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The United Front: Evangelical Protestantism and Abolitionism Among Women  
in the Antebellum North

The antebellum period was a time of religious revival and reform in the United States. New religious beliefs created new churches, and many Americans, reawakened by the ideals of this evangelical Protestantism, felt it their moral, ethical, and religious duty to make the world a better a place. Women were an active part of this process. During the first decades of the 1800s, women fought for and were integral to a number of causes of the early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The new definition of a woman's place in society made her, in the eyes of society, an appropriate person to fight against inequalities in the United States, even when her work brought her outside the home. Most women acted only as foot soldiers, though their contributions were invaluable and many became leaders in their movement of choice, and later in the Women's Rights Movement.

A woman's place in benevolence and reform movements was not a new idea, nor was it a radical idea. Not only was a woman considered more moral than a man, the duties of reform often fell within the traditional women's sphere. The new ideas of womanhood that shaped the thoughts and actions of many in the early years of America, such as the Cult of Domesticity, as well the ideas of republicanism and Republican Motherhood, suggested that a woman had a responsibility to do anything to take care of her family and also placed her as the guardian of the country's morals.

Although a woman's actions were acceptable, then, her causes were not always treated the same way. Women fought in long list of movements in the antebellum period; the most well-

known including temperance, women's rights, charity to the poor, prison reform, and towards better care for the mentally insane. Antislavery and abolitionism, another one of the reforms women took part in and gained national leadership in, was one of the smallest and most radical movements in the United States, as well as the most unpopular.

The scholarship of three distinct, yet intertwined, subjects coalesce in this paper: religious revival, reform and abolitionism, and women in Antebellum America. Each topic is more than worthy in its own right for historical study, but together they provide a way to understand a middle-class woman's place, socially and politically, during the antebellum period. Ultimately, the literature chosen for this paper unites into a fairly clear picture. The historiographies for religion, antislavery, and women are extensive when studied separately, and together are easily overwhelming. In an attempt to get at least one perspective on each element of this phenomenon, only a small selection of the available material is mentioned. Most of it limits this study to the time between the 1820s and 1860s in the North, where the antislavery and abolitionism was much stronger than in the South.

The religious revival of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, also referred to as the Second Great Awakening, deeply touched and fundamentally changed most of the population of the United States. The movement began in New England and western New York in the 1810s, building locally in an intermittent fashion through 1820s when the country erupted in a religious fervor in 1831.<sup>1</sup> Upper- and middle-class Americans, many of them young, small-town women, threatened by a changed world after the American Revolution and anxious about the country's moral

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<sup>1</sup> Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 4.

standing, “turned to religion in numbers and intensity that have not been surpassed before or since.”<sup>2</sup>

Jon Butler’s *Awash in a Sea of Faith* and Nathan O. Hatch’s *Democratization of American Christianity* focuses on the resurgence of an increasingly pluralistic Christianity in Antebellum America, a time and place Butler refers to as a “unique spiritual hothouse.”<sup>3</sup> Hatch’s book preceded Butler’s by merely a year, and though their focuses differ slightly, they do agree that America became radically Christianized in the period between the American Revolution and the Civil War. They also agree that Christianity became a religion of the people as a whole, not just of the elite. As will be explored later, scholars agree that Protestant religious beliefs formed the basis for many of the reform movements in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Hatch and Butler’s books, when combined with scholarship on the connections between religion and reform, support idea that Americans needed to establish that religious theory before Americans could take steps towards reform.

Hatch argues specifically that democratization and knowing how religious movements were built is key to understanding how American Christianity developed. The new Christian churches appealed to all socio-economic classes in America when they broke apart from traditional European beliefs about Christianity.<sup>4</sup> These more popular groups, the Christian Movement, Black churches, and Mormons, but most especially the Methodists and Baptists, did more to Christianize the American people than any other movement. They encouraged self-confidence and self-respect at the individual and community levels, virtues older churches did

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<sup>2</sup> Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform*, (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2000), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 3-4.

not always offer to their adherents. Between 1775 and 1845, the number of ministers in America increased from eighteen hundred to almost forty thousand, one sign of the “religious upsurge” occurring in the new nation.<sup>5</sup> Hatch locates one of the causes of the spread of religious populism in the American Revolution, a movement that he says “dramatically expanded the circle of people... capable of thinking for themselves” and that the transitional period where these feelings erupted left an undeniable mark on American religion as well as American politics.<sup>6</sup>

*Awash in a Sea of Faith* studies nearly three centuries of religious development in America, from the European religion brought to the colonies through to the Civil War. He constructs a “complex religious past, one that reflects processes of growth and development far removed from a traditional ‘Puritan’ interpretation of America’s religious origins.” Instead of the traditional approach, Butler believes the more prominent “religious eclecticism” should be identified as the major force in shaping American religion.<sup>7</sup> The society of the early national period gave birth to four new Christian institutional movements: Methodism, Mormonism, Afro-American Christianity, and spiritualism. Folk and occult religious beliefs, stretching back to the earliest days of the colonies, still were also still adhered to alongside Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

Paul E. Johnson looks specifically at the religious revival of 1830 and 1831 in *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*. In addition to Johnson's tighter focus in time and location, especially when compared to Hatch and Butler, he is also more interested in the fundamental changes Christianity underwent during the revival and the effects of those changes, rather than the spread of the religion or the increase in number of practicing Christians. Charles Grandison Finney spread a message of Christianity and reform

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<sup>5</sup> Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 236.

in the 1820s, primarily in northern and central New York. He preached a new Protestantism, against the more traditional idea that men could not change themselves or the world. Finney advocated for men and women to take a more active role in their own lives and in the world around them, a place where “men worked ceaselessly to make themselves and others perfect” and started to “remake society in God’s name.” Finney’s ideas, and those of his colleagues, firmly established a middle-class whose faith was an activist and millennialist evangelicalism focused on free agency and perfectionism, that would, Johnson argues, transform American politics and society.<sup>9</sup>

Finney’s radicalism, however, has been questioned, as has the radical nature of the revivalist movement. The year after *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium* was published, James H. Moorhead stated in his article “Social Reform and the Divided Conscience of Antebellum Protestantism” that while Protestantism encouraged reform, the relationship between the two was often ambiguous. Like Protestantism itself, Charles Finney, an activist and innovator against institutional restraints on religion, had a “very cautious side” that Moorhead quoted one author called “conservative, status conscious, and pessimistic about human nature.” Moorhead argues that by acknowledging and studying Finney’s ambiguities rather than choosing one side of him as the “real” Finney, scholars can gain insight into evangelicalism’s potential and limitations in reform and benevolence work.<sup>10</sup> Evangelical Protestantism called on believers to take every chance to do good works for their own sakes; it was up to individuals to do God’s work on their own because of the limitations the movement placed on religious authority. Moorhead posits that

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<sup>9</sup> Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, 3-5.

<sup>10</sup> James H. Moorhead, “Social Reform and the Divided Conscience of Antebellum Protestantism,” *Church History* 48 no. 4 (December 1979), 416.

those limitations also prevented Protestantism from creating a united movement that might have more successfully provided social critique and reform.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars agree that the ethics and morals encouraged and practiced by evangelical Protestantism led to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reform movements. Abolition was only one of the many causes Americans fought for; others included temperance, Sabbatarianism to make Sunday a sacred day in the public calendar, the beginning of the women's rights movement, and various types of self-reform such as vegetarianism and phrenology.<sup>12</sup> Lori Ginzberg identifies the northern and western regions of the United States as the most active in terms of reform efforts, where participation was another way of showing identification with the Protestant middle-class. The ideals of the Enlightenment and the ideals of the Republican thought that shaped early American society, especially the idea of a virtuous citizenry, combined with the religious fervor to create a group of people who thought it their duty to change the world.<sup>13</sup>

In *Cosmos Crumbling*, Robert Abzug argues that religious beliefs formed the basis of the reform movements. Abzug notes that previous scholars have noted a religious element, if not its centrality, to reform. He, however, moves beyond them by looking a) beyond formal theology, b) the religious element in reform ritual, and c) at the relationship between the sacred and profane and the significance with which the reformers ascribed their religion to the mundane world. Rather than study the reform movements themselves, Abzug instead looks at the reformers and their beliefs to create a "kind of genealogy of reform cosmology" between the American

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<sup>11</sup> Moorhead, "Social Reform and the Divided Conscience of Antebellum Protestantism," 429.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), vii.

<sup>13</sup> Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform*, 1-3.

Revolution and the women's movement.<sup>14</sup> These reformers, at odds with the world around them, used religion to make sense of that world and united the sacred and the profane in their everyday lives.<sup>15</sup> Abzug also ascribes reform as a reaction to historical processes present in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century: the Constitutional separation of church and state, the struggle to define the new nation, and the change from a pre-industrial state to a commercial-industrial marketplace. New England, deeply affected by all three factors, became a center of reform activity.<sup>16</sup>

Lawrence J. Friedman focused his book *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolition, 1830-1870* on the first generation of the abolitionist cause in the 1830s. He identifies these reformers specifically as "immediate abolitionists" who wanted to immediately end slavery, as opposed to those who were working towards an eventual antislavery goal.<sup>17</sup> Like the other authors discussed in this paper, Friedman places the goals of immediate abolition as a part of the larger evangelical movement of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; his focus on the 1830s, in fact, is directly in line with Johnson's focus on the revival of 1830-1831. He casts the immediate abolition also as the result of "gregarious social aspirations and intense desires to improve the level of one's personal devotion."<sup>18</sup> Antislavery activists, then, were motivated as much by personal gain as by their own beliefs in social justice. Finally, Friedman advocates for a "push-shove interpretation" of the sectional conflict between Northern and Southern attitudes towards slavery. Originally suggested in the 1930s and 1940s, this view says that despite the limited success early abolitionists actually had, southerners believed their effect to be much greater, resulting in a southern shove to counteract the northern push and helping to promote

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<sup>14</sup> Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, viii.

<sup>15</sup> Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolition, 1830-1870*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, 3.

sectional conflict.<sup>19</sup> Immediate abolitionists represented northern middle-class beliefs of religion and reform.

Chris Padgett also limited his study of the antislavery movement, a move he sees as a necessity in order for historians to avoid writing the same histories of antislavery and abolition; he suggests looking at the constituency of the abolitionist movement, one he sees as grass-roots in nature, in order to understand why people joined this “unpopular cause.”<sup>20</sup> In “Hearing the Antislavery Rank-and-File: The Wesleyan Methodist Schism of 1843” he focuses on the Methodist separatists, who left the Methodist Episcopal Church because they believed the condoned slaveholding, made up a considerable bulk of the antislavery activists. The letters of these Wesleyan Methodists to abolitionist newspapers provide insight to the thoughts of a group Padgett calls the “rank-and-file abolitionists.”<sup>21</sup> Fifteen-thousand Wesleyan Methodists joined the abolitionists in two years, and the as a whole, the group was noted throughout the movement for their dedication to the cause.<sup>22</sup> Though the main focus of the article is the separation of the Wesleyan Methodists from the larger Methodist Church, it is a good example of religious beliefs guiding the path of reform and antislavery. Padgett reminds historians that the abolitionist leadership and constituencies may have had different inspirations and all internalized their beliefs in their own way.<sup>23</sup>

Richard Cawardine takes a very different look at the role of evangelical Protestantism in *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*. He instead focuses on the important role of the new Protestantism in shaping American political culture, especially in breaking down political

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<sup>19</sup> Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Chris Padgett, “Hearing the Antislavery Rank-and-File: The Wesleyan Methodist Schism of 1843,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 12 no. 1 (Spring 1992), 63.

<sup>21</sup> Padgett, “Hearing the Antislavery Rank-and-File,” 64-65.

<sup>22</sup> Padgett, “Hearing the Antislavery Rank-and-File,” 66.

<sup>23</sup> Padgett, “Hearing the Antislavery Rank-and-File,” 83.

consensus in the years leading up to the Civil War.<sup>24</sup> He sees evangelical Protestantism as the “principle subculture in antebellum America” because of their large numbers, and thus considerable political influence.<sup>25</sup> Though Cawardine recognizes reform as a part of Protestant life, he is far more interested in their role in changing the politics of the country. He is interested in Protestant reform efforts as far as they impact national political issues, such as ballot measures, party organization, elections, and sectionalism.<sup>26</sup>

The ethics and morals brought about by the religious revival that pushed the reform movement also spurred women to become a driving force for many causes. Those same morals gave women a foundation for their activities outside the home, providing an ideology that, according to Lori D. Ginzberg in *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, justified their social activities. Women identified reform and benevolence, as Christian, fundamentally moral, and uniquely female in nature.<sup>27</sup> In the 1820s and 1830s, women became more closely identified with religion and morality, while men were associated with politics and other aspects of public life.<sup>28</sup> Antebellum activists believed “that virtue was more pronounced in women than in men and that this virtue could be the force behind a moral transformation of society at large.” In the ideology of Republican motherhood and the cult of domesticity women were responsible for alleviating suffering and harsh conditions.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Richard J. Cawardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), ix.

<sup>25</sup> Cawardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*, xv.

<sup>26</sup> Cawardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*, xx.

<sup>27</sup> Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 9, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Beth A. Salerno, *Sister Societies: Women in Antislavery Organizations in Antebellum America*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, 5, 17.

Because of women's superior moral values, male reform leaders called on them to take active roles in the reform movements, especially in abolitionism and antislavery. George Thompson, an English abolitionist, told women in Concord, New Hampshire that opposing slavery was "inherently feminine" because the institution tore families apart, connecting it to the established practice of women's aid societies for mistreated women and children.<sup>30</sup> American abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison recognized the contribution of women to the antislavery cause, going as far as to believe that accounts would highlight women's efforts and sacrifices, and Frederick Douglass knew women performed the day-to-day work of reform and kept the morality of the abolitionist cause alive when it became a more political issue.<sup>31</sup>

*Women and the Work of Benevolence* also argues for a class-based "nature of benevolence," where social status helped determine which causes a woman would support and came to help define middle-class identity.<sup>32</sup> The idea of reform based on class is again illustrated in *City of Women*, when Christine Stansell explores female class relations and class conflict brought about by middle-class attempts at reform among the working class in New York City. Stansell looks not only at why a community of laboring women existed in New York City, but also at the social conflicts and pressures they were involved in. She argues that laboring women were not able to offset the oppressions they faced in terms of class and sex as middle-class women did by acting as "moral guardians of their families and their nation."<sup>33</sup> These women did not adhere to the same cult of domesticity their better-off sisters believed in. In fact, this mark of womanhood "quickly became an element of bourgeois self-consciousness" they tried to

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<sup>30</sup> Salerno, *Sister Societies*, 3, 5. "Inherently feminine" is Salerno's phrase, not Thompson's.

<sup>31</sup> Julie Joy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1-2.

<sup>32</sup> Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), xi.

incorporate into attempts to reform the city, most often of the women of the working class, “whose sexual and social demeanor subverted strict notions of female domesticity and propriety.”<sup>34</sup> Stansell drives home the point other authors hinted at, but did not always explicitly say: in many cases, reform was the domain of the middle-class. While popular religious beliefs might have spread to the poorer classes, the reform efforts they triggered were often limited to the middle and upper-middle classes.

Anna M. Speicher drew an explicit connection between female abolitionist leaders and the influence of religion on their activities in *The Religious World of Antislavery Women: Spirituality in the Lives of Five Abolitionist Lecturers*. In her own words, Speicher looks to understand the “what factors have motivated and sustained some women who chose unconventional paths” rather than the common experience many women shared.<sup>35</sup> To do so, she looks at five high-profile antislavery lecturers: Sarah Moore Grimke, Angelina Grimke Weld, Lucretia Coffin Mott, Abby Kelly Foster, and Sallie Holley, all of whom recognized religious truth as the “the fundamental organizing principle of their entire lives” even if they did not always identify with a specific sect of Protestantism and their relationships with organized religion were not always clear.<sup>36</sup>

An important change in the historiography concerns the role of women in the abolitionist movement. Early scholarship bringing women into the history of antislavery movements focused primarily on radical women who would go on to help found the feminist movement.<sup>37</sup> As already explored, however, scholars generally agree that antislavery and other reforms often fell within,

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<sup>34</sup> Stansell, *City of Women*, xii-xiii.

<sup>35</sup> Anna M. Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women: Spirituality in the Lives of Five Abolitionist Lecturers*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women*, 4-5.

<sup>37</sup> Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism*, 2.

or were made to fall within, the women's sphere and thus accepted comparatively easily by society. According to Lori D. Ginzberg in *Women in Antebellum Reform*, the idea of the women's rights movement was actually suppressed by Protestant-based reform and evangelical ministers condemned any movement towards equal rights for women.<sup>38</sup> Eventually, however, the Protestant ideas that drove women's involvement in the antislavery movement did help push them beyond the traditional and accepted public boundaries, and they began to fight for their own rights. Their second fight in women's history made exploring their other work, and that of other feminists, a goal of feminist scholarship. Like the common man in traditional political and military history, less radical women came in second place.

Julie Joy Jeffrey challenged the field in *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism* when she studied what she considered an overlooked group, an "army of silent workers," the ordinary women who worked for and believed strongly in the abolitionist cause but did not go on to play a role in the early feminist movement, or who even wanted to change the status quo for women in Antebellum America. Jeffrey points out that early work on women in the abolitionist movement successfully brought women into the discussion, but if focused on the "small number of radical women who would become feminists." Her book, however, is an attempt to recover women's experiences in the rural areas where abolitionist feelings were strongest.<sup>39</sup> She also argues that the scholarly community's placement of abolitionism in electoral politics has relegated women to the sidelines when women's groups often kept the movement afloat. The reality of their abolitionist activities, however, brought them outside the home, into the public sphere, and up

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<sup>38</sup> Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform*, 97-98.

<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism*, 1-2.

against the boundaries of gender, no matter the woman's view of feminism and women's rights.<sup>40</sup>

Jeffrey's identification of non-feminist reformist women was not wholly unique when she published in 1998. An anthology edited by Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne in 1994, *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, includes essays that bring women into political culture, but only through their work in antislavery societies. The essays, Yelling and Van Horne explain, recognize that abolitionism "opened a new path for women's political concerns" by helping to prepare them for the work they would later do, but black and white women created a political culture long before that. That political culture, distinct from benevolent societies and the feminist movement, is what the essays in the book seek to explore.<sup>41</sup> Working towards abolition allowed black women to create new cultural forms in reaction to racism and sexism, and some, but not all, women, regardless of race, to question social restrictions on women and switch their rhetoric to women's rights.<sup>42</sup> The book covers a broad number of topics related to women's activity in antislavery societies, such as radical versus conservative movements, the influence of religious revival, the roles white and black women played, and divides in race, class, religion, and age.

The women uninterested in feminism and the women's rights movement also comprise a large percentage of the women studied in *Sister Societies* by Beth A. Salerno. Salerno posits that women gained power by working together in societies or associations for the antislavery cause. These societies gave women the chance to run their own organizations separately from men, giving them the opportunity to run public meetings, vote on resolutions, and serve as officers.

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<sup>40</sup> Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism*, 5-7.

<sup>41</sup> Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), ix, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Yellin and Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, 8, 19.

Meeting with one another also strengthened their local, regional, and national ties to the greater reform movement.<sup>43</sup>

Though Speicher's *The Religious World of Antislavery Women* seems to be an exception to the trend of the past twenty years of scholarship in terms of studies in women and abolition, she follows in the path of Robert Abzug in terms of reform and religious studies. In actuality, Speicher effectively ties much of the historiography relating to all three of these topics together. Through studying women like Mott, Halley, and the Grimke sisters, she looks at the radical and transformative reform-oriented religion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She also touches on the idea of a community created by common interest, identity, purpose and personal and emotional bonds among women, an idea articulated first by Nancy Cott and picked up in 2005 by Beth Salerno for her work on networks of more moderate and less well-known female antislavery activists.<sup>44</sup>

As this paper shows, most scholarship surrounding women, antislavery, and religion agrees generally on central ideas, such as the importance of Christianity on American society, the influence of religious revival on the reform movement, and the key role women played in reform. While the large picture is fairly coherent, though, its nuances keep it fresh and interesting, as well as creating a fuller and richer depiction of what inspired and motivated antislavery women in the antebellum north. These studies also provide an idea of the challenges to gender roles in the antebellum period, especially in the 1820s and 1830s, before the feminist movement really began. The consensus most historians appear to have reached in terms of the importance of Protestant belief and women's roles in the reform movement provides a new

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<sup>43</sup> Salerno, *Sister Societies*, 4.

<sup>44</sup> Abzug's *Cosmos Crumbling* and Salerno's *Sister Societies* were both examined in this paper. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womenhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

platform for new historians to work from, both in terms of further exploration of these subjects and new ways to challenge the consensus.