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Sue Morgan, ed. *Women, Religion, and Feminism in Britain, 1750-1900.* New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xi + 235 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-99307-1.

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Women Negotiating Beliefs and Boundaries

In *Women, Religion and Feminism in Britain, 1750-1900*, Sue Morgan has assembled a group of scholars whose diverse approach to and treatment of particular aspects of this broad topic mirror the complexities of the subject itself. While it is nearly a trope to describe women's lives in the late-nineteenth century in terms of both the import of female roles in Christian organizations and in terms of their agitation for increased rights and formal roles in the public sphere, these two areas have been too little discussed in relation to one another.

The collection consists of short, largely biographical essays that illuminate the gendered negotiation of faith and feminist action against the social structure of modern Britain. The editor argues quite persuasively that this intimate approach to the particular is a useful means by which to illumine a more general construct of women in the past. The approaches taken by the various contributors are usefully grouped into four themes: education and moral reform, sexuality and female friendships, women writers with causes, and independent women missionaries. Each of the four sections of the collection artfully group together papers that deal with diverse subjects in unique ways.

In the first section on education and moral reform, Anne Stott evaluates the educational views of Hannah More, beginning with a discussion of More's own educational background, and then contextualizing her directives for women's education against the cultural expectations of "refined" society, and against the imperative of her evangelical conversion that led her to establish an extensive Sunday School network. Stott's argument, that More's evangelical conversion explains the confluence between her conduct literature and her Sunday School belief, can no doubt be more closely examined in her recently published biography of More.[1]

In her chapter on "Rational Religion and Feminism," Ruth Watts examines the lives of four prominent Unitarian women. She does so in order to study the effect of this rational religiosity on British women's lives and their access to education in the early-nineteenth century. In so doing, she notes that the tenets of their belief and these women's Unitarian networks enabled their public action at the same time that it acted to limit their potential impact.[2]

Joyce Goodman and Camilla Leach turn their lens on the spirituality and work of Quaker women in the British and Foreign School Society (BFSS) in the early-nineteenth century. These authors skillfully mine the papers of Quaker women to illustrate how their teaching and volunteer efforts aimed at social uplift–founded on an egalitarian notion of gender and lived through deep spiritual friendships between women–enabled women to engage in public work, to participate in the corporate spiritual life of their denomination, and to construct devotional writings that subsequently influenced both male and female believers. Each of these three studies paints a convincing portrait of small groups of women both reacting to and shaping the intellectual, cultural and religious threads of their world, and suggest the import of linking these disparate groups together more clearly through further examination.

The authors in this second and perhaps most stimulating section of the collection focus their attention on an important principle that was introduced in the first section of the text. Goodman and Leach suggested that Quaker women's work, their intellectual production and their spiritual life rested in important ways on their abil-

ity to form and maintain intimate homo-social relationships. Martha Vicinus looks further ahead in the nineteenth century to examine ways in which, for Victorian women, the very emotive ecstasy of evangelical faith could explain and vindicate their belief, needs, and desires. Her examination is based around the complex private life of Mary Benson, whose husband became the Archbishop of Canterbury. Benson's extensive personal papers illustrate the intricacies of corporate married life: she bore Benson six children, managed his home, and facilitated his business and personal relations with others, while developing a series of same-sex relationships independent of him. Her last lover lived with the family and their shared bed replaced that of husband and wife. Vicinus describes Benson as celebrating sexual consummation as the human act that allowed her truly to understand spiritual passion while simultaneously denouncing the fact that her own earthly passion turned her eyes from more single-minded spiritual pursuits.

Sheila Wright looks at spiritual friendships between Quaker women. She argues that friendships such as these sustained women in a world marked by gender inequalities, creating a physical and metaphorical space in which they could share with each other their spiritual growth. However, despite her examination of the extensive correspondence of many women, Wright argues that the familiarity between these women did not include physical intimacy, and that their spiritual closeness in fact surpassed human physicality (p. 98).

The third section of the collection contains four selections that move out into the world to examine women acting to use their faith and talents to transform the world for Christ. Linda Wilson examines the writing of Marianne Farningham, texts that Wilson argues had such widespread circulation that she would have been a household name in literally hundreds of thousands of nineteenth-century non-conformist British homes (p. 108).

Farningham's argument that not only was it possible but imperative that women throw off the culturally-defined rope of "respectability" to do God's will is one that is illustrated specifically in the life and work of Josephine Butler. Helen Mather's study of Butler points out that while Butler's public organizing against the Contagious Diseases Acts is well-documented, her private life has been much less-well studied, in part because of the "interpretive complexities" of disentangling her "feminist, melodramatic, sentimental and intensely religious" private writings (pp. 124-5). Despite the work of previous scholars, Mathers argues that it is still all too possible to examine Butler without understanding the intimate connection between her faith and work, but further, how that led to her radical feminist biblical criticism and her critique of the institution of the Church.

In her "Victorian Women with Causes," Suzanne Rickard looks at a selection of Victorian women and writers and echoes the argument that religious belief shored up rather than inhibited women's desire to "do good." Kristen Doern's "Equal Questions" focuses on the writing of Clara Lucas Balfour, a temperance reformer and writer of works on the lives of religious women, which was fashionable enough in the mid-nineteenth century that she was able to support her family (p. 161). Doern argues that our popular contemporary depiction of religious women in general and temperance supporters in particular as conservative is a flawed one–and that in fact Balfour represents middle-class reformers as likely to subvert notions of middle-class respectability as they were to endorse them. She, like the other women in this study, justified her "convictions by claiming scriptural authority" (p. 171). Each of the authors in this section underlines the need for historians to examine more closely the connections between feminine religiosity and feminist theory and action, both in the nineteenth century on its own and as an antecedent for feminist action in the twentieth century.

The last section of the collection looks outward from Britain to include an examination of British women engaged in "God's work" in the non-western world. Judith Rowbotham's "Ministering Angels, not Ministers" provides a succinct historic overview of women's contribution to foreign missions, both at home and abroad, concluding that women's significant efforts were welcomed, but that their work continued to be considered peripheral to that of ordained men, and in fact that siphoning off the effort and talent of women to "foreign fields" may have in fact maintained women on the periphery of formal religious life for longer period in Britain (p. 193).

Guli Francis-Dehqani's "Medical Missions and the History of Feminism" gnaws away at the connections between women, religion and the professions. She focuses her discussion on the work of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Persia, in roughly the first three decades of the twentieth century. Rowbotham's article is a very brief introduction to what is now a significant field of research, and a more comprehensive bibliography could point the reader towards more of this rich material. Similarly, Francis-Dehqani's notes could usefully make refer-

ence to some of the fine literature that has focused on the efforts of contemporary medical women working with religious societies in India and China.

The collection is accessible and could be used in upper-division undergraduate courses. The strength of the collection is clearly its attention to the intersection of faith and developing feminisms in modern Britain. The essays quite nicely support Morgan's assertions that understanding faith and acts allows historians to "generate concepts beyond that of separate spheres, beyond the boundaries of public and private, that instead focus on types of activity where women were concerned at home and abroad with issues of maternity, morality, religiosity and philanthropy, while men dominated "high" politics, institutional management and most forms of paid employment that did not involve domestic skills" (p. 15). An increased number of footnotes and a more extensive bibliography could only enhance the usefulness of this collection for students.

Notes

[1]. Anne Stott, *Hannah More: the First Victorian* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[2]. Also see Ruth Watts, *Gender, Power, and the Unitarians in England 1760-1860. Women and Men in History* (London and New York: Longman, 1998).

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