

Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940

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Alison Twells

This volume makes an excellent contribution to the field of religious and gender history, properly marking the revival of interest in religion within British cultural and social history that has been quietly developing over the past decade. In a well-focused and enjoyable introductory chapter, the editors provide a helpful survey the developments which have led historians to begin 'to think in more nuanced and judicious ways about the influence of religion in the formation of women's private selves and public roles' (p. 2). They locate the recent 'religious turn' in part in developments in women's and gender history, which have been at the forefront of the development of cultural history analyses and methodologies, and have issued challenges to both a particular feminist wariness of religion and a simultaneous lack of interest in gender and feminism in religious history.

Religion is defined here as 'an intellectual belief system, a source of personal inspiration and private sustenance, an interior form of mystical experience, an influential cultural discourse, a platform for political action, and an institutional system of church and chapel structures' (p. 3). The ten chapters focus broadly on Christianity and 'explore the diverse cultures in which women encountered, absorbed, influenced and organised religious faith, belief and practice': in family life, missions and philanthropic and reform networks, in sisterhoods and diaconate institutions, as theologians, preachers and feminists, and in terms of sexual ideas and practices and less mainstream spiritual traditions. At the heart of the volume is a concern to explore the role of women as 'both the inheritors and makers of their own religious cultures' (p. 2): as active in their reception and interpretation of religious discourses; and as key contributors to modern British cultures of belief.

The volume opens with a wonderfully stimulating discussion by Sarah Williams of the separate trajectories, methodologies and concerns of the social history of religion, the history of gender and the history of the family with regard to women's religiosity. Williams critiques the social history of religion for its over-focus on class, and the marginalisation within gender history of religion and spirituality. Innovative work on the history of the family and home history – focusing on the material lives of families – is also carried out at a distance from ideas of religion and spirituality. Williams challenges historians to explore the interplay between the concepts of gender, spirituality and the home and so to energise what she calls the 'still life model' of middle-class evangelical domestic piety and female moral superiority, derived from Davidoff and Hall and perpetuated by Callum Brown. Urging movement beyond this now clichéd stereotype of gendered evangelicalism, she argues for an exploration of a wider range of Christian discourses about gender, which are shaped by class, locality, denomination and theology. Williams' emphasis on the persistence of peripheral 'folk narratives' and popular religion – alongside church-based practices – in forming familial identities is extremely engaging. Similarly, her discussion of the relationship between religion and material culture, expressed in home decoration and a range of artefacts, such as family bibles, mascots and amulets, opens up fruitful areas for future historical research.

A number of essays in the volume reflect the new focus on religious culture that is currently offering a much-needed revitalisation of 19th-century British history. Julie Melnyck explores the neglected field of women's contribution to British Christianity as theologians: in subcultures created and sustained through 'para-ecclesiastical organisations' such as mothers' meetings, mission societies and philanthropic groups, and through hymnody, novels, poetry and periodical writings. She engages with a central concern of the volume: the ways in which women, whilst excluded from the clergy, shaped the larger denominational cultures of British Christianity; and the ways in which women's theology contributed to both modern feminism and to reconceptualisations of the divine. Three essays address the area of missions, philanthropy and reform. Susan Mumm's discussion of Christian philanthropy focuses on the Young Women's Christian Association and the Girls' Friendly Society in the late 19th century, to challenge the over-focus among historians on secular philanthropy. Mumm's argument that such work aimed for 'modest change and moral uplift' rather than 'saving souls or transforming the social order' (p. 54) raises further questions, however: would a Christian 'moral uplift' not transform the social order? Indeed, what was specifically Christian about the moral uplift in the first place? Rhonda Semple's assertion that religious belief was of paramount importance in women's decisions to enter professions and to put themselves forward for missionary work seems self-evident, yet offers a subtle challenge to the tendency to discuss women's interest in missions in terms of secular issues concerning women's empowerment. Semple looks at the different institutional structures of four missionary societies - the London Missionary Society, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, Church of Scotland Mission and the China Inland Mission – and the changing roles for women within them in the later 19th century. She explores the tensions between ecclesiastical structures and familial and informal church ties and the ambiguities around women's professional status, which contributed to an extension of what constituted valid missionary labour while retaining an emphasis on women's civilising qualities. Faith both restricted and empowered. Clare Midgley's contribution explores the ways in which religion encouraged women's engagement with reform and also set limits on the scope of their activism in, for example, anti-slavery, temperance and rescue work. Midgley emphasises the capacity of informal religious networks, both national and transnational, to facilitate middle-class women's involvement in reform. The case studies of Mary Carpenter, Josephine Butler, Octavia Hill and Elizabeth Fry, clearly demonstrate that personal faith, born out of family and denominational cultures, was inseparable from their politics and humanitarianism. In Midgley's words, "religion" was not a discrete part of life, confined to Sunday church attendance; it informed their whole outlook on the world, and was inseparable from their humanitarian ethics, their political perspectives and their views on the social position and roles of women' (p. 154). Religiously-inspired conscience and courage were central to women's world views and senses of self.

Like Midgley, Carmen Mangion and Pamela Walker both place a welcome emphasis on denominational difference, thereby offering a more complex and nuanced picture of 19th- and early 20th-century women's religiosity than that provided by the dominant focus on evangelicalism. Mangion's contribution looks at all-

female religious spaces: Anglican sisterhoods, convents which saw the re-establishment of Catholic religious life, and deaconess orders. Each of these experienced opposition from the Protestant majority, although public antipathy lessened towards the end of the 19th century. Mangion explores the different relationships of each to clerical authority, and their attraction for women in offering a context for the expression of personal faith and Christian service as well as the development of modes of autonomy and authority which were in many ways contrary to dominant models of Victorian femininity. Pamela Walker focuses on one of the most significant roles within Protestantism: that of the preacher. Walker discusses the ongoing debates about who should have the authority to preach the word of God and considers denominational differences, which saw Quaker women traditionally speaking at meetings, creative responses from Methodist women to increasing opposition to their roles as preachers, the openness to women's spiritual receptivity within 19th-century revivalism, and the ordination of Congregationalist Constance Coltman, the first woman ordained into the Christian ministry in 1915.

Sue Morgan's very fine chapter addresses the absence of both women and religion in the history of sexuality. Morgan challenges the representation of the history of sexuality, with its dominant legal and medical-scientific focus, as analogous with secularisation, through an exploration of the significance of churchwomen's writings on sexual matters. She addresses three main areas: the influence of spiritual beliefs on attitudes to the body and sex, marital relationships and birth control; women's involvement in the moral regulation of extra-marital sexual activity via the social purity movement, anti-vice work and attacks on double standard; and the role of a 'language of spiritual love and divine compassion' (p. 175) in legitimating celibacy, female friendship and same-sex desire in the context of a virulent heterosexual imperative. Morgan argues that discourses of religion and sexuality were interdependent modes 'of truth-telling and self-making' (p. 159). She argues that religion in the 19th century was 'sexually capacious' (p. 179) and that women's writings on sex were part of 'broader political and theological agendas' (p. 160) that contributed to modern sexual ideas.

Jacqueline deVries explores the paradox which sees Christianity as both 'a source of oppressive domestic ideology and a starting point for feminist activism' (p. 188). She identifies and addresses a number of interpretative challenges which have contributed to this confusion, including dominant definitions of feminism conceived in secular terms and the reluctance of historians to take seriously religious belief and religiously-inspired political practice; the sheer variety of Britain's religious culture, in terms of denomination and regional difference; the elusive nature of religious experience itself, and 'the popularity among feminists of unorthodox forms of spirituality that defy easy categorisation' (p. 188). Focusing on key moments in the relationship between Christianity and feminism throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, deVries explores in detail the openly religious rhetoric of suffrage activists, whereby women 'co-opted religious language, symbols and ideas to such a degree that it is hard to distinguish between unconscious cultural borrowings and self-conscious adaptations' (p. 199). They spoke of their conversions to a cause which was represented as a Christian crusade, for example, and staged political demonstrations that drew on traditions of religious revivals. In turn, feminism had a profound and complex influence on denominational Christianity. DeVries draws on Mircea Eliade to call for an understanding of religion 'on its own terms', and argues for a greater understanding of the reciprocal relationship between religious cultures which were themselves expansive and flexible and a feminist movement which, 'far more than just a struggle for equal rights ... was a rich and disparate project of cultural reconstruction' (p. 204).

Joy Dixon moves the discussion of the 'private', the 'feminine' and the 'spiritual' onto a new terrain, with an inspirational discussion of the relationships between the sacred/secular, public/private, masculine/feminine as expressed in various late 19th- and early 20th-century movements which were outside of the religious mainstream: higher criticism and development of a liberal theology; spiritualism and theosophy; the study of comparative religion; and the psychology of religion. Dixon shows the binary opposition of the sacred and the secular, while apparently dichotomous, to be fluid and subject to interesting slippages which often turned on issues of gender and public/private practice. Crises of faith, she argues, far from being a masculine and unproblematic dimension of late 19th-century Christianity, are part of the ongoing transformations of religious cultures. Dixon emphasises the necessity to explore the construction of relationships between

femininity, religion and domestic/private space, and the sheer inadequacy of the language of faith and doubt and of simplistic constructions of the sacred and the secular for understanding the processes of modernity and secularisation. We need to refrain from assuming we ‘know in advance what “secularisation” (or for that matter spirituality) looks like’ (p. 226), she argues, and to engage in more studies of the dynamic between the private, the feminine and the spiritual in different historical contexts.

There is little to find fault with in this volume. Indeed, it is rare these days that I devour a whole book in one (or two) sittings. The contributions are well conceived and well focused, each surveying existing scholarship and exploring possibilities for new research, as well as developing a specific area of enquiry. The shift away from evangelicalism is very much to be welcomed, as is the complication of female agency and the emphasis on denominational difference. A further strength lies in beginning to probe a little more deeply what we mean when we say that women received ‘sustenance’ from their religious beliefs and practice; to explore the personal meanings of the ‘spiritual’. There remain some gaps, inevitably so, with comparative denominational studies, transnational (especially European) influences and networks, and also women’s shifts between denominations still requiring a good deal of work. But this volume is successful in its (very considerable) aims: to ‘rethink the narrative turning-points in British religious history’ (p. 9), and to disrupt truisms, especially those associated with the ‘feminisation of religion’ model and with assumptions concerning Christianity’s apparently oppressive relationship to women. Also to be appreciated is the necessarily deep engagement with Callum Brown’s compelling arguments in *The Death of Christian Britain*. (1) Brown’s transformation of the field through his prioritisation of ‘discursive Christianity’ over a quantitative approach, and his rethinking of the periodisation of secularisation and the place of gender therein, was utterly compelling. While a number of the chapters here are critical of Brown’s focus, particularly on ‘evangelical still life’, the role of women in leading the apparent secularisation of the postwar years, and indeed the shape of secularisation itself, this book shares a great deal with his work, not least in its freshness in offering new ways of exploring the relationship between women and religious cultures.

Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain successfully demonstrates the myriad ways in which women ‘have consistently contributed to the revitalisation and re-imagining of the cultures of faith in which they found themselves, despite confronting a series of breathtaking ideological, theological and practical barriers to equality with men in institutional forms of religion’ (p. 232). The chapters by Williams, Morgan, deVries and Dixon in particular are extremely stimulating in opening up new areas of enquiry, and as a whole this book provides exactly what the field needs: a discussion of British Christianity which explores women’s agency in their encounter with Christian discourses; which offers an interrogation of the categories of the sacred and the secular; and which examines the profound connections between (expansive and flexible) Christian cultures and the histories of sexuality, reform, feminism, the family and domesticity.

Notes

1. Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London, 2000). [Back to \(1\)](#)

The editors wish to thank the reviewer for her considered and comprehensive analysis and feedback and do not wish to comment further.

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