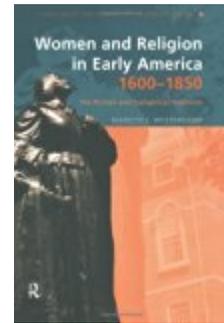


Marilyn J. Westerkamp. *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600-1850: The Puritan and Evangelical Traditions*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. ix + 219 pp. \$22.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-19448-8.

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Women and Religion: Coming of Age

This work of synthesis by a senior scholar offers a limited, yet densely informative and elegantly insightful introduction to the emerging field of study that examines the relationship between gender and religion in early America. Marilyn Westerkamp has chosen to focus on the Puritan and evangelical traditions which have stimulated most of the scholarship that has probed women's engagement with Christianity in early America. Following an introductory chapter in which she briefly reviews the European legacy of feminine spirituality, she divides her book into two parts. Part one surveys the Puritan heritage in three chapters, while her treatment of evangelicalism ranges over the five chapters constituting part two. Westerkamp establishes the theme that is focal to her study in the introductory chapter, when she notes that the Puritan and evangelical women in early America who were "socially and politically subordinate according to custom and law, experienced the Holy Spirit during their lives and discovered their own charismatic authority" (p. 1). In the chapters that follow, she explores the evolving counterpoint between women's claim to a public religious voice inspired and authorized by the Holy Spirit and opposing social and cultural structures of domestic, ecclesiastic and political patriarchy. Both the Puritan and evangelical traditions acknowledged the legitimacy of the Holy Spirit's call and defended patriarchal norms. They constitute a logical focus for her study, Westerkamp claims in her introduction, because within their compass lay this central paradox.

In the opening chapter of part one, Westerkamp pro-

vides a portrait of New England Puritans as she sketches the ideal of the "goodwife." She emphasizes the ways in which Puritan theology and social organization buttressed hierarchy in its affirmation of patriarchal authority and order. Even the promotion of literacy across gender boundaries served, she argues, to reinforce male superiority, since the public fruits of reading the Bible – textual exegesis and preaching – were reserved to men. "By privileging erudition as a primary source of religious authority, Puritans effectively disfranchised women religiously," she asserts (pp. 20-21). Yet, she concedes, women's capacity to open themselves to the working of God's grace made them influential within the circle of Puritan orthodoxy, where they provided spiritual leadership through their example without directly challenging gender hierarchy.

Not all women were satisfied with such a limited deployment of the gifts grace, and in chapter three Westerkamp describes those who stepped beyond the boundaries of acceptable behavior as they gave voice to the Spirit. The tradition of Puritan dissent animated individual women like Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer, as well as Quakers, to contest the male ministerial monopoly on public spiritual authority. Westerkamp ably describes the suppression of such feminine dissent by Puritan civil and church officials. She moves on, in chapter four, to a consideration of the ways in which they advanced their suppression of women's spiritual voices through the medium of the witchcraft persecutions of the late seventeenth century. By emphasizing women's susceptibility to evil,

churchmen made it easier for women's claims to mystical inspiration to be construed as manifestations of satanic rather than divine powers.

Part two shifts its focus to evangelical religion, opening with a chapter that considers Quakers and the Great Awakening. Westerkamp presents a competent overview of Quaker piety and its well known, and exceptional, promotion of gender equality. Her coverage of the Awakening bears the salutary imprint of her previous work on the transatlantic context of this movement, providing more information on the Scots-Irish role than is customary. Using Sarah Osborne's home-based yet public ministry as an illustration, Westerkamp delineates the continuing conundrum between Spirit-driven piety and a patriarchal social system. In rejecting Puritanism's privileging of the learned, the Awakening strengthened the claims of those whose lack of learning made them more receptive to the gifts of the Holy Spirit: women and enslaved blacks.

In succeeding chapters, Westerkamp explores the continuing tension between women's strengthening religious voice and patriarchal suppression. She describes Methodism's experiments with gender equality and the openings it created for public female religious speech, attending to differing white and black experiences. In her chapter on nineteenth-century domesticity she widens her discussion to include a provocative consideration of missionary wives, depicting an alternative to benevolence for women compelled by the Spirit to act. In both settings, Westerkamp argues, women were also often acting upon a sense of earthly vocation and aspiration. Both domesticity and missionary work provided women with opportunities to act on their own impulse while under the aegis of the Holy Spirit and within the sanctioned compass of marriage and family.

Westerkamp moves onto more contentious and interpretively adventurous ground in chapter eight. Here she reveals herself sceptical of the link that has often been made between reform, particularly abolitionism, and evangelicalism, citing the incompatibility of conservative religious belief and social change. She also locates in the reform movement a key shift in the development of women's religious voice, exemplified by Sojourner Truth.

Truth, Westerkamp suggests, "displayed the authority of the spiritually gifted, but she spoke in her own voice" (p. 173). As she recapitulates the emergence of an autonomous public female voice in a concluding chapter, Westerkamp draws our attention again to the essential role of the Holy Spirit in the process. Because they recognized the legitimacy of the Spirit's power to animate and work through all believers, Puritanism and evangelicalism unlocked women's public voice and gave it a space in which to grow beyond the confines of religious speech.

This book is both more and less than the perfect introductory synthesis on women and religion in early America. It will be useful in both undergraduate and undergraduate teaching for its comprehensive and detailed attention to the personalities, ideas and developments that constituted Puritanism and evangelicalism in early America. The text and bibliographic essay point readers in the direction of the latest scholarship, and the portraits of figures such as Anne Hutchinson, Sarah Osborne, Phoebe Palmer and Sojourner Truth provide illustrative anchors for undergraduates traversing the territory of women and religion for the first time. Students may find less accessible what will be most appealing to those already familiar with the topic, who will find Westerkamp's articulation of the thesis that grows from her synthesis both an elegant interpretation and a spur to new research. Finally, students and scholars alike may regret, as I do, the limitation of this study to Protestant women. Catholic religious women responded to divine inspiration with activist ministries in early America, too. Their experiences, from the eighteenth-century evangelizing Ursulines in Louisiana to the phalanx of teaching and nursing sisters who swept across antebellum America, constitute an important strand in the development of women's public voice. To exclude them and the growing scholarship about them makes a certain degree of interpretive sense, but there should have been some acknowledgement that they must be part of the agenda of future research to which Westerkamp alludes in her conclusion.

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