Christian beliefs, and modern feminists rejected conventional religious beliefs altogether, these three women remained convinced that broader cultural prejudices underlay the political and sexual inequities in America. They believed that the roots of these prejudices could be traced to the traditional Protestant faith, and that social inequalities would therefore persist as long as conventional Protestantism endured. They labored to undo centuries of cultural and religious oppression of women by providing a new religious foundation from which to begin, even as a growing number of women were turning their backs on
Christianity, and on the power of religion—even a woman-centered religion—to effectively combat the cultural restrictions upon women’s rights.

Contrary to twentieth-century feminists, they adhered to a framework of sexuality informed by nineteenth-century understandings of the dangers inherent in sexuality. As a result, their construction of a new, woman-centered morality differed in significant ways from the New Morality of feminists and flappers. Whereas feminists advocated a new moral license for women, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard continued to focus on the dangers implicit in sexuality, and continued to emphasize the need to protect women from men’s moral license. Although they agreed with modern feminists that the sexual double standard was one of the key sources of women’s social inequality with men, they hoped to remedy the inequities primarily by raising the moral standards for men, rather than increasing sexual license for women. This sexual framework was common among reformers of their generation, and it conformed more closely to their understandings of Christian morality, which, even in a revised, woman-centered formulation, upheld the ideal of monogamous, heterosexual marriage—albeit an egalitarian form of marriage—as the proper context for sexual relations. For Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, restricting sexual relations to monogamous marriage seemed not only biblical, but also the most “liberating” social arrangement for women, and therefore the most moral.

Though their rejection of the new sexual framework, and the emphasis on sexual freedoms it entailed, might be considered conservative or conventional, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard nevertheless continued to advance a woman-centered critique of traditional sexual relations and social practices. At a time when two competing frameworks of sexuality clashed, however, it was not always clear what would in fact constitute the best
arrangements for modern women. They attempted to work out new constructions of morality not only in the form of abstract theological reflections, but on more practical levels as well, but they did so in the context of a complicated and often confusing sexual discourse, and the fluid nature of cultural understandings of gender and morality are evident in their attempts to develop a practical sexual ethics for modern American women. As cultural arrangements shifted, so, too, did their assessment of issues such as divorce and birth control. Recall, for example, how Starr, who had once made a name for herself opposing divorce, became an advocate of divorce after coming to understand its role as an important protection for women, rather than as a threat to women’s security and happiness. Bushnell and Southard had likewise concluded that rigid regulations against divorce did far more harm than good in a culture in which the institution of marriage was itself an anti-female corruption of its original egalitarian purpose.

The issue of birth control provided a more complicated conundrum for these women. All three were ardent supporters of voluntary motherhood, but they, along with many early-twentieth-century American women, were unclear as to the virtues or potential dangers of artificial means of contraception. Today birth control is widely regarded as one of the central ingredients of women’s emancipation. But as mentioned above, in the early decades of the twentieth century, it was not yet clear whether or not birth control would enhance women’s control over their own bodies, or men’s control over women. Bushnell, influenced by her work against the government regulation of prostitution, associated artificial contraception with state-imposed regulations, and as a result she staunchly opposed birth control until her death. Aware of Margaret Sanger’s
ties to the social hygiene movement, Bushnell vigorously combated the “Birth-Control delusion,” which, she argued, would “accomplish none of the good things it promises.”

Southard, however, concluded that birth control provided a much needed option for women. When visiting the “sleepy little town” of Moline, Kansas, in 1921, she stayed with a young minister and his college-educated wife. They were “nice, earnest young people,” Southard reflected in her journal, but “they have three little children and there will be four when the oldest is four years and one month old.” The mother was “so nervous, it is really pitiful,” since “child-birth and child-care is simply taking all there is in her.” Although children were a blessing, she considered, in certain circumstances having them seemed “almost unendurable.” “If ‘multiplying conception’ is part of the curse it surely has done its work for women,” she wrote. The young couple she was staying with were “very conscientious,” but “human nature being as it is,” Southard decided that she “believe[d] in birth control.”

Southard became only a quiet supporter of birth control, however, because she feared the harm that the controversial issue could bring her young Association of Women Preachers.

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard also persisted in the view that the subordination of women was deeply entrenched in American culture, and they were aware that achieving women’s suffrage and equal legal status would only begin to rectify the pervasive

---

106 Bushnell, Brief Sketch, 27. Bushnell felt that birth control would “encourage illicit relations among old and young enormously.” She regretted that “just as many of the churches had led” in the “mischievous” social hygiene movement, so, too, had they “followed on into the second infamy.” In God’s Word to Woman, Bushnell wrote that “modern human devices” for birth control “would curtail expression of longing for offspring, and give full rein to irresponsible fleshly desire” (527). As she further explained in “Birth-Control: Where’s the Harm?” [The Light (March-April 1923): 11-14], advocates of birth control “Hold that indulgence of the flesh is inevitable, and self-control unmanageable” (13-14).

107 Southard, Journal, 4 February 1921.

108 When some members of the Association of Women Preachers advocated the cause, Southard distanced the organization from that stance.
inequalities. All three shared an ambivalent view of the use of the law to effect social change. Even when they strongly supported particular moral or social views, they frequently expressed reluctance to enforce those ideals upon others through the coercion of the law. Although they supported legal protections for women, and, influenced by the temperance movement, believed in the benefits of prohibition, they had also witnessed the legal oppression of women in too many cases, and had observed the shortcomings and manipulations of laws designed to protect women. Bushnell, for example, expresses this ambivalence towards legal measures of reform in her discussion of the true “province of human legislation as it relates to moral conduct.” As a woman about to become enfranchised, she wrote to other Christian women who were deliberating the appropriateness of their involvement in politics, since “human legislative measures so often fall short of the Christian standard.” Despite the shortcomings of legislation, Bushnell recommended political involvement for women, and she used an analogy to illustrate her point, describing a man dragging a heavily loaded cart up a hill. The cart represented moral progress, and the man, providing the energy for the upward movement, represented “moral and religious instruction.” The limited, but still important, role of legislation, was to act as a stone placed behind the wheels of the cart, to keep the cart from sliding back down the hill. “Good laws may not make men good,” she reflected, “but bad laws certainly demoralize men.”109 Her work with prostitutes, and her observations of many failed attempts to rehabilitate prostitutes through state homes, had contributed to her skepticism on the possibilities of imposing morality through legislation

109 Bushnell, GWTW, 568-570.
or coercion, convincing her that “confinement and deprivation of freedom are not compatible with the development of morality, which grows in liberty, or not at all.”

Southard, too, had little faith in the political system. Even though she had long been a committed prohibitionist, she realized the limitations of government imposed social behavior. Religious people had erred by depending on the law, she thought, and had “failed to get enough people truly turned to God.” She drew an important distinction between religious ideals and secular law, reminding her readers that the state was responsible for drafting legislation for Christians and non-Christians alike, and that it would be unwise and unfair to hold non-Christians to certain religious standards of behavior. Although she and Bushnell both considered that legislation could play a role in safeguarding women and ensuring a basic level of social morality, they remained ambivalent when it came to legal avenues of reform, expressing skepticism at the legal impositions of morality. In this way they did not share the enthusiasm of Protestant

110 Bushnell to Dummer, 10 [March?] 1920. Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. State-run rehabilitation homes or farms would in all likelihood be “managed by political influence,” Bushnell explained. “It will be a history of dividing the spoils among officers thereof, and the girls subjected to more or less mistreatment by officials who have no interest in anything much but their own salaries—interspersed with an occasional scandal of corruption between men about the institution and the girls.”


“moral reconstructionists” of their time, who hoped to purify society through legal reform.\textsuperscript{113}

During the often confusing transition from Victorian to modern sexual arrangements, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard provide valuable examples of how three Protestant women worked to negotiate the changing conditions. Although they did not always reach identical conclusions, they did unfailingly work to approach all questions of sexual ethics and moral responsibilities from an intentionally woman-centered position. They applied biblical principles to sexual ethics, but their religious commitments were themselves based upon a radically woman-centered faith.

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard seemed generally aware of the differences that existed between their own views and those of many younger women activists, but their critical stance in regard to the Victorian moral system prevented them from adopting a reactionary view of modern developments. They rejected, for example, any alarmist position that American morality was in decline. Even in the midst of the sexual emancipation of the “jazz age,” they maintained that morality was more likely improving than deteriorating. Because they judged the Victorian moral system, with its double sexual standard and systemic oppression of women, to be highly immoral, they considered modern departures from that warped morality understandable, if not always ideal. In the absence of an alternative, truly moral framework—which they were laboring

to provide—the sexual license flaunted by young flappers could be seen as a reasonable reaction against the repression and injustice endemic to “traditional” morality.  

It is unclear to what extent Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were aware of the rise of modern feminism, or were familiar with the changing views of sexuality and religion. When writing of women’s rights activists, they generally pointed to notable nineteenth-century women like Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as well as to Carrie Chapman Catt and their fellow Methodists, Frances Willard and Anna Howard Shaw. They were, however, cognizant of a general anti-Christian sentiment among a number of modern women’s rights advocates, an attitude that they found understandable. They reasoned that “radicals” had good reasons for claiming that the church “had hindered more than helped the woman’s cause,” and the fact that the “church seemed to be the last to yield to the growing spirit of sex-democracy,” causing them “great grief.” They hoped that their own work would bring about the much needed reform of Christianity that would reunite proponents of women’s rights with a new, woman-centered Christian belief system, and would help to overcome an enduring cultural “feminitis.”

114 As one member of the Association of Women Preachers expressed, “modern girls” were “better than their mothers were.” In a talk she gave frequently to audiences around the country, Lida M. Herrick argued that “all the talk about the evils of flapperism is doing more harm than good,” and insisted that “boys and girls are not going to perdition.” [taken from an unmarked clipping “…Says Modern Girls Better than Mothers Were,” in Southard Papers, Schlesinger]. The Woman’s Pulpit also contains reports of Herrick’s work.

115 See, for example, Southard’s Journal, 27 April 1919. They also celebrated the Woman’s Declaration of Independence from Seneca Falls. Southard printed a copy of the declaration in the Woman’s Pulpit (Vol. 1, No. 8, Jan-Feb 1924), and Starr included a copy of the declaration as an appendix in her book, Bible Status of Women.

116 Woman’s Pulpit 2, no. 5 (December 1925): 2.

117 Woman’s Pulpit 1, no. 11 (September 1924): 3.
Although Bushnell, Starr, and Southard continued to advance woman-centered perspectives on sexual ethics throughout the 1910s and 1920s, they nonetheless found little support among a younger generation of feminists. Their commitment to Christianity, albeit a Christianity that departed in significant ways from traditional formulations, and, particularly, their conflicting understandings of sexuality, prevented them from finding common cause with a new generation of women’s movement leaders. Living and working in the Midwest and on the West Coast, they were also located far from the geographical centers of the new vanguard of women’s leaders.

**American Protestantism**

Unable to find support among a younger generation of women’s leaders, and with the decline of women’s reform work eroding their cultural authority, it became possible for once respected women like Bushnell, Starr, and Southard to be perceived as “cranks” with few supporters. But to fully understand their increasing marginalization, it is useful to examine the shifting context of American Protestantism as well. All three women were committed Methodists, and they concentrated their efforts on the reform of traditional Protestantism. In an era when a number of Protestants were aligning themselves with progressive social causes, one might expect to find a center of support for the work of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard within early-twentieth-century Protestant churches. But if feminists were to find that, despite their best intentions, pervasive social and sexual inequalities persisted into the modern age even in their own relationships, nowhere was the perseverance of traditional gender inequalities in the twentieth century more evident than in America’s churches. As it turned out, a variety of developments within American
Protestantism would inhibit the reception of Bushnell’s, Starr’s, and Southard’s thought, even among those who shared many of their religious commitments.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, American Protestants of all persuasions found themselves in a world in which Victorian economic and social arrangements no longer prevailed. The separate, gendered spaces of nineteenth-century middle-class existence had given way to shared social and work spaces with the rise of mass culture and the growing numbers of women in the work force. As entrepreneurial capitalism gave way to a new corporate order, the “feminine” morality of self-restraint came to seem inappropriately restrictive in a world offering new consumer pleasures and commercial leisure possibilities. In the absence of validating social configurations, certain aspects of Victorian gender ideologies appeared outmoded, restrictive, or simply not true to reality. This was particularly the case with the Victorian emphasis on women’s moral superiority. As women no longer occupied the private refuge of the home, but increasingly embraced the amusements and responsibilities of modern life, depictions of women as naturally pure, chaste, and particularly religious lost their hold on the popular imagination. Whereas religion had long been considered the appropriate realm for women, due to their moral and sentimental natures, early twentieth-century Americans began to doubt the aptness or desirability of this arrangement. The overrepresentation of women in religious organizations suddenly seemed objectionable, and revelatory of men’s troubling lack of participation. Men came to fear that women’s overrepresentation

118 My discussion of the masculinization of American Protestantism is drawn from Bederman’s, “The Women Have Had Charge,” 107-140.

119 Already in the 1880s American Protestants had begun to reorient religion with manliness, Gail Bederman writes, beginning religious boys’ clubs that used “athletics and a quasi-militaristic organization as bait” (“The Women Have Had Charge,” 115).
in American Protestantism had emasculated and “sissified” religion. They decided that they needed to “take back” religion, to recapture the “virile” gospel message.\textsuperscript{120}

In 1911 and 1912, thousands of men across the nation united in a crusade to provide “More Men for Religion, More Religion for Men.”\textsuperscript{121} This Men and Religion Forward Movement swept the country, crossing denominational lines, and reaching seventy-six major cities and 1,083 smaller towns. Convinced that “the women have had charge of the church work long enough,” men hoped to bring back a masculine balance to American religion by finding the purported 3,000,000 men who were missing from American church life.\textsuperscript{122} Although the Men and Religion Forward Movement failed in its mission to find those “3,000,000 missing men” and bring them to the churches, its attempts to masculinize American Protestantism were not without success. By the mid-1920s, according to historian Gail Bederman, “American Protestants had effectively masculinized their churches.” Churchmen touted business models for church work, and women’s hold on power in many American denominations steadily diminished.\textsuperscript{123} Once flourishing women’s organizations faltered, as male church leaders seized control of women’s boards by merging the organizations with their own. The effects of this

\textsuperscript{120} As Bederman explains, churchmen ignored the fact that “the churches had been two-thirds female for over two hundred years.” Instead, “they discovered—or, more accurately, constructed—a “crisis,” pointing to the ‘excess of women over men in church life’ as a new and dangerous threat, requiring immediate attention” (“The Women Have Had Charge,” 115).


\textsuperscript{123} Bederman, “The Women Have Had Charge,” 133-134. The effects of masculinization on Presbyterian women, Bederman assesses, was “devastating.” Churchmen disbanded women’s organizations or put them under male leadership in the name of “efficiency,” and “women church leaders lost their authority.”
ideological and practical masculinization of American Protestantism are apparent in both the liberal and the more conservative branches of the faith.

The rise of antifeminism among American fundamentalists is a familiar story. Historians have demonstrated how theological commitments, such as the promotion of biblical inerrancy and dispensational theology, combined with an antimodernist stance to produce antifeminist, and at times, clearly misogynistic rhetoric and practices among conservative Protestants. Although fundamentalists were not a homogeneous group, and they embraced various and at times conflicting views of women, many fundamentalists began to reject the Victorian emphasis on women’s purity, moral superiority, and innate religiosity, while retaining the Victorian model of familial relationships that relegated women to the home as wife and mother. Far from seeing women as morally superior, many fundamentalists became increasingly suspicious of women’s nature, and they resurrected the classic symbol of Eve. According to fundamentalist readings of Genesis, Eve had demonstrated her weakness in the Garden of Eden, and according to some of their interpretations of the scriptures, the Bible actually foretold of “silly women” who would pervert the gospel in the “last days.”

124 Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 31. See also Betty De Berg, *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). As Bendroth explains, dispensational teachings “depended heavily on notions of order and obedience. It defined sin as ‘disorder’ and rebellion against God’s rule as a latter-day sign of religious apostasy and social anarchy.” The loose translation for the Greek word for “dispensation,” fundamentalists pointed out, was in fact the “ordering of a household” (*Fundamentalism and Gender*, 8).

125 Bendroth notes that fundamentalists added an “ominous corollary” to the Victorian myth of feminine virtue. As J. C. Massee warned, “Since woman is the determining factor in social life,” she “must of necessity be religious or destroy the very society she creates” (J. C. Massee, “Women Attend Special Meeting,” 30 January 1931, a reprinted excerpt from a standard sermon on “The Old Fashioned vs. the New Woman,” J. C. Massee Papers, quoted in Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 64).

126 Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 51.
could point to the theological perversions of liberal Protestantism that reflected, in their minds, an “effeminate” squandering of the virility of true Christian doctrine.  

Fundamentalist pronouncements on women’s spiritual and psychological inferiority, and their denunciations of the habits of modern women, abound in early fundamentalist literature. In practice, many conservative women persisted in their religious work—primarily in the area of missions and religious education—but they were to remain “submissive,” and frequently encountered significant opposition to attempts at asserting other religious or social power. The models of obedient wife and self-sacrificing mother continued to define women’s identities in conservative Protestant circles through the 1930s and beyond. Even though they were often deeply suspicious of the moral character of women, fundamentalist leaders continued to relegate women to their roles as mothers and guardians of the home. And as various forces of change seemed poised to undo the very foundations of the social order, the family, and woman’s role in it as wife and mother, became increasingly important as a guarantor of the nation’s moral and social order.

---

127 Ibid., 65, 67. “It is manly to follow Christ,” claimed one writer for a Baptist journal, according to Bendroth. He wrote that “the Bible is virile literature” and that Christ himself was “the most manly of men” [A. William Lewis, “The Investment of Manhood,” Bible Champion 30 (July 1929): 384], while Curtis Lee Laws claimed that “The rationalists would emasculate Christianity by cutting out supernaturalism” [Laws, “The Supernatural,” Watchman-Examiner 8 November 1923, 1432].

128 See Bendroth, Fundamentalism and Gender, 81. On the religious activities of fundamentalist women, see also Hamilton, “Women, Public Ministry, and American Fundamentalism.”

129 This discussion of Fundamentalist mothers is taken from a chapter on “The Fundamentalist Family” in Bendroth’s Fundamentalism and Gender, especially pages 100-103. This continued idealization of the role of motherhood, together with the fundamentalist rejection of women’s moral superiority, are in indicative of the complexities of fundamentalists’ attitudes toward femininity. Bendroth aptly quotes J. C. Massee’s expression of this complexity: “Oh woman!” “How you bother us, how you puzzle us, how you exasperate us, yet how we love you!” [Massee, “The Old-Fashioned Woman,” n.d., J.C. Massee Papers], (Fundamentalism and Gender, 50).
Although Bushnell, Starr, and Southard held certain religious beliefs in common with conservative Protestants, including an emphasis on personal salvation through faith in Christ, belief in the authority of the Bible and the rejection higher critical methods of interpretation, and a continued commitment to the role of theology in shaping social and moral practices, their work was not widely read in the conservative circles. The publication of their major works did not occur until the 1920s, and by that time, divisions between liberal and conservative Protestants had reached new levels of acrimony. Fundamentalists were losing their hold on Protestant denominations to liberals, just as women were appealing for greater rights within their denominations. Given their existing association of right doctrine with masculine virility, it was not difficult for fundamentalists to project a liberal conspiracy between modern Protestant women and their liberal theological opponents. Additionally, as tensions flared between fundamentalists and modernists in the volatile 1920s, any middle ground between the two poles became less tenable. Conservatives, who had once embraced many lower critical methods of biblical interpretation, retreated from their positions and reified the King James Version of the Bible as “King Truth.” The theological setting of the 1920s was hardly conducive to radical and woman-centered reexaminations of the scriptures, even ones penned by evangelical women claiming to adhere to biblical literalism.

The lack of support Bushnell, Starr, and Southard found in conservative Protestant circles is perhaps not surprising to those familiar with the history of early

130 Bushnell’s *God’s Word to Women* did receive a favorable review in the Moody Bible Institute Monthly in 1921. Bushnell described the review as “an unstinting recommendation of my teachings.” See Bushnell to Dummer, 20 May 1921. Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. She received a less favorable review, however, from Griffith Thomas in the *Sunday School Times* (22 March 1924).

131 See Bendroth’s chapter “Fundamentalist Men and Liberal Women: Gender in the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy,” *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 54-72.
fundamentalism. But they might be expected to have found a more hospitable reception among more progressive Protestants. After all, they continued to emphasize social action, denounced tradition, and worked to render the word of God relevant to modern America. Although little historical work has examined in detail the role of gender in liberal Protestantism, when juxtaposed to the harsh antifeminist rhetoric of fundamentalists, it is generally assumed that liberal Protestants necessarily would have been more amenable to women’s rights, and would have held far more progressive views on family and gender than did their conservative counterparts. And to a certain extent this assumption holds true. In their writings, liberal Protestant leaders were more likely than conservatives to support women’s suffrage and other feminist causes. But it would be a mistake to construe early-twentieth-century liberal Protestantism as entirely compatible with women’s advancement, particularly when it came to issues of family and society.

Liberal Protestants had, after all, provided much of the impetus for the Men and Religion Forward Movement, and like their conservative counterparts, they believed that men needed to reclaim religion from women’s stifling hold in order for it to become a viable faith for modern men. Consequently, the theology, and particularly the social visions of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, would fare little better with twentieth-century liberal Protestants, than with religious conservatives. Both institutional and ideological factors impeded the reception of their thought among Protestant liberals and moderates. On the institutional front, mainline Protestantism’s centralized power structures inhibited the advancement of women in its organizations. As Michael S. Hamilton has explained,

132 An exception to the scarcity of work on gender and liberal Protestantism would be examinations of gender and the social gospel. See, for example, Fishburn, *Fatherhood of God*, and Edwards and De Swarte Gifford, eds., *Gender and the Social Gospel*. 

371
the decentralized organizational structures of conservative Protestantism allowed for more opportunities for women’s advancement than did the more established and hierarchical liberal or mainline organizations. Women could and often did rise to power in smaller conservative sects, at a time when their more liberal sisters were being stripped of power in mainline churches. Although mainline Protestants included more “token” women on their national boards than did more conservative denominations, women exerted little real denominational power, and their active participation did not often extend down to the local level in many instances.

By the late 1920s, when liberal and moderate factions had emerged victorious over their conservative rivals for control of mainline Protestant denominations, the power of women in those denominations had been significantly diminished. With the decline of the social and religious constructs of female moral superiority, women had lost an effective claim to power in religious circles. Additionally, with the rise of professionalization and a growing emphasis on scientific expertise, many women themselves advocated a gender-neutral, “objective” approach to social issues that discouraged the development and application of particularly woman-centered analyses. As women’s organizations themselves downplayed emotion and female solidarity for the sake of “efficiency” and professionalization, other, more traditionally-minded women found little reason to devote their own time and money to these organizations. Historian Patricia R. Hill, for example, has demonstrated the effects of these changes on Protestant women’s involvement in foreign missions from 1870-1920. During this time, women lost control of once thriving organizations because many of their members had become

distanced from the increasingly “scientific” and “professional” identities of the institutions, rendering the organizations vulnerable to forceful takeovers by male denominational leaders in the 1920s. 134

Such patterns appear frequently in the literature on women in Protestant denominations during this period.135 At first, many women privately expressed outrage at the seizure of their denominational power, and some publicly expressed their concerns. In the 1920s one finds frequent warnings directed at male denominational leaders that, if they did not allow women to participate actively and on an equal basis with men in their churches, women would simply look to secular avenues for advancement and turn their backs on religion altogether. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard all voiced this concern.136 Their objections, however, and those of other women, went unheeded. And, in fact, by the next generation many of those women who did remain in Protestant churches had largely come to accept their subordinate positions. Examining the results of research conducted in 1946 and 1947 by the Federal Council of Churches, Inez Cavert concluded that there was “a very real concern on the part of church women” that men would “lose all interest” in church affairs if women were to take greater responsibility. With regard to male leadership on church boards, for example, some women would claim that the


official church board was “the only men’s club in the church,” and that it “would never do to give women any responsibility there.” Most women who achieved leadership positions in mainline denominations served “as deacons or trustees in small rural churches.” Reminiscent of the earlier double standard, women themselves set high standards for other women in leadership positions. They did not “think that ‘a woman’ is all that is needed,” Cavert wrote. “Indeed, to fill all the qualifications suggested she would have to be a paragon!—not over-aggressive, nor yet afraid to speak up, cooperative, tactful, capable, able (and willing) to present the women’s point of view to the board and its problems to the women’s organization, free from petty jealousy, not eager for power and prestige.” And when women failed to meet such qualifications, it was “likely to be considered proof positive by the local church that women cannot do the job.”

The institutional marginalization of women accompanied and reflected enduring theological and ideological biases in American Protestantism. As mentioned in my analysis of Bushnell’s, Starr’s, and Southard’s positioning with regard to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century religious developments, the three women had much in common with proponents of the Social Gospel. Like Social Gospelers, they stressed the centrality of active social reform in their constructions of Christianity. Although they

---


placed a greater emphasis on the place of individual conversion than did many Social Gospel leaders, they nevertheless shared a common belief in the significant religious role of reform. Without neglecting individual conversion, then, the importance Bushnell, Starr, and Southard assigned women’s rights in their theologies was in many ways comparable to the importance Social Gospelers placed upon broader social reforms in defining true Christian faith.

For Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, the condition of women in modern society constituted their primary social concern. Even Southard, who promoted a number of social causes including populism, pacifism, labor rights, and socialism over the course of her career, clearly identified women’s rights as her chief concern. But although Social Gospelers advocated a wide array of social reforms, a concern for women’s rights was conspicuously absent from their agenda. Not inconsequently, some of the most ardent promoters of the Men and Religion Forward Movement had been liberal Protestant Social Gospelers. Although progressive on other social concerns, when it came to issues of gender and family life, Social Gospel leaders consistently displayed conservative, rather than progressive attitudes. Men like Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, and Josiah Strong firmly upheld the Victorian family ideal as the basis for a Christian social order. As Social Darwinists, they considered the Victorian family to be the most advanced social institution ever developed, and central to social morality and to the future progress of civilization. Rauschenbusch, for example, argued that for both biblical and biological reasons, the purpose of women was to serve as “mothers of the race.” In an

---

139 Southard wrote in her journal that, despite all of the great social issues of the day, the “public questions, national and international” that interested her, the “woman question in all its varied [bases] seems to make the strongest appeal to me” (30 July 1919).

outline for a project he called *The Woman Problem*, penned around 1899, Rauschenbusch sketched out a theory of women’s physiological destiny. He believed, for example, that women should not participate in the work force because of the limitations menses and childbearing presented. In a speech ten years later, Rauschenbusch outlined the evolution of women in the patriarchal family. He contended that it was women’s duty “to lift the family further,” and claimed that the very future of the race depended upon women in the home.\textsuperscript{141} Rauschenbusch claimed that “no woman comes to perfect womanhood” without experiencing marriage and self-sacrificing motherhood.\textsuperscript{142} By promoting this static view of the Victorian family, Social Gospel leaders departed from their otherwise progressive social and political views. As historian Janet Fishburn notes, the “only plank in the Republican platform of 1912 that Rauschenbusch refused to endorse was that of woman suffrage.”\textsuperscript{143}

Traditional roles for women as wives and mothers were at the center of the Victorian family, and that institution, Social Gospel leaders maintained, constituted the center of their theology. A well-ordered family that was the culmination of evolutionary progress provided a model for a well-ordered, progressive society. Over time, Social Gospelers’ defense of the traditional family became “virtually synonymous” with their frequently touted ideal of “the Kingdom of God,” because the family provided the moral


\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 78. The quote comes from Rauschenbusch’s lecture, “What about the Woman?”, which he gave at least twenty times between 1902 and 1912. Fishburn transcribed the lecture, the notes for which are located in the Walter Rauschenbusch Papers, Box 21, Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, New York.

\textsuperscript{143} Fishburn, *Fatherhood of God*, 124.
source for the regeneration of society.\textsuperscript{144} Feminism, then, threatened not only their gender and family ideals, but the very foundations of their theology. It is unclear whether or not Social Gospel leaders encountered the writings of Bushnell, Starr, or Southard. But it is clear that the religious and social visions advanced by these women contradicted in significant ways the social and theological basis of the Social Gospel. The Social Gospel was very much “a theology written by men for men.”\textsuperscript{145}

Among Social Gospelers, then, as well as among other liberal Protestants, the integration of modern scientific theories into their religious world views did not disrupt—and at times contributed to—the persistence of conservative views of women and family in their religious and social thought. We have already observed how Social Darwinist thinking could support traditional understandings of women’s roles in the family and in society. But in the early twentieth century, another powerful scientific discourse permeated liberal Protestant thought, further hampering the development of a woman-centered theology and social vision. Related to the sociocultural evolutionary thought developed in the nineteenth century, eugenic thought began to emerge as early as the 1880s. By the turn of the century, eugenics had infiltrated nearly every social and political discourse, including American Protestantism.\textsuperscript{146} This new scientific school of thought drew freely upon the late-nineteenth-century notion of civilization, but stripped that civilization of its naturalistic inevitability. Civilized people now had to act to protect

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid. The Victorian family ideal embodied the mutual self-sacrifice necessary for social harmony, they believed (Ibid., 28).

\textsuperscript{145} Fishburn makes this assessment in \textit{Fatherhood of God}, 32.

\textsuperscript{146} By the twentieth century eugenics itself had become a fluid term that could be widely applied. As Christine Rosen notes, one physician commented in 1914 that eugenics had become “a mere catch phrase which covers any rubbish which any crank chooses to inflict upon the world” (\textit{Preaching Eugenics}, 11). See also Allison Berg, \textit{Mothering the Race: Women’s Narratives of Reproduction, 1890-1930} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 15, 81.
their superiority, and the very trappings of civilization seemed to render the civilized particularly vulnerable to the vigor of the “savages.”

A wide array American Protestants, particularly more liberal members, eagerly embraced eugenic theory as the leading representation of “modern science.” At a time when the cultural authority of Protestant ministers seemed to be perpetually eroding, ministers found that they could reclaim some of their power by becoming leading spokespeople for the culturally authoritative movement of eugenics. A number of Protestants had in fact championed social hygiene in the early decades of the twentieth century, seeing it as an ideal combination of modern scientific and religious impulses. David Pivar estimates that over 13,000 ministers had preached the social hygiene message, and in 1918 the Federal Council of Churches pledged to continue to advance social hygiene after the war, and they even worked to incorporate social hygiene into their Sunday school curriculum. Many Protestants were also quick to embrace the closely related and more pervasive discourse of eugenics. In 1926, a widely publicized

---

147 See Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*.

148 “Protestants of nearly every denomination, Jews and Catholics” who “overwhelmingly represented the liberal wings of their respective faiths” supported eugenics, writes Rosen (*Preaching Eugenics*, 14). Rosen notes that “The evidence yields a clear pattern about who elected to support eugenics reforms and who did not. Religious leaders pursued eugenics precisely when they moved away from traditional religious tenets. The liberals and modernists in their respective faiths—those who challenged their churches to conform to modern circumstances—became the eugenics movement’s most enthusiastic supporters (Ibid., 184).


150 Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene*, 224. See also Ibid., 215.
sermon contest sponsored by the American Eugenics Society further encouraged the preaching of eugenics, and religious arguments for eugenics could be heard from pulpits across the country.151 As Christine Rosen explains, eugenics and organized religion had certain features in common: “both encouraged the belief in a better world, whether that was eugenicists’ vision of a perfect human race or the clerics’ vision of heaven. Both also insisted on enforcing social codes, whether biological or ethical. Both had clear notions of sinfulness, although for the eugenicist, these transgressions were biological.”152

The boundaries between religion and science were indeed “remarkably fluid” at this time.153 One of the founders of eugenics, Francis Galton, expressed this melding explicitly in 1904, suggesting that eugenics might someday replace religion. It “must be introduced into the national conscience, like a new religion,” he recommended, and he professed the faith that eugenics had “strong claims to become an orthodox religious tenet of the future.”154 Psychologist G. Stanley Hall contended that eugenics was “simply a legitimate interpretation of Christianity.” “Is it not all latent in our Scriptures?” he asked, and recommended a “new eugenic exegesis” for the “entire Old Testament from the myth of Eden to the latest prophets.”155

151 Rosen, Preaching Eugenics, 120-121.
152 Ibid., 183-4. Both also had catechisms and rituals, Rosen notes. Additionally, they were also reacting to the same cultural trends: to immigration, urbanization, and industrialization (22). Rosen does add that “if preachers and rabbis too eagerly embraced eugenics, they also consistently challenged eugenicists’ belief that scientists were the most qualified judges of human ‘fitness.’”
153 Ibid., 27.
155 G. Stanley Hall, “Eugenics: Its Ideals and What It Is Going to Do,” Religious Education 6 (June 1911): 157, 154, quoted in Rosen, Preaching Eugenics, 38. Rosen writes that “Although Hall’s professional path led him to the secular world of social science, religion remained a constant influence on his work. He was representative of a transitional generation in U.S. social science, one that did not
Many Protestants found in the discourse of eugenics a modern and “scientific”
expression of their religious commitments, and a means of continuing their work in social
reform. Progressive or modernist Protestants found the discourse particularly compatible
with a more immanentist theology, a belief that the world around them was inherently
spiritual or religious and could be investigated as such.\textsuperscript{156} Within an immanentist
framework, science \textit{was} religion. In order to reach the modern mind in twentieth-century
America, Protestant liberals argued, religion needed to become more scientific.\textsuperscript{157} Many
Protestant leaders found that they could best bring together these scientific and religious
impulses by entering the burgeoning field of social science.\textsuperscript{158}

This increasing association of religion with science, and the accompanying
professionalization of social reform work, effectively diminished the role of women
reformers and weakened the authority of women in Protestant churches. But beyond these
structural and organizational effects, the substance of the reigning scientific discourse
further inhibited women’s advancement, and the development of a woman-centered
theological and moral system. For central to eugenic theory was a heightened role
assigned to motherhood.\textsuperscript{159} Birthrates among white, native-born, middle-class women had
long been declining, and by the 1920s they reached an all-time low, intensifying the

\textsuperscript{156} Durst, “No Legacy,” 35 (referring to Smyth). See also Hutchison, \textit{Modernist Impulse}.
\textsuperscript{157} Durst, “No Legacy,” 35.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 55. As Rosen points out, “a jurisdictional battle was brewing” between scientific and
religious forces, as “the morality-based efforts of the churches were giving way to the scientific,
professional efforts of the physicians” (\textit{Preaching Eugenics}, 57).
\textsuperscript{159} As Eileen Yeo argues in her introduction to \textit{Radical Femininity}, eugenics “saw women mainly
as mothers or, to use a more radical formulation: citizens engaged in race production” (5).
urgency for such women to bear children.¹⁶⁰ No longer contained in the private or domestic realm, motherhood increasingly emerged as a matter of public—and national—significance.¹⁶¹ Defined as mothers or potential mothers, white women necessarily played a crucial role in the advancement of white civilization.¹⁶² Protestant liberals, too, reinvoked motherhood and, with scientific backing, reassigned women to the home where they could carry on the all important task of perpetuating the race. In many ways this was a return to the nineteenth-century domestic ideal couched in a scientific, rather than sentimental tone. Once again, religious and cultural leaders instructed women on their need to sacrifice their own interests for the sake of others—in this case not only for her family, or even her nation, but for the entire race. As Allison Berg has articulated in her study of early-twentieth-century motherhood and race, “the evolutionary metaphors that dominated discussions of reproduction in the 1910s and 20s suggested that motherhood should be protected and perfected not for women’s sake but for the future of the race.”¹⁶³

Initially, many feminists and women’s rights activists had embraced eugenic theory. They saw it as a way to denounce the sentimental and self-sacrificing model of Victorian womanhood and motherhood by arguing that women’s submissiveness was, in reality, dysgenic. They used eugenic reasoning to support greater educational opportunities for women along with public sex education. But, as historian Linda Gordon points out, “Every eugenic argument was in the long run more effective in the hands of

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 8.
¹⁶³ Berg, *Mothering the Race*, 29. It was a “mother’s racial responsibility” to live for others, specifically as “a conduit for racial advancement” (30).
antifeminists than feminists.”¹⁶⁴ In the context of early-twentieth-century fears of “race suicide,” arguments that women belonged in the home for the sole purpose of procreating the race held greater sway. Over time, eugenics came to focus more on heredity than on environment. As a result, social factors diminished in importance, as did women’s roles in child-rearing, replaced by an emphasis on her role as biological breeder. Antifeminists had seized control of some basic eugenic concepts, and as a result eugenics became increasingly antifeminist.¹⁶⁵ Some women—including Bushnell—opposed the early-twentieth-century race suicide scare, but they frequently encountered keen opposition.¹⁶⁶ The authority of modern science, accorded with the moral weight of modern religion, presented an indomitable front. As Ida Husted Harper had pointed out, women only had men’s word, handed down through the “masculine authority” of the churches, that it was their commission to “multiply and replenish the earth.”¹⁶⁷ But such instances of critical dissent wielded little power against the majority alignment of religious and scientific opinion.

Among liberal Protestants, then, there was little sympathy for the woman-centered and theologically based approach to issues of sexuality and family advanced by Bushnell, Starr, and Southard. Preferring the illumination of modern scientific theories to careful biblical exegesis, Protestant liberals had little use for such painstaking explications of progressive scriptural views of womanhood and sexuality. Just at the time when a small

¹⁶⁴ Gordon, Moral Property, 83.
¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 82-4.
¹⁶⁶ Catherine Waugh McCulloch, for example, a future speaker at an annual meeting of the International Association of Women Ministers, denounced the scare in 1911, and “received obscene and threatening postcards” (Ibid., 92). Bushnell took issue with the “many foolish men (what are their motives?), like a recent President of the Untied States,” who “are constantly talking of the nation’s need of proliferous mothers” [Bushnell, “Birth-Control: Where’s the Harm?” The Light (March-April 1923): 11].
¹⁶⁷ Kraditor, Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 117-118.
group of women had achieved the educational skills and theological expertise to retranslate the scriptures and reconstruct Christian doctrine, then, a substantial portion of American Protestant leaders no longer looked to such biblicist theology for their social and religious positions. But the alternative authority they embraced, modern scientific knowledge in the form of eugenic theories and social hygiene, largely failed to advance progressive views of womanhood or promote a woman-centered approach to issues of sexuality and morality.

By the 1920s, the growing professionalization of reform work, accompanied by the waning authority of female reformers and the diminishing role of religion in social reform—factors evident in the decline of social purity and the rise of social hygiene in America—contributed to the increasing marginalization of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard. Changing views of sexuality further limited their effectiveness within the modern women’s movement, and their authority in broader circles as well. And developments within American Protestantism, among conservatives and liberals alike, also inhibited the reception of their thought. In light of these historical developments, it is perhaps not surprising that the names of Katharine Bushnell, Lee Anna Starr, and Madeline Southard are largely unknown in our own time.
CONCLUSION

By the 1920s Bushnell, Starr, and Southard did not discover the supporters they had hoped they would find. Bushnell continued in her theological pursuits, publishing various editions of her biblical work along with social commentary on issues of sexuality. In 1928 she returned to China, where she remained until the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931.1 In 1946, at the age of ninety, she passed away, an obscure and marginalized woman who seemed a relic of an earlier era.

Southard continued to devote her energies to her association of women ministers. The organization never achieved the level of success she had anticipated. It continued to provide fellowship and support for a small number of women ministers, but she never witnessed the sweeping changes she had once envisioned. Her responsibilities in connection with the association, together with her preaching and speaking schedule, left little time for research and writing. When she finally revised and published her dissertation in 1927, the book found only a small audience of interested readers. In 1928 she left for Southern Asia, where she spent the following four years as a missionary and social purity lecturer. By the 1930s and 1940s it had become clear that the dawning age of the emancipation of women in American religion and American society that had seemed so real in the early years of the twentieth century had never materialized. Although the profound cultural changes she had envisioned did not occur, the institutional changes Southard achieved through the organization she established

1 Hardwick, O Thou Woman, 79.
contributed to her legacy. Today she is heralded as one of the leading Methodist women in modern Protestantism, and is credited with achieving the ordination of women in the Methodist Church. Her association of women ministers, though never a large or highly influential group, nevertheless continues to this day, and its journals contain some of the most complete records of women’s struggles for ecclesiastical rights in twentieth-century America.

Of the three women, Starr has disappeared most completely from the historical record. At her death in 1937, a few local newspapers noted her passing and acknowledged her pioneering work for women in American Protestantism. And it was Starr’s book, *The Bible Status of Woman*, that Southard sent to the American Standard Bible translation committee in 1940. Although never celebrated in mainstream Protestantism, her work did remain influential among a small number of Protestants, and it informed later Protestant women like Inez Cavert and Georgia Harkness.²

Although remarkable women in many ways, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard demonstrated certain shortcomings that might have contributed to the marginalization of their own work and thought. In some ways they were visionaries, looking ahead of their own time to a new age of liberation, but even as they did so they could at times be rather shortsighted. With the notable exception of the anti-Semitism Bushnell and Starr displayed in their theological critiques of Old Testament theology, they largely avoided the virulent racism that often marked early-twentieth-century American culture—a

---

² Alma White, too, was a great admirer of Starr’s, and in 1955 the Pillar of Fire republished Starr’s *Bible Status of Women*. Although Georgia Harkness was aware of Starr’s work, she herself did not carry on their tradition of intentionally woman-centered theological studies. Although she focused on issues such as women’s ordination, she did not pursue the broader theological and social critiques exemplified in the work of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard.
racism that frequently pervaded the women’s movement as well. Their rejection of evolutionary frameworks likely distanced them from notions of race and civilization common among proponents of Darwinian social theories, and their constant emphasis on the conditions of women gave them an extremely critical view of men of their own race and class. This is not to suggest, however, that they were outspoken advocates of racial equality, or that they actively sought meaningful alliances with African American women or other women of color. And Bushnell, at least, was not above using widespread racism to promote her cause. For example, in her crusade against prostitution in California, she warned American women of the grim results that could transpire were “almond-eyed citizens” to attain the vote before they did.\textsuperscript{3} Despite such rhetoric, however, it was far more common for Bushnell to draw a distinction between men and women, rather than between races or ethnic groups. The title of her book \textit{Heathen Slaves and Christian Masters} reveals her tendency to blame respectable Christian men for the oppression of “heathen” women, and she left little doubt with whom her sympathies lay. Southard, too, demonstrated an openness to women regardless of their race. In 1923, for example, she welcomed Leana Bower of St. John, Kansas—an African American woman—into the young Association of Women Preachers. Southard annotated a letter from Bower noting that she was “our first Negro member.”\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{3} See Pivar, \textit{Purity and Hygiene}, 71-2. However, it is important to note that Bushnell can also be traced to anti-imperialist agitation. See Tyrrell’s discussion of this in \textit{Woman’s World/Woman’s Empire}, 213.

\textsuperscript{4} Bower to Southard, 1923, annotated in Southard’s handwriting. Southard Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. This is a notable inclusion, since Southard and other leaders of the association were particular as to the women they accepted into their group. For example, they worked to exclude Pentecostal and other “erratic” women who, they believed, gave women preachers a bad name. See Mary E. Kuhl to Southard, 3 November 1919. Southard Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.
For Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, the oppression of women by men remained primary. Because of this focus, however, they were not always sensitive to the significant differences that could exist among women. And their strong commitment to the theological roots of women’s oppression could at times lead them to neglect the more practical aspects of women’s subordination. For example, they offered few concrete recommendations as to how American women could escape the drudgeries of housework and childcare, preferring instead to focus on dismantling the theological foundations of women’s domesticity. And, although at times sensitive to the plight of poorer women, they did not actively work to address the needs of working women, a cause common among women’s rights activists of their time. Although their focus on the religious underpinnings of society often provided them with a broad perspective on women’s oppression, then, it could also potentially limit the scope of their work.

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were not unaware of the many worthy causes available to women reformers. But they maintained that, as Christian women skilled in biblical languages and theological training, it was their particular task to undo the theological obstacles to women’s advancement. In light of the dramatic expansion of women’s rights that they had observed in their own lifetimes, they tended to see the liberation of women as an uneven but nevertheless persistent advance, and were optimistic that a new age of women was upon them. Rather than seeking to work closely

---

5 In this way they were not different from many other early-twentieth-century feminists. See Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism*.

6 Of the three, Southard was most sensitive to the needs of working men and women, and she became a cautious socialist. But she still considered the religious rights of women to be her primary focus.

7 A more limited scope is not necessarily a weakness. They needed to balance the desire to focus enough on one particular cause in order to make a significant difference, with broadening their concerns to embrace a more comprehensive view of women’s liberation.
with secular feminists, then, or working to pursue interracial or cross-class alliances, they
maintained a faith that, when the true, woman-centered essence of Christianity was
revealed, women of all kinds would inevitably be drawn to it. It was their task to unveil
that faith.

Bushnell, Starr, and Southard were single, childless, white middle-class women,
and their work in many ways reflects this composition. They were not, however, wealthy
middle-class women. Evidence suggests that they came from the lower portion of the
middle class, and for them finances were often in short supply. Starr drew a modest
salary as a minister, but Bushnell and Southard supported themselves primarily through
their speaking engagements. Given their other responsibilities, all three women struggled
to find time to devote to writing, publishing, and distributing their work. As a result, their
work was often published years, or even decades, after it was first begun. This delay
likely diminished the contemporary relevance of their thought.

Personal factors, then, combined with historical circumstances to inhibit the
reception of their work. The historical significance of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard,
however, should not be assessed solely in terms of their historical legacies. Upon close
examination, the failures of these women to successfully shape mainstream Protestant
views of gender and sexuality reveal much about the choices available to early-twentieth-
century women and to American Protestants. Their thought illuminates the shifting
arrangements of religion, sexuality, and gender during this time in part by revealing
alternative paths not taken. Working to negotiate the changing religious and social

---

8 I have not been able to determine Starr’s financial situation. Southard, however, came from
difficult economic circumstances, and she often struggled to meet her financial needs, as well as the needs
of her widowed mother and sister. Bushnell supported herself through her work, and towards the end of her
career was supported by a nephew, as well.
contexts of early-twentieth-century America, they maintained a distinctly woman-centered approach.

Their work demonstrates the fruitful interplay between their personal experiences in reform work and their theological reflections. By reassessing Christian “truths” professed by centuries of theologians, they constructed radically different views of women, sin, and society. They turned the Victorian notion of feminine virtue on its head, and, by challenging the purported moral superiority and self-sacrificial nature of women, as well as the idealization of motherhood, they severed the close connections between Christian beliefs and Victorian constructions of gender and family professed by liberal and conservative Protestants alike. They challenged these cultural conventions on both a theological and, when necessary, on a “scientific” basis as well. Their woman-centered vantage point provided them with a critical perspective on centuries-old theological traditions, as well as on contemporary scientific constructions of social “truths,” and enabled them to fashion sophisticated alternatives to both “secular” and religious constructions of gender, sexuality, and morality.

In their opposition to Victorian social and family arrangements, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard not only parted ways with the majority of Protestants of their own time, but they also provide Protestant alternatives to the “family values” discourse that continues to dominate twentieth-century discussions of religion and sexuality in America. In doing so, their examples illuminate an important middle ground between conservative Protestants advocating a return to Victorianism, and secular feminists committed to alternative social arrangements.
If we listen only to the historical voices of such radicals as Emma Goldman or Crystal Eastman, or to conservatives reacting to their shocking challenges to moral conventions, we are likely to take radicals’ or conservatives’ assessments of the incompatibility of Christianity and women’s liberation in early twentieth-century America as our own. This tendency is strengthened if we follow the example of early-twentieth-century sex radicals and define women’s liberation primarily in terms of sexual freedom. In retrospect, however, many historians have recognized the oppression inherent in “sexual freedom” when underlying social and sexual inequalities persist. Bushnell, Starr, and Southard refused to endorse the new sexual “liberation,” but they also rejected the patriarchal sexual and social arrangements of Victorianism. A desire to address systemic cultural prejudices unites women like Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, with other feminists who, while continuing to promote sexual freedoms, have nonetheless adopted a more critical assessment of the challenges confronting that project.

Bushnell’s, Starr’s, and Southard’s attempts to refashion Protestantism in order to remedy the social and sexual inequalities they observed around them should also encourage historians of sexuality to avoid the tendency to uncritically equate religion with conservative and reactionary constructions of sexuality. The history of sexuality in twentieth-century America has often been written as a kind of progress narrative, framed by the decreasing role of religion in constructing sexual meaning. In fact, as historian Molly McGarry has argued, in modern America the history of sexuality and the history of secularism seem to be inextricably intertwined. In his influential *History of Sexuality*, for example, Michel Foucault depicted the birth of the modern sexual subject in the nineteenth century as a transition from religious ways of knowing about sex to scientific
conceptions. He thus constructed a narrative that has been advanced by subsequent scholars in which religious constructions of sexuality are necessarily defined as anti-modern or reactionary. Accordingly, few scholars of modern sexuality have seriously grappled with the role religion has played in constructing understandings of sex, and those who have, have tended to focus on conservative repressions of or restrictions upon sexuality. Such assumptions, however, have blinded historians to the role that religion might play in more progressive constructions of sexuality, and have also occluded understandings of the persistence of religious views in seemingly “secular” scientific frameworks of sexuality, contributing to an overly simplistic or deterministic understanding of the past.

The writings of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard can also challenge common perceptions among American Protestants that conservative approaches to scripture necessarily produce conservative understandings of gender. Rejecting the tools of higher criticism and modernist views of biblical authority, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard nevertheless constructed elaborate critiques of “traditional” gender roles and family arrangements. In fact, their work has a particular relevance to those conservative Protestants who continue to hold literalist views of biblical interpretation. Contrary to the predictions of religious liberals and secularists, early-twentieth-century fundamentalism

---

9 My discussion of the history of sexuality and secularism is drawn from Molly McGarry’s excellent “Secular Subjects, Queer Matters,” unpublished manuscript received from author. As McGarry explains, “If secularization is a progress narrative that culminates in the telos of freedom from religion, religion functions as an anachronistic invasion in public life that logically aligns with conservative and reactionary ‘returns’ to moral values.”

did not die out in the wake of the Scopes Trial. And contrary to the belief of many early-twentieth-century feminists, religion has continued to play a significant role in constructions of gender and sexuality for a large number of Americans even in the modern era. Many conservative Protestants simply retreated from public view, and worked to build their own educational and religious institutions and organizations, and develop their own views of gender and family, set apart from mainstream American culture. They reemerged on the public scene with surprising strength in the 1970s, however, and have since played a central role in the development of the Religious Right, and its emphasis on traditional “family values,” powerfully shaping the political and cultural landscape of contemporary America.

Like earlier Protestant fundamentalism, modern evangelicalism is not a monolithic movement; it encompasses a wide range of religious and social perspectives. Beginning in the 1960s, and emerging more visibly in the 1970s, a small feminist movement has appeared within American evangelical circles. Much of the work done by evangelical feminists has echoed that done by Protestant women of decades past, although often without widespread knowledge of the women who preceded them. In recent years, however, a number of conservative Protestant women have rediscovered the work of Bushnell and, to a lesser degree, of Starr and Southard as well. Three charismatic, “spirit-filled” women have designed a website devoted to Bushnell’s God’s Word to Women. The site contains links to all one-hundred lessons of God’s Word to Women, as well as to Penn-Lewis’ Magna Charta and Bushnell’s Vashti-Esther Story.

These women take pains, however, to distance themselves from modern feminism.\textsuperscript{12} They draw on voices from the past to justify women’s biblical right to preach the gospel, and to argue for greater religious authority for women, but an authority based on complementarian rather than egalitarian gender arrangements.\textsuperscript{13}

The organization Christians for Biblical Equality has also promoted the work of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, and has recently republished an edition of \textit{God’s Word to Women}. Twenty-first-century Christian women have found in the work of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard avenues for greater opportunities for women, without contradicting their theological convictions. As of yet the potential of this work to destabilize contemporary evangelical understandings of family, gender, and sexuality has not been fully recognized.

In their own lifetimes, Bushnell, Starr, and Southard failed to see the radical social and religious reorganizations they had hoped for. A renewed interest in their work raises intriguing possibilities, as another generation of women attempts to bring together their religious commitments with their understandings of gender, family, and sexuality in the twenty-first century. Their writings should alert women to the potential challenges a woman-centered theology might pose to traditional arrangements of gender and family. But at the same time, the challenges Bushnell, Starr, and Southard faced in their own time

\textsuperscript{12} The three women are Pat Joyce, Gay Anderson, and Barbara Collins. “Placing the word Biblical before feminist, or saying Christian feminist does not solve the problem,” they explain. “The word feminist has come to be identified with a radical posture that maintains that women have few differences from men, or denies the need for men, or at best presents men as lesser beings like some of the TV sitcoms. We believe man and woman offer a completion and strength to each other. Woman was created as a help to man yet not inferior in any way.” (http://www.godswordtowomen.org/whoweare.htm, accessed on 13 June 2004).

\textsuperscript{13} This is perhaps not surprising, since Joyce, Anderson, and Collins focus almost exclusively on Bushnell, who was the least able to accommodate her views to twentieth-century developments. Southard, however, would provide a greater challenge to contemporary evangelical views of family, gender, and sexuality.
should caution present-day Americans—and religious “feminists” in particular—from offering overly simplistic pronouncements on the compatibility of feminism and Christianity in modern America.

The work of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard, however, is significant not only with regard to conservative views of sexuality and gender, but also in the way it highlights the failure of mainstream Protestants to embrace sophisticated, woman-centered, religious approaches to issues of sexuality and family. Just at the time when women like Bushnell, Starr, and Southard had the skills necessary to construct radical critiques of traditional male theology, the ground shifted beneath them as liberal Protestants, who otherwise might have been receptive to their work, turned away from traditional theological reflection and looked instead to the authority of modern science. Without a powerful, woman-centered critique of traditional Protestant theology, liberal Protestants were unable or unwilling to fashion religiously informed alternatives to Victorian social and moral configurations. This failure would prove costly with the vigorous re-emergence of conservative Protestantism in the last third of the century. The rallying cry of “family values” put to rest any notions that religion had ceased to play a significant role in shaping many people’s views of gender, sexuality, and family, even in modern America. But liberal Protestants struggled to respond effectively to their conservative counterparts. Since the 1970s a number of feminist theologians—including many from within the Methodist tradition—have penned powerful revisionist theologies, addressing many of the themes advanced decades earlier by Bushnell, Starr, and Southard. But modern feminist theologians pursued their work largely unaware of the powerful traditions of woman-centered theological critique that preceded their own work.
The examples of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard also highlight the implications—as well as many of the causes—of the twentieth-century estrangement between religious and secular feminists. Although returning to the Christian scriptures as one of the foundations of the present-day women’s rights movement is neither possible nor desirable, appreciating the persistence of religion in defining a large number of Americans’ views of gender, sexuality, and family should lead to a reassessment of the cultural significance of religious justifications of women’s rights. The work of Bushnell, Starr, and Southard does much to dispel simplistic associations of religion with conservative social practices, and it reveals the far-reaching possibilities of a religiously grounded critique of conventional social and sexual arrangements. Although very much a product of the historical circumstances of their own times, their work may prove helpful in exposing and perhaps in circumventing some of the impasses that plague contemporary American society.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Manuscript Collections:

Ethel Sturges Dummer Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

Frances Elizabeth Willard Papers, Evanston Historical Society, Evanston, IL.

Josephine Butler Correspondence, Women’s Library, London, UK.

Luther Allan Weigle Papers, Yale University Library.

M. Madeline Southard Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

National Archives of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, Evanston, IL.

Northern Wisconsin “Slave” Investigations, 1882-1889; Series 81. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh.

Papers of the Standard Bible Committee, 1939-1968, Yale University Library, Divinity School Special Collections.

United Methodist Archives, Drew University.

Selected Periodicals:


Sources:


Bushnell, Katharine C. *The Badge of Guilt and Shame*. Oakland, CA: privately printed, 194?.


———. "Plain Words to Plain People." 1918.


Bushnell, Katharine C., and Elizabeth Andrew. The Queen's Daughters in India. London: Morgan & Scott, 1899.


Methodist Episcopal Church, South. *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 1924.


*Pittsburg Christian Advocate*. July 29, 1926.


Wilson, Elizabeth. *A Scriptural View of Woman's Rights and Duties in All the Important Relations of Life*. Philadelphia: Wm. S. Young, 1849.

*Woman's Christian Temperance Union State News* (Wisconsin, 1888).