

# Outside the Mainstream: Women's Religion and Women Religious Leaders in Nineteenth-Century America

Mary Farrell Bednarowski

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## ABSTRACT

In order to understand fully the status of women in a particular religious tradition, it is helpful to consider the views held within that tradition on four topics: the character of the divine, human nature, the function of the clergy, and the nature of marriage. While the assumptions which have been held by mainstream religious groups on these topics appear to be linked to the absence of female leadership, certain marginal religious movements have taken positions which seem to have a positive relation to leadership roles for women. These marginal groups are characterized by (1) a perception of the divine that deemphasizes the masculine, (2) a tempering or denial of the doctrine of the Fall, (3) a denial of the need for a traditional ordained clergy, and (4) a view of marriage which does not hold that marriage and motherhood are the only acceptable roles for women. In this analysis of Shakerism, Spiritualism, Christian Science, and Theosophy, the author examines the particular manner in which each manifested these doctrinal positions and explores the roles which women occupied within the four groups.

The article concludes with some observations on the causal relationship between doctrine and leadership roles for women and on how the concerns expressed in the four movements discussed parallel those of contemporary feminist theology.

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Mary Farrell Bednarowski (Ph.D., Minnesota) is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the Master of Arts in Religious Studies Program at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. She is the author of "Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism in Wisconsin" (*The Wisconsin Magazine of History*).

It is nearly impossible to summon the names of individual women who have achieved fame within the context of American religious history. The experiences and contributions of women have gone largely unrecorded in the standard American religious histories. Cotton Mather spoke of women as the “hidden ones” as far as religion was concerned, and contemporary scholars note that the situation remains much the same in the twentieth century as it did in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries; the women go to church and the men exercise the authority as members of the clergy and as professional theologians./1/

There is growing agreement among scholars that certain aspects of institutionalized religion, especially Christianity, have been responsible for excluding women from positions of leadership in American religion. These are the pervasive use of masculine language for the divine, which has tended to link the male with the numinous and exclude the female; the belief that the Fall resulted in human depravity and serves to prove the moral weakness of women, particularly; the insistence that the divine “plan” for women was revealed in St. Paul’s admonition that women keep silent in church; and the assumption that woman’s subordination to man was divinely ordained and revealed in Scripture and that this subordination has implications for marriage and for woman’s place./2/

There are numerous examples of women’s exclusion from acknowledged positions of religious authority from the seventeenth century to the present. In 1636 Ann Hutchinson was accused not only of teaching heresy, but of stepping beyond her place: she was told, “*You have rather bine a Husband than a Wife and a Preacher than a Hearer; and a Magistrate than a Subject*” (Hall: 382–83). Little had changed for women by the early nineteenth century. R. Pierce Beaver gives numerous examples of the controversy over whether Protestant women even had the right to gather to pray for the missions, much less form their own missionary societies. The struggles of mid-nineteenth-century women like Congregationalist Antoinette Brown (Solomon) and Methodist Anna Howard Shaw (Flexner) illustrate the firmly rooted assumption that women were by nature unsuited to be members of the clergy. Our own time is witness to a profusion of activity regarding the ordination of women in many denominations. The expressed need of these denominations to demonstrate Scriptural approval—or at least lack of disapproval—of women’s ordination; the theological controversies over the ordination question; and the subsequent difficulties of placing women who have been ordained in some of the denominations all give evidence that the aforementioned assumptions about the rightful place of women in organized religion are still in operation.

In the so-called marginal or nonmainstream religions, however, it has often been a different story in regard to female leadership./3/ Individual women who have achieved prominence in American religious history have usually been those associated with marginal religious movements whose sources of doctrine and inspiration have been outside the Bible or in addition to it: Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers; the Fox sisters, who are closely associated with Spiritualism; Ellen G. White of the Adventist movement;

Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science; and Helena P. Blavatsky of the Theosophical movement.

Why is it that women were able to achieve positions of leadership in some religious movements, contrary both to established tradition and to cultural assumptions about the proper role of women as well? It is my contention that women achieved leadership positions and equal status with men in religious movements which embodied assumptions about the divine, about human nature, about the function of the clergy, and about marriage which ran counter to those in the mainstream traditions:

1. a perception of the divine that deemphasized the masculine either by means of a bisexual divinity or an impersonal, nonanthropomorphic divine principle;
2. a tempering or denial of the doctrine of the Fall;
3. a denial of the need for a traditional ordained clergy;
4. a view of marriage that did not stress the married state and motherhood as the proper sphere for woman and her only means of fulfillment.

My isolating of these characteristics grew out of an attempt, first, to identify American women religious leaders and, second, upon finding most of them in the marginal movements, to understand what these movements might have in common that made them sympathetic to female leadership. As a result of my survey of religious movements in which women were prominent, I chose to analyze four in detail—the Shakers, the Spiritualists, the Christian Scientists, and the Theosophists—because they were founded by women (that statement must be qualified in regard to Spiritualism); because of the high degree to which women participated in them; because of their insistence that woman's spiritual equality must be embodied in practice; and because they exhibit in various ways the four characteristics described above. I had originally intended to include the Oneida Perfectionists in my analysis, but discovered that in spite of such characteristics as group marriage, the practice of birth control, and an understanding of the divine as bisexual, founder John Humphrey Noyes was highly patriarchal in his expressed understanding of woman's nature (Thomas:119–28).

The four nineteenth-century American religious movements mentioned above produced a number of women leaders whose concern with the spiritual and social status of women has not been so strongly articulated again until the present feminist movement. The movements address in somewhat less cohesive form the very same concerns that feminists are voicing today in their critique of organized religion: the detrimental effect on women of the pervasiveness of the masculine in God language; the stereotype of women as morally weak as a result of the doctrine of the Fall; the virtual exclusion of women from the ordained clergy on the basis of essential unsuitability; and the narrow circumscribing of woman's proper sphere within marriage and motherhood.

By contrast, in spite of sometimes bitter rivalries among them as well as different sources of doctrine, Shakerism, Spiritualism, Christian Science, and

Theosophy all put forth doctrines about the divine, the human, the clergy, and marriage which provided a situation conducive to female leadership.

### The Shakers

The American Shakers provide the first example of a religious movement whose beliefs and their practical working out gave women leadership status equal to that of men. Ann Lee brought her small group of followers to New York in 1774. She died in 1784, but the flowering of the Shaker communities, formed on the basis of her revelations, occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century. During their history, which is not yet ended, the Shakers attracted approximately 16,500 followers (Andrews:292).

Shaker doctrine embodied two beliefs which insured that women would assume roles of spiritual leadership: first, that God was both male and female in nature; and second, that "concupiscence" was the sin in the Garden of Eden and thus celibacy was the proper relationship between the sexes. Out of these two beliefs grew the necessity for female leadership as well as male among the Shakers: not only to reflect in practice the dual nature of the divine, but to provide religious leadership for the female members of the communities. In addition, these two beliefs prevented the denigration of women that often occurs in religions which stress the sinful nature of sexual relationships. The Father/Mother God kept the feminine aspect of the divine constantly before the Shakers, and the fact that celibacy was practiced by both sexes prevented the association of the feminine alone with the temptations of the flesh.

The Shakers based their belief in a Father/Mother God both on Ann Lee's revelation and on a kind of common sense theology which developed over the nineteenth century. Ann Lee emerged from prison in England convinced that she was to be the leader of the Shaking Quaker sect of which she was a member—that she was to represent the "female line" of divinity. It was revealed to her also that the cause of human suffering and depravity was the indulgence of the flesh through sexual intercourse (Andrews:11–12).

Both the doctrines of the Father/Mother God and of celibacy developed gradually during Shaker history. At the time of her vision Ann Lee did not articulate a sophisticated theology of a Father/Mother God or of its implications for the status of women in her religious movement. She did, however, claim divine approval of her own religious leadership as a woman. Defending herself in 1779 against Calvin Harlow's accusation that she could not reconcile her leadership "with the Apostle's doctrine," Ann Lee used an analogy with nature to answer him:

The order of man, in the natural relation, is a figure of the order of God in the spiritual creation. As the order of nature requires a man and a woman to produce offspring; so where they both stand in their proper order, the man is first, and the woman the second in the government of the family. He is the father and she the Mother; and all the children, both male and female, must be subject to their parents; and the woman, being second, must be subject to her husband, who is the first;

but when the man is gone, the right of government belongs to the woman: So is the family of Christ. (Andrews: 19)

The above is not a ringing affirmation of the equal standing of women in the family of Christ—Ann Lee's defense of her leadership implies authority by default. In addition, the reference to procreation seems an inappropriate defense of female leadership in view of the Shaker doctrine of celibacy. Nevertheless, at this time Ann Lee articulated a theological defense of the right of women to religious leadership.

It was for later generations to be more specific in using the analogy with human parents to defend the Shaker belief in the Father/Mother God. In 1849 Paulina Bates of the Canterbury, New Hampshire, community spoke of the dual role of male and female in the nurturing of children. "Will the infant receive nourishment at the breast of a tender father?" she asked, and goes on to say that "equally inconsistent would it be, to argue the uselessness of the mother in the natural birth, and rearing of the natural family, as it would be to argue the uselessness of the spiritual mother in the family of Christ: for the necessity of both are equally evident." Bates becomes more insistent as she continues: "And ye who think to be born and reared by the exertions of my beloved Son, exclusive of the aid of my beloved Daughter, the Bride, the Lamb's wife, know ye, your hope is vain; for this can never be" (153).

Closer to the end of the nineteenth century, Elder Frederick Evans spoke of the complementary functions of the male and female natures of divinity reflected also in the natural arrangement: "Man is to Woman *her* God, in physical and intellectual power, as revealing the Father in Deity—Wisdom. And Woman is to Man *his* God and Saviour in affectional power, and in Divine spiritual intuition, as representing the Mother in Deity—Love" (101). That description of the alternating and mutually complementary functions of the father/mother deity does not depart from the cultural stereotypes of the male as cognitive and the female as affectional. Nor does Bates's earlier description modify the notion of Father as begetter and Mother as nurturer. What is striking, however, is to see both male and female qualities incorporated into the Shaker concept of the divine: the Shaker insistence that the feminine qualities of the divine are as necessary as the masculine.

The Shaker defense of a Father/Mother God on the basis of an analogy with natural marriage did not strike the Shakers as incongruous with the practice of celibacy. Perhaps that is because the belief in celibacy underwent some modifications in the course of Shaker history. In the eighteenth century Ann Lee said to a young man that "the marriage of the flesh is a covenant with death and an agreement with hell" (Andrews:22). One hundred years later Frederick Evans explained the Shaker life as merely one way of proceeding in order to achieve salvation, not as the only way. He claimed that Shakers were not absolutely opposed to marriage, but that there were two orders, that of generation (marriage) and that of regeneration (Shaker) and that each contributed to the unfolding of the divine plan (101).

The Shaker practice of celibacy has inspired numerous speculations and explanations, among the most detailed that of Henri Desroche, who sees a

direct connection between the Shaker practice of celibacy and the granting of leadership roles to women. Desroche elaborates on this connection in a chapter of *The American Shakers* on what he calls “ascetic feminism” and claims that a rejection of society of those roles assigned to women in mainstream society—to marry, to have sexual intercourse, to bear children—is always accompanied by the demand that there be a religious role for women (140). Thus, the fact that men and women led sexually separate lives within the Shaker communities fostered not only the physical, but also the psychic need for a female spiritual leadership which would function equally with that of the males.

Dual leadership took official shape after the death of Ann Lee when Joseph Meacham, her successor, appointed Lucy Wright to take leadership responsibilities at Niskeyuna, New York, in 1787. Edward Deming Andrews cites her appointment as a recognition of the need for the “Mother Gift” (56). Wright and Meacham formed the first central ministry of the Shaker communities. The ministers formed the highest echelon of Shaker leadership and their power and influence was substantial. They appointed the elders, of both sexes equally, who presided over the separate families within communities, and the trustees, also of both sexes, whose sphere was temporal.

This dual system of leadership gave rise to a new class of woman, according to Desroche: the eldress. Anna White describes her in *The Motherhood of God* as bishop, pastor, and family mother: “To her come the members of her flock, soul by soul, with the burden of sin, the frailty of nature, the weakness of character. To God, before her as witness, is confession made. . . . She must focalize the rays of divine love, connect the soul to God, impart the germ of heavenly life” (Desroche:176). The eldress had all the rights and privileges of the elder. She functioned as a representative of the divine on earth for her Shaker sisters, and she was visible evidence that to the Shakers God was mother as well as father.

The Shakers had a strong sense that their system of dual-gender leadership was superior to that of the outside world in which women functioned in religion in ways that were hidden from public view. Aurelia Mace, a Maine Shaker, claimed that “in the Shaker Community woman has taken her place as an equal with man, by intellectual, if not by physical strength. Where there is a Deacon, there is also a Deaconess, and they are considered equal in their powers of government” (95).

In spite of the visibility of their female leadership, the Shakers were not able to step out of nineteenth-century American culture completely. The work in Shaker communities reflected a sex role bias, and property settlements to departing Shakers favored husbands over wives and sons over daughters (Andrews:67). Nor is it possible to say that all women found happiness in Shaker communities, as is attested by Mary Dyer with her bitter accusations against Shakerism. But the combination of Shaker beliefs and the way that those beliefs were put into practice gave women the opportunity to participate in the communal ownership of property, to have roles in their society other than that of wife and mother, and to participate equally with men in the

spiritual leadership of their communities. The high visibility of the feminine demanded by Shaker beliefs functioned to offset the Shaker conviction that the body was sinful and that its concupiscent tendencies must be curbed—a belief that is often detrimental to women aspiring to religious leadership.

The Shakers set themselves up as a society separate from the rest of the world, a society in which they believed they could reform the corruptions they saw in the world they had left. One of the specific corruptions was the inequality of women, and they intended to remedy it. As Mary Antoinette Doolittle of the community of Mt. Lebanon explained, she was taught to look back to the apostolic church for the source of truth, but with one exception: “It still lacked one pillar to give it permanency and cause it to stand erect; i.e. the recognition of woman’s rights, and her capability as a counselor and co-worker with man in all that pertains to physical and spiritual life” (35).

### The Spiritualists

Nineteenth-century American Spiritualism is a second religious movement where women found opportunities for leadership. Although spiritualism had appeared previously in many forms and in many cultures, including manifestations among the Shakers, the movement which came to be known by its followers as Modern American Spiritualism originated with two young girls, Kate and Margaret Fox, in Hydesville, New York, in 1848. The basic Spiritualist belief that the spirits of the dead could return to earth to communicate with the living necessitated the services of mediums, persons thought to be particularly suited by nature to receive and convey the messages of the spirits. From the beginning the role of medium was open to women, and, in fact, women were thought to be particularly suited to it. In addition, Spiritualism attracted a large number of women followers. Historian Robert Riegel remarks not only on the number of women drawn to the movement, but particularly the number of feminists. Although striking, the connection is puzzling to Riegel: “Possibly the type of mind receptive to feminism also was prone to be impressed by Spiritualism, but such a connection is difficult to support by any normal process of reasoning” (191).

Actually, the connection is not difficult to understand, given the fact that Spiritualism provided a professional role, that of medium, for women to assume, and in addition had all of those characteristics which are conducive to the support of equal status for women: a nonmale deity; a denial of human depravity; a deemphasis on an ordained clergy which approached the anticlerical in many cases; and a nontraditional interpretation of marriage. The highly optimistic and essentially nonjudgmental doctrines of Spiritualism concerning both the deity and human nature provided no theological barriers to keep women from functioning as mediums. The anticlerical attitude of Spiritualism coupled with the accessibility of mediumship to women resulted in the large number of women who achieved prominence in the movement; and the liberal Spiritualist notions about marriage and the relationship between the sexes provided an atmosphere of further support for women in



Spiritualism who sought to step beyond the ordinarily prescribed roles of wife and mother. To be sure, the role of medium was not a breaking away in every sense from the cultural stereotype of what a woman ought to be, as will become evident. Nonetheless, as R. Laurence Moore points out, mediumship provided women with one of the few professional options in nineteenth-century America (1975:200–221).

Any discussion of Spiritualist theology needs to be preceded by the caution that its tenets were highly derivative and eclectic. In addition, Spiritualism was never very highly institutionalized, so any generalization about beliefs is always subject to qualification. For example, although the trend in Spiritualism was to deemphasize the personal God of Christianity, there were Spiritualists like Charles Beecher who considered themselves Christian and spoke unhesitatingly of the mercies of the Father. Further, in spite of an intensely anti-institutional fervor, especially during the early years, by the end of the nineteenth century there were Spiritualist churches served by pastors, many of them women such as Cora L. V. Richmond (Moore, 1977; Bednarowski, 1973). In spite of these cautions, however, it is still possible to proceed responsibly in speaking of certain patterns of belief that run through Spiritualism as a whole.

To begin with, the Spiritualist concept of the divine seems to have benefited women by its insignificance. The Spiritualist God was neither mother nor father, but Spirit, an impersonal entity which did not figure prominently in Spiritualist theology. This was a God who did not judge or function as an image whose perfection was an incentive to human striving. Nor was this a God who necessarily performed any functions of consolation; that role was filled chiefly by the spirits. No doubt the most appealing feature of Spirit, at least to those Spiritualists weary of the angry God of much traditional Christianity, was that it didn't interfere much in human affairs. The advantage for woman in this kind of by-the-way, impersonal God lay in the fact that she was not likely to be found wanting in qualification for roles of leadership because she did not sufficiently reflect the divine image.

Further, the Spiritualist denial of the Fall, of human depravity, did away with any concentration on the sin of Eve and obviated the need for a redemption by a male incarnation of the deity. "Spiritualism," Robert Dale Owen explained, "disavows (or, more usually, ignores) . . . that all men and women are originally depraved, therefore objects of God's anger, and that they can be justified before him only by the blood of one of the Persons of the Godhead, to wit, Jesus Christ; who was made to suffer for the sins of the human race" (729). While the theological doctrines of Spiritualism regarding deity did not actively promote the need for female leadership, neither did they set up obstacles to such leadership.

The Spiritualists' anticlerical attitude grew in part out of a rejection of human depravity, the reality of the devil, and the possibility of human damnation. The Spiritualists maintained that the ordained clergy had badly misled their flocks about such falsehoods and had terrorized them into religious belief. Spiritualist accusations extended further to hypocrisy and



elitism. One medium, Lizzie Doten, kept track of public mention of “ministerial delinquencies, ecclesiastical abominations, and human frailty,” and claimed to find that “where one spiritual sheep . . . had gone astray, I have found ninety and nine of the Shepherds of Israel in great need of repentance” (1870:7). Another Spiritualist exclaimed, “What wonder that ministers who are flattered, petted, and caressed, as though they were not like other men, should, when weighed in the balance, be found wanting!” (Carra:3). A third writer asked that ministers open their pulpits to Spiritualists, men and women alike: “Gentlemen and Brothers! . . . Will you open your churches to some of our earnest and eloquent workers in the spiritual ranks? Such as Harrison D. Barrett . . . Mrs. Petter, an eloquent speaker and test medium; Miss Margaret Gaule, also a fine speaker and test medium?” (Allen:2).

This anticlerical sentiment resulted in a disdain and a distrust of the professional clergy and a willingness on the part of Spiritualists to look upon mediums as the conveyors and interpreters of truth. The Spiritualists had no intention of fostering an elite corps of clergy within their own ranks, and the role of medium was open to whoever could fill it and attract a following. Since gender was not a prohibitive factor for mediumship, many of the mediums were women. The *Banner of Light* for April 15, 1876, printed a list of Spiritualist lecturers around the country. Out of a few less than three hundred, 127 were obviously women’s names, among them Lizzie Doten, Emma Hardinge Britten, Nettie Colburn Maynard, Victoria Woodhull, Cora L. V. Scott Tappan, Mrs. Livermore, and Mrs. Severance. None of their names appears in standard American religious histories, but all of them are familiar to persons who have done research in nineteenth-century Spiritualism.

Like their anticlerical attitude, the Spiritualists’ antagonism toward marriage stemmed from several sources: a concern, if not a very effective one, with women’s rights that was evident from the beginning of the movement (Moore, 1977:83–84); their doctrine of “spiritual affinities” which dealt with the nature of sexual attraction; and the constant need to defend themselves, particularly mediums, from the accusation of loose sexual behavior.

The Spiritualist criticism of marriage as it operated in nineteenth-century America was based on the knowledge that the husband rather than the wife had most of the legal advantages. Spiritualists recognized that the dissolution of a marriage was a social, even if not a legal, impossibility particularly for women. A woman trapped in an unhappy marriage had two choices: to remain and continue to be unhappy, or to divorce and suffer public scorn, as did Mrs. P., “one of nature’s noblewomen,” whom Spiritualist Warren Chase cites in his autobiography. Mrs. P. divorced the husband who deserted her and married another man, who unfortunately died a few weeks later. “Of course,” said Chase, “it was not the duty of any Christian to aid or comfort her, for she had broken their sacred tie of legal marriage; and they not only let her suffer, but heaped slander on her with their scorn” (192–94).

The Spiritualists spoke of the “marriage law” or the “love principle” as something different from the legal institution of marriage. For Spiritualists love and sexual attraction had both a physical and a spiritual basis. According

to Lizzie Doten, trance speaker and lecturer, the virtuous Spiritualist did not deny the reality of physical attraction, but rather cultivated a relationship based foremost on spiritual attraction: "And when you begin to know the Divine Unity, when you begin to be attracted toward each other, not from the law of the flesh, not from the first law of nature, but by the law of the spirit, the spirit acting first; then you shall know what it is to have this combination of two natures, so harmonious, so perfect, so undivided, that you are, indeed, one—most emphatically one" (1867:11). The trouble, the Spiritualists maintained, lay in the fact that too often people married at a very young age or based marriage contracts on financial concerns and thus were trapped for life with persons other than their spiritual affinities. For them, divorce should be a possibility.

Given these unconventional views, it is not difficult to see why Spiritualists were accused repeatedly of advocating free love and divorce. The Spiritualists claimed that they did not want to abolish marriage, but to institute a higher form. Lizzie Doten clarified that she was not in favor of "free lust," and her advice to those who found themselves unhappily married was temperate indeed: "Bear your misfortune" (1867:11). On the other hand, the views of Victoria Woodhull were not so moderate. She said of marriage that "the very safeguards that you have thrown around the family to make it pure and holy have made instead a community of little hot hells" (9). Woodhull's is admittedly an extreme view. More typical is that expressed by William Hepworth Dixon, who devoted an entire book to a discussion of "spiritual wives" and who echoed Lizzie Doten in his insistence that any relationship between the two sexes must have both a physical and a spiritual basis: "Can there be a true marriage of the body without a binding covenant for the soul? Are not all unions which are of the body only, false unions?" (1868:71). Again, Dixon's criticism was not so much one against marriage itself, but against the impossibility of escape, particularly for women, from a contract that was in no way a marriage of souls.

Whatever the variety of opinions within the Spiritualist ranks regarding the dangers of marriage, the prevailing view was one which afforded women more freedom and approval to seek careers other than marriage, or else to function as a medium in addition to being married, putting into effect the hope of one Spiritualist advice columnist who said, "We will not rest content until we have set her [the young girl's] soul agrowing and seen her coming into her full strength for any career" (Soule:4).

For all their unorthodox views on theology, the clergy, and women's roles, female Spiritualist mediums nonetheless conformed in a surprising way to nineteenth-century America's view of what a woman should be, as is indicated by the following excerpt from the *Banner of Light* for April 8, 1876: "Mediumship is closely identified with spiritual refinement, and all the delicate and poetical and lovely attributes of humanity, excepting those which give strength and resisting power. It is like the delicate bloom of the flower, something which is unfit to bear the contact of coldness or harshness, and generally disqualifies its possessor for exercising the necessary force and stern

resistance which should be exercised in an ungenial society" (1). From this description one could assume that the Spiritualist medium was the epitome of nineteenth-century womanhood with her attendant virtues of docility, passivity, and demureness. But because she functioned as a religious professional in a society which rejected that as a suitable role for a woman, she was subject to accusations of immorality and stepping beyond her station. R. Laurence Moore suggests that to offset these criticisms, the medium emphasized her femininity by insisting that she was not responsible for her actions, that she was controlled by higher powers (1975:200–221). Mediums frequently maintained that they were as surprised as anyone else that the spirits had chosen such a frail vessel through whom to communicate. Lizzie Doten said of herself, "My brain was fashioned, and my nervous system finely strung, so that I should inevitably catch the thrill of the innumerable voices resounding through the universe, and translate their message into human language as coherently and clearly as my imperfections would allow" (1864:viii).

Moore catalogues and interprets the ambiguous position of the female medium. On one hand, she enjoyed a certain measure of independence, freedom from traditional female responsibilities, an income, even if small, and the adulation of audiences and followers. On the other hand, she often endured social ostracism, frail health, which may have been deliberately cultivated, and exploitation by audiences and managers. In a very real way, mediumship involved exploitation by both the medium herself and her audience of passivity and helplessness, but as Moore says, "The frail sensitiveness that characterized nineteenth-century womanhood was put to worse uses" (221). In sum, for the woman Spiritualist the option to function as a medium was there if she wanted it and if she thought it was worth the price. There were no theological injunctions to prevent her from doing so, and there was a great deal of encouragement for her to proceed.

### The Christian Scientists

In 1867, nineteen years after the beginnings of Modern American Spiritualism, Mary Baker Eddy discovered, as she said, Christian Science, a religious movement whose root belief is that reality is in essence spiritual and that matter, sickness, and evil do not exist. Recognition of what Eddy called this spiritual fact makes possible the healing of both spiritual and physical ills. Like Spiritualism, Christian Science rapidly attracted many women followers, a fact remarked upon by historians and interpreters of the movement. Frank Podmore mentions that women constituted the majority of Christian Science patients, at least in the early years (1910:279); and Donald Meyer speaks of the "ubiquity" of women in Christian Science and other mind cure movements: "Not only was its most famous exponent a woman; scores of its lesser exponents were women, as founders, writers, preachers, teachers, healers. Mind cure gave jobs to women by hundreds and thousands." Meyer concludes his comments with the question, "Was there something wrong with

women?" (46). The question might more accurately be phrased, "Was there something wrong with the position of women?"

Mary Baker Eddy discovered Christian Science at a time when women were virtually excluded from positions of political, economic, or religious power. Their influence in these areas was to be exerted obliquely through motherhood and family life. Motherhood had taken on almost cultlike proportions of what Ann Douglas calls "an extravaganza of self-immolation" (85), and a woman was expected to find fulfillment by a system of vicarious living through husband and children. A woman's life was one of physical and emotional dependence on others. In many ways Mary Baker Eddy herself epitomized the difficulties and helplessness of nineteenth-century women: she suffered early widowhood, poverty, an unhappy second marriage and subsequent divorce, and a brief third marriage. She experienced constant physical illness as well as emotional instability and seemed unable to care for the son of her first marriage. Her discovery of Christian Science marked the end of her years of illness, at least until old age, and of dependency; and although her life from then on was marked by controversy, she did not suffer the poverty and helplessness of the first half of her life.

Mary Baker Eddy's radical ontology—the total denial of the reality of matter and evil—promised an independence from specific debilitating circumstances such as sickness, poverty, and gender. The sphere of Christian Science activity was the mind, a reflection of Divine Mind, an arena open to all regardless of physical situation. The appeal of Christian Science for women lay primarily in its stress on self-help rather than helplessness, and on the possibility of healing without dependence on the dictates of doctor or clergy. Reinforcing its appeal for women was the fact that Christian Science gave access to its offices—reader, practitioner, and teacher—regardless of gender. Further, Christian Science incorporated into its doctrine of healing those same characteristics which portend well for women in a religious movement: a divinity other than father/creator; a shunning of the doctrine of human depravity; an absence of ordained clergy; and a nontraditional view of marriage.

Two aspects, particularly, of the Christian Science concept of deity have significance for women. First, Eddy stressed that God is nonanthropomorphic, but nonetheless incorporates the feminine as well as the masculine. Human philosophy had erroneously "made God manlike" (1909:269); nonetheless, she said, the divine is constituted of certain characteristics of personality. One of these is love. It was from love that the feminine aspect of God proceeded: "In divine Science, we have not as much authority for considering God masculine, as we have for considering Him feminine, for Love imparts the clearest idea of Deity" (1909:517).<sup>4</sup> Second, Eddy divorced God from responsibility for the world's ills: God is not the creator of the material world—that is the work of mortal mind. The Christian Science God is not the author of human suffering; does not send sickness as a trial to the faithful; has not meted out death as a punishment for the sin of Eve. This God is not the stern judge of those who fall into sin, helpless in their own depravity to keep from doing so.

The deity of Christian Science affirms the feminine aspect of the divine. God becomes both mother and father, an infinite fount of love, not seeking retribution for sin, but desirous only that human spirits come to understand the perfection they already possess. Women could see themselves, then, not as weak and helpless, but as reflecting the image of the divine feminine. They did not need to interpret their relatively weak position in the world as a sign of God's particular disfavor. Nor was there any reason that women should be kept from full participation in Christian Science because they did not sufficiently mirror the divine nature.

The Christian Science view of human nature further reinforced a highly optimistic estimate of human capabilities, regardless of gender. Eddy taught that the human person is not a duality, made up of matter and spirit, but a totally spiritual being, a reflection of the divine: "Man is not matter! He is not made up of brain, blood, bones, and other material elements. . . . Man is spiritual and perfect; and because he is spiritual and perfect, he must be so understood in Christian Science. Man is idea, the image of Love; he is not physique" (1909:475).

It is not difficult to understand the appeal, particularly for women, of a religion which told them, first, that the body with all its limitations was merely an illusion, and second, that spiritual perfection was already theirs. For the Christian Science woman spiritual exercise involved not self-abnegation or lament over perfection not achieved, but cultivation of the understanding of the human person as already perfect. Sin, or error, in Christian Science, was to put too low an estimate on the powers of human spirit. Gender became unimportant if the body was not real. There was no moral or spiritual or physical weakness peculiar to women if the female body, like the male body, was illusory.

That gender was not prohibitive in the qualifications for leadership in Christian Science is evidenced by the fact that in the early years women practitioners outnumbered men five to one (Gottschalk:244). In addition, the offices of reader and teacher were open to women. These positions were not clerical in nature, since Christian Science considered itself a religion of laypersons, and it reflected that same bias against the ordained clergy that was evident in Spiritualism—a bias that is common in religious movements in which women have equal status. Eddy saw the clergy as perpetrators of error rather than truth, and she blamed the priestly caste for the misunderstanding in Christianity of the nature of reality: "The pride of priesthood is the prince of this world. It has nothing in Christ" (1909:270). Eddy claimed that Jesus administered to his disciples without benefit of ordination, and she did not want to "organize materially Christ's Church" (1896:90–91). Eddy's wish was that the offices of Christian Science should reflect the dual nature of deity, and the *Manual of the Mother Church* specifies that the two readers at the weekly services must be a man and a woman (29).

Nineteenth-century Christian Science gave evidence of a final likeness to other religious movements granting equal status to women in that the attitude of Mary Baker Eddy toward marriage might be called lukewarm. Her antagonism to marriage was not as strongly expressed as that of the Shakers

or some of the Spiritualists, but Eddy's writings indicate that she saw marriage as a necessary encumbrance for the present state of human development: "Marriage is the legal and moral provision for generation among human kind" (1909:56). The chapter on marriage in *Science and Health* reveals an ambivalence about marriage. There are numerous typical admonitions about the need for fidelity, patience, and endurance. There is certainly no hint that Eddy had revolutionary ideas about the roles of men and women in marriage. "Men," she says, "should not be required to participate in all the annoyances and cares of domestic economy, nor should women be expected to understand political economy" (1909:59). Eddy even expressed the belief that the need for sexual union to perpetuate the race would eventually disappear: "As human generation ceases, the unbroken levels of eternal harmonious living will be spiritually discerned, and men, not of the earth, earthly, but co-existent with God will appear" (1909:68–69). Stephen Gottschalk points out that for Christian Science marriage was a human, not a spiritual, institution, and there is no provision for marriage in the *Manual of the Mother Church* (241–42).

If the evidence concerning Eddy's antipathy toward marriage seems ambiguous, her critics nonetheless were convinced of her views. In an often quoted article in *McClure's Magazine* Georgine Milmine takes Eddy to task for "her qualified disapproval of marriage," as well as her failure to say anything about children in her chapter on marriage in *Science and Health*.<sup>15</sup> Milmine quotes Eddy further on the subject: "Human nature has bestowed on a wife the right to become a mother; but if the wife esteems not this privilege by mutual consent, exalted and increased affections, she may win a higher" (n.p.). In *The Religio-Medical Masquerade* Frederick W. Peabody criticizes Eddy's views on marriage and children, and accuses Christian Science of causing estrangement between husband and wife. Peabody claims that "it is a part of Mrs. Eddy's teaching and the teaching of her students, that a woman cannot be an effective healer, if she really loves a man and be a true wife" and that the same was true of men (161–62).

Mary Baker Eddy's own life as a wife and mother, as both Milmine and Peabody point out, was an irregular one. It is difficult to know what kind of valid cause-and-effect relationship to set between Eddy's personal life and her tepid views on marriage and children. Suffice it to say that she herself did not function as a role model for wife and mother for her followers. Nor did Christian Science in the nineteenth century extol the high calling of the married state and motherhood as the only fulfilling options for women.

In conclusion, Mary Baker Eddy's religious doctrines had implications for the evaluation of women both spiritually and physically. She was firm in her stand for women's rights, saying that Christian Science "equalizes the sexes" (1909:340). She recognized and spoke out against the fact that "civil law establishes very unfair differences between the rights of the two sexes" (1909:63). Stephen Gottschalk claims that it would be inaccurate to call Eddy a feminist, but he speculates that her followers saw Christian Science as giving expression to a "higher concept of divine womanhood," as well as providing an example of a female religious leader (269).



Mary Baker Eddy's religious discovery evolved into a highly authoritarian structure, one which nonetheless gave women a place not usually afforded them by traditional Christianity.<sup>16</sup> Christian Science demanded of women that they give up the claim of reality for their material bodies, but in return it gave them a connection to the numinous in the Father/Mother God, and it promised them power over their own lives as well as equal participation in the religion they had chosen.

### The Theosophists

Helena P. Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875, the same year that *Science and Health* was published for the first time. The first objective of the Society was "to form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color" (Blavatsky:24); and so from the beginning there was a specific identification with women and a concern for equality—this in spite of the fact that at the formation of the Society Henry Olcott served as president and Madame Blavatsky as secretary.

Blavatsky supplied the doctrinal basis for the Society, which had its origins in Eastern religious traditions, the occult, and "ancient religions." In spite of generally different content and origins, Theosophy shared with Shakerism, Spiritualism, and Christian Science the same propensities to see the divine as other than masculine; to interpret human nature in a highly optimistic manner; to dismiss the need for an ordained clergy; and to view marriage as a less than desirable state, particularly for women. The Society attracted many women of high intellectual capabilities, many of whom had had a strong allegiance to Christianity at one time in their lives; who had worked actively for women's rights; and who had experienced unhappy marriages—women like Annie Besant, Katherine Tingley, and Alice Bailey. Bailey later left Theosophy to form the Arcane School.

Blavatsky's doctrine of deity stressed its impersonal nature. She considered the Christian God "a bundle of contradictions and a logical impossibility." She saw the God of Moses as "but the gigantic shadow of *man*, and not man at his best, either" (35). Blavatsky described the God of Theosophy as a "universal Divine Principle, the root of All, from which all proceeds, and within which all shall be absorbed at the end of the great cycle of being" (36). She rejected the need for abjectness and humility on the part of human beings in their dealings with the divine, and claimed that prayer offended the dignity of human nature and "kills self-reliance." Blavatsky insisted that "this idea of passing one's whole life in moral idleness and having one's hardest work and duty done by another—whether God or man—is most revolting to us, as it is most degrading to human dignity" (42). Blavatsky did not see either men or women as suppliants: "We *act*," she said of Theosophists, "instead of *talking*. . . . We call it WILL-POWER, and it is rather an internal command than a petition" (38).

The Theosophical view of human nature proceeded from this impersonal view of the divine as a principle: "Grant us our postulate," said Blavatsky,



“that God is a universally diffused, infinite principle, and how can man alone escape from being soaked through, *by* and *in*, the Deity” (Judah:120–21). Theosophists coupled their belief in the human person as permeated by deity with a belief in karma and reincarnation. The combination resulted in a denial of human depravity and a stress on individual power and responsibility regardless of gender or particular situation.

To illustrate, women found the Theosophical interpretation of karma and reincarnation particularly appealing because it deemphasized the importance of gender: reincarnation could occur in either a male or a female body, depending upon what karmic ties from past lives needed to be worked out. As Theosophist Margaret Cousins explained: “According to the doctrine of Reincarnation, which is generally accepted by Theosophists, the same ego which has incarnated as a woman several times, takes later a man’s body, and vice versa; and the experiences gained in one kind of form are carried over in consciousness to the other” (215).

Like Christian Science, then, Theosophy promised women an escape from gender, but by different means. Well aware that woman’s body had kept her from positions of spiritual leadership in Western Christianity, women could turn to Theosophy for aid: “A temporary function of the body [child-bearing] is made an excuse for closing off many avenues of world-service to women,” said Cousins. “It is an expression of that ‘Curse of Eve’ which it is part of the great mission of Theosophy to reverse” (217). Because of their work in India, Theosophists knew that the doctrines of karma and reincarnation had not had a salutary effect on the roles of women in countries where the beliefs were indigenous. Transplanted to the West, however, these same doctrines seemed to promise that women could define their roles in a way that was broader than those imposed upon them by traditional Christianity. Taken together, the Theosophical interpretations of karma, reincarnation, and the essential divinity of the human person gave women an opportunity to dispense with the Christian emphasis on sin and repentance and to look forward to the redressing of the wrongs they had suffered, even if it be in another life. This was an understandable attraction for many women in a position to feel that one lifetime was too short for the strides they needed to make.

In addition to providing women with satisfactory beliefs of a personal nature, Theosophy afforded them the opportunity of exercising spiritual leadership equal to that of men. Like the Spiritualists and the Christian Scientists, the Theosophists claimed that dogma, clergy, and hierarchy distorted religious truths, and Theosophy thus had no ordained clergy. Their truths, they said, came from the masters or mahatmas, “great souls” who had passed beyond the need to be reincarnated (Blavatsky:159). The mahatmas favored women as well as men with their messages, although I am not aware that any mahatmas have ever been women; and according to Annie Besant, “Those on whose heads but for a moment the touch of the Master has rested in blessing can never again look upon the world save through eyes made luminous with the radiance of the Eternal Peace” (1893:364).

Women attracted away from Christianity to Theosophy were often those resentful of the traditional churches' attitudes toward women as well as of their refusal to ordain women. According to Margaret Cousins, "The Churches and their priesthoods have ever been the enemies of the freedom of women" (218). Theosophists countered the policies of the churches with examples from among their own members: "The writings of Madame Blavatsky, Anna Kingsford, Annie Besant, and several other women have given ample evidence that the science of theology has not been made a masculine preserve by Mother Nature, but was arbitrarily appropriated by those persistent suppressors of womankind, the world's materializing priesthoods, for their own sex" (Cousins:218). Women Theosophists encountered resistance even among their own kind, however, in the refusal to ordain women to the priesthood of the Liberal Catholic Church, to which many Theosophists belonged: "Some occultists . . . maintain that the line of magic for a man is quite different from that of a woman, and infer that the magic of the Mass could not take place through the female organism" (Cousins:220). Nonetheless, women joined the Theosophical movement expecting to participate "on terms of entire equality with men in its ideal of the family of Humanity, in its terms of membership, in all its offices, and in every facet of its teachings" (Cousins:214). The fact that there was no clergy in Theosophy itself made this an easier fact to accomplish.

Like other religious movements sympathetic to full participation by women, Theosophy had in its teachings a resistance to the traditional marriage relationship that was somewhat subtle, but detectable nonetheless. Theosophists did not deny the validity of marriage. Madame Blavatsky said, "Surely you cannot believe us so absurd and fanatical as to preach against marriage altogether" (154). But Theosophists saw the potential of marriage in the nineteenth century for the degradation and legal helplessness of women, and Madame Blavatsky also spoke of taking "the risks of that lottery where there are so many more blanks than prizes" (154). Blavatsky further spoke of marriage as detracting from spiritual development, but it is interesting to note that her remarks appear to have been addressed to men: "Can a man serve two masters? No! . . . practical Occultism is far too serious and dangerous a study for a man to take up, unless he is in the most deadly earnest, and ready to sacrifice *all, himself first of all, to gain his end*" (154-55).

Annie Besant gave another aspect of the Theosophical view of marriage. Besant was very much concerned with women's rights, particularly in the area of marriage and divorce reform and birth control, saying that in marriage a woman "loses her legal existence" and "loses control over her own body; it belongs to her owner, not herself" (1970:9). Besant was not shy about blaming the churches for the sufferings women endured in unhappy marriages and as a result of having numerous children, saying that "both the New Testament and the Church have insisted on the inferiority of the female sex" (1970:13).

Besant was convinced of the views expressed above even before she joined the Theosophical Society. Her opinions after that remained the same, but they had a different basis. After her study with Madame Blavatsky, Besant

claimed that humans had let sexual passion brutalize them to the extent that their spiritual essence had been obscured. Now it was time to “hold this instinct in complete control, to transmute it from passion into tender and self-denying affection, to develop the intellectual at the expense of the animal, and thus to raise the whole man to the human stage, in which every intellectual and physical capacity shall subserve the purposes of the soul” (1893:242–43).

Because Theosophists believed that matter had its place in the scheme of human spiritual development—they did not see the body as an illusion, but as a vehicle of learning for the spiritual essence—women like Madame Blavatsky did not express the expectation that marriage would fade away entirely. Rather, they tended to reduce marriage to a passionless, utilitarian setup necessary only for carrying on the species and providing bodies for waiting “egos.” But included in the insistence of Theosophists on the need for the spiritual elevation of marriage was the goal of alleviating the physical suffering of marriage for women.

The profeminist implications of Theosophical doctrines did not make the movement immune to cultural biases. For example, Arthur Sinnett’s *Mahatma Letters* include an antifeminist strain, and Alice Bailey apparently felt no compunction about saying in her *Unfinished Autobiography*, “I have women friends and am devoted to them but, as a general rule, I prefer the masculine mind . . . a woman will give you lots of silly little troubles all the time and I can’t be bothered” (77). But the number of female leaders and writers among Theosophists provides good evidence that in the various facets of the movement women did indeed achieve prominence as spiritual leaders and interpreters.

### Conclusion

A study such as this one involves a chicken-and-egg problem. It is difficult to know exactly what cause-and-effect relationships existed between the women who were drawn to Shakerism, Spiritualism, Christian Science, and Theosophy, and the doctrines of the movements. Were women attracted to them because of their teachings about God and human nature and their distaste for an ordained clergy and for marriage? Were the doctrines, instead, shaped by the large number of women participants? Or might not both be the case? There seems little doubt that at the very least women were drawn to these four movements because of the possibility of assuming positions of leadership which were denied them in the mainstream religions.

What is striking about these four movements in which women played such important roles is that the similarities of doctrine and attitude are apparent in spite of often bitter rivalries among the groups themselves, particularly the Spiritualists, the Theosophists, and the Christian Scientists. For example, many Spiritualists were of the opinion that Madame Blavatsky’s mahatmas were “undoubtedly myths”; Blavatsky spoke of the “gross materialism” of Spiritualism and downgraded the spirit manifestations as subhuman in nature; and Mary Baker Eddy devoted a chapter in *Science*

*and Health* to discussing the evils of Spiritualism. But in spite of all the disagreements, these movements showed obvious similarities in their attempts to demasculinize the deity, to elevate human nature, and to do away with the power of the ordained Christian clergy. They differed in their views of how to reform marriage, but were unanimous in their agreement that the institution as it was lived out in nineteenth-century America was harmful to women on a variety of levels.

Another impressive fact about these four movements is the extent to which their concerns parallel those of contemporary feminist theologians. These similarities make even more salient Robert Ellwood's recent remarks to the effect that "a possible American feminine religion has already been limned by certain common features of these movements, and that when its day comes it could break out of marginality with surprising speed" (72). Missing from the nineteenth-century religious movements is the emphasis on total separation of women from the churches that is characteristic of a theologian like Mary Daly. But even that note was present to a minor extent. In *New America* William H. Dixon speaks of Eliza Farnham of Staten Island, founder of the Truth of Woman movement, based on the inherent superiority of the female in all spheres, particularly the religious: "Man is but the paragon of animals, while woman, by her gifts of soul, belongs to the celestial ranks." Farnham rewrote the story of the Fall, and in the new version Eve gave Adam the benefit of her strength: "She finds Adam in bonds and she sets him free" (1867:379-86).

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century women concerned with equal participation in religious movements appear to share a common understanding, although it is less self-consciously articulated in the nineteenth century, that a God pictured in wholly masculine images is not conducive to an understanding of the feminine as participating in the divine; that a doctrine of human nature as depraved through the Fall seems to be even more detrimental to women than to men; that an ordained male clergy is not likely to open its ranks willingly to women; and that marriage interpreted in the traditional Christian sense will confine women to a particular sphere of influence which does not include positions of religious leadership. In the nineteenth century attempts to act upon these realizations were confined almost exclusively to religious movements considered marginal. In the second half of the twentieth century these understandings are beginning to affect the practice of mainstream Christianity.

## NOTES

/1/ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich quotes Mather's reference in "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735," and says further that "well-behaved women seldom make history" (20). A survey of American religious histories shows that Ulrich is correct. One can hardly find references to women or the religions in which they achieved prominence prior to Sydney Ahlstrom's *A Religious History of*

*the American People*, and even there the references to women are relatively few and restricted mostly to the marginal traditions. As another current example, Henry Warner Bowden's *Dictionary of American Religious Biography* mentions few women who are not connected with marginal traditions. He omits, for example, Antoinette Brown, first woman ordained in the Congregational Church in the United States.

/2/ Gayle Graham Yates summarizes the attitudes of institutionalized religion toward women and the reaction of feminist theologians in *What Women Want: Ideas of the Movement* (65–73). Analyses of antifeminism and profeminism in specific religious traditions can be found in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (1976); Ruether, ed. (1974); Plaskow and Romero, eds. (1973); Gross, ed. (1977); and Christ and Plaskow, eds. (1979). The Winter 1978 issue of *American Quarterly* deals with women in American religious history (see James, 1978), and *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* (1975) contains essays on women in less traditional religious forms such as astrology and witchcraft.

/3/ The terms "mainstream" and "marginal" are fraught with controversy as to what they mean exactly. R. Laurence Moore suggests that "mainstream" is a "societal invention that has no necessary relation to an actual consensus of values and therefore its use is inappropriate, as is the use of 'marginal'" (1977:xii–xiii). I am using the term "marginal" to designate groups whose teachings are perceived by Protestants and Catholics alike to be outside the bounds of orthodox Christianity.

/4/ Not all critics see Mary Baker Eddy's concept of the Father/Mother God as particularly helpful to women or even conducive to well-being. Meyer speaks of the God of Christian Science as an extreme manifestation of the accepting parent: "Father/Mother was the child's wish about his parents, perfect in their gratification of every need" (82). Gail Parker interprets Christian Science as the "Sentimental Heresy institutionalized," and "the holiness of motherhood evolved into a species of mariolatry" (18). Susan Setta, although she affirms the incorporation of the feminine into the deity, points out that Eddy had to deny the reality of her own female body in order to do so (289–301).

/5/ This quotation is from chapter 14 of a series that began in *McClure's* in January 1907 and was entitled "Mary Baker Eddy, The Story of Her Life and the History of Christian Science." The page numbers of the copy I used at the American Antiquarian Society were cut off for chapter 14.

/6/ There seems to be an understanding that the authority in the structure of Christian Science has passed to male leadership, something which is bound to happen as a religion becomes more assimilated into a patriarchal culture. The most recent mention of this I've seen is in Heilbrun (1979:203). But the very fact that all my doctrinal quotations are taken from Mary Baker Eddy's writings rather than from a variety of interpreters illustrates the skill with which she insured that her views alone would persist.

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