

Quaker Feminists Theologians in 19th century America

Rosemary R. Ruether

The women's rights movement that arose in the two decades before the American Civil War drew on a combination of radical evangelical and Quaker theological and social principles and American political egalitarianism. The American Declaration of Independence assumed an Enlightenment secularization of Christian doctrine that all humans are created in the image of God. This was understood to mean that all humans have a common human nature that endows them with "reason and moral conscience." This is the basis of the claim that all humans should therefore possess the same "human rights."

European societies divided between aristocracies and peasants denied any such equality of natures and so of rights. For revolutionary liberalism this class hierarchy reflected a distortion of "nature." The overthrow of class hierarchy and the establishment of democratic society was understood as the restoration of an original equality in nature. This secular political equivalent of the theology of creation, fall and redemption was enshrined in the American tradition in the phrase "we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal."

But the framers of the American Constitution did not seriously consider including all humans in this definition. Property-less white males, slaves, Indians and women were all assumed to be excluded from full and equal citizenship and hence voting rights. The "all men created equal" *de facto* meant free white propertied men. It would take almost two centuries for the excluded groups to be incorporated into the American legal definition of equal self-representing citizens. Quaker feminists played a key role in this struggle to abolish slavery and female subjugation in 19th century America.

Angelina and Sarah Grimké were leading figures in the first generation of this movement in the 1830s. The Grimké sisters were white Southerners raised as Presbyterians. Repelled by her experience of slavery in her family estates, Sarah Grimké was drawn to the Society of Friends by her reading of John Woolman, an 18th century Quaker abolitionist. In 1821 she put her new convictions into practice by leaving her family home in Charleston, South Carolina and moving to Philadelphia, where she joined the Fourth and Arch Street meeting of the Society of Friends. Her sister Angelina,

13 years her junior, followed a similar path and joined Sarah as a member in the Arch Street Quaker meeting in 1829.

Philadelphia Quakerism at that time was rent by a schism between prosperous establishment Quakers, represented by the Arch Street Meeting, and the Hicksites who sought to revive more egalitarian expressions of the Society of Friends. The Arch Street meeting, while admitting Blacks to membership, made them sit on special “colored” benches at the back of the meeting. They frowned on social activism, including abolitionism, among members, especially when it involved participating in non-Quakers gatherings. Thus despite the importance of Quakerism in facilitating the sisters escape from slavery, these patterns of racism and sectarianism would result in marginalizing them from the Arch Street meeting.

In 1832 Angelina identified herself with abolitionism by joining the Female anti-Slavery Society, led by Hicksite Quaker activist Lucretia Mott. Angelina also identified herself with William Lloyd Garrison, leader of the more radical anti-slavery movement. In 1836 she published her first anti-slavery tract, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*. At this time Sarah Grimké joined her sister in training as field agents of the American Anti-slavery Society. For the next 18 months the sisters spoke extensively throughout New England, often confronting violence from angry mobs and criticism from local clergy for speaking in public. Conservative reformer Catherine Beecher wrote a tract in 1837, *Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duties of American Female* criticizing the sisters for violating New Testament teachings that women should be subordinate to males and silent in public.

Angelina wrote a series of letters to answer Beecher’s views. This was followed by a series of essays by Sarah Grimké, “On the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women” written from July to November of 1837. These essays laid out a biblical exegesis and theology against slavery and female subordination. The core of Sarah Grimké’s argument rested on her reading of Genesis as teaching the equality of all humans in the image of God. This meant that God created all humans with the same moral nature, equal in rights and responsibilities. She argues that all humans collectively are given dominion by God over the lower creation, but no dominion was given of some humans over others, either master over slave or male over female. When one group of humans asserts dominion over another group, the humanity of the subjugated is denied, reducing them from the

status of persons to that of property. This is a grievous sin against God's design for creation and the source of all evil in society. In Sarah Grimké's words"

We must first view woman at the period of her creation. "And God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over the cattle and over all the earth;" in this sublime description of creation of man (which is a generic term including between man and woman) there is not one particle of difference intimated as existing between them. They were both made in the image of God; dominion was given to both over other creatures, but not over each other. Created in perfect equality, they were to exercise the viceregency entrusted to them by their Maker in harmony and love.

Moving to the story of the Fall, Sarah Grimké reads Genesis 3 as showing that the primal pair played different roles. The woman initiating but more naively, the man accepting, but more culpably, since the divine command was given first to him. For Grimké this means that woman is no more guilty for the Fall than man. Moreover God in no way removed their original equality. It is human sin that generates the evil impulse from which dominion of some over others arises.

"The lust of dominion was probably the first effect of the Fall, and as there was no other intelligent being over whom to exercise it, woman was the first victim of this unhallowed passion."

She sums up her case in these pithy words:

But I ask no favors for my sex. I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brothers is that they will take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God has designed for us to occupy.

The Grimké sisters believed that it was Christ's mission to restore this original equality between humans, overcoming the unjust systems of domination of male over female and master over slave. This was not simply a matter of theological acknowledgement by the church, but reform of social and political systems of society. The Grimkés also rejected the common view at the time that women and men occupied separate social spheres and had fundamentally different virtues of

behavior. They insisted that whatever is right for a man to do, such as speak in public and exercise political power, is also right for women to do. The contrary also holds. Whatever is wrong for a woman to do should be wrong for a man to do.

In Sarah Grimké's words:

...God has made no distinction between men and women as moral beings; that distinction now so much insisted upon between male and female virtues is as absurd as it is unscriptural and has been the fruit of much mischief: granting to man a license for the exhibition of brute force and conflict on the battlefield; for sternness, selfishness and the exercise of irresponsible power in the circle of the home and to women a permit to rest on an arm of flesh and to regard modesty and delicacy and all the kindred virtues as peculiarly appropriate to her. Now to me it is perfectly clear that *whatsoever it is morally right for a man to do, it is morally right for a woman to do*, and that confusion must exist in the moral world until woman takes her stand on the same platform with man and feels herself clothed by her Maker with the same rights and, of course, that upon her devolve the same duties.

For the Grimkés it is not simply that females have been deprived of their full rights and ought to be able to exercise the same public roles as males. The humanity of males has also been distorted by the system of domination. Both masculinity and femininity socially defined are false distortions of humanness. Women need to be converted from their timidity and deference to men and men need to be converted from their aggression and prideful claim to superiority in order to restore both men and women to their divinely intended humanness of equal and shared moral rights and duties in all spheres of society, domestic and public.

In 1838 abolitionist leader Theodore Weld confessed his love for Angelina Grimké. They were married in a home ceremony that reflected their egalitarian and anti-slavery principles. An African American confectioner made the cake with all free (i.e. no slave-grown) ingredients, Black and white friends attended and both a black and a white minister offered the blessings. Weld's vows included his repudiation of the unjust dominance over his wife found in current law. Yet despite their good intentions of living as equals, Angelina's rapid childbearing at an older age and their limited economic resources, meant both she and her sister Sarah, who came to live with the couple,

no longer exercised their former roles as public lecturers. Yet their three year public career had launched the issues of women's rights within abolitionism. This was continued by Quaker minister Lucretia Mott and the younger leaders Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

I will focus here on the theological thought of Lucretia Mott. Although her leadership as a social activist in abolitionism, women's rights and peace is recognized, her importance as a theologian is generally overlooked. In my view Lucretia Mott is a transformative thinker, perhaps one of the most important theologians of 19th century America. Mott was born in 1793 and married at eighteen to James Mott, a Hicksite Quaker with whom she shared an egalitarian partnership. In 1838, when the Grimké's retired from public life, Lucretia Mott was already a grandmother and was emerging into a public leadership role that she would continue until her death in 1880 at the age of 87.

Mott was sensitive to women's rights from her school days. This was deepened as a young mother in her twenties when she read Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. The Motts espoused antislavery views from the earliest years of marriage, adopting in the mid-1820s the principles of "free produce," boycotting products produced by slave labor. In 1830 they were drawn into the Garrisonian anti-slavery movement; Lucretia organized the first meeting of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. This society broke sectarian and racial boundaries, drawing in members from different churches and Black as well as white members. Mott's social activism raised some controversy among conservative Quakers, yet she remained a lifelong Quaker minister in good standing.

Lucretia's manner of public speaking draws on the testimony tradition of the Quaker silent meeting. She spoke without notes or formal written text, and yet in a highly organized and systematic way. A stenographer recorded her talk which Lucretia did not correct. She was a prolific speaker, lecturing often in the Cherry Street Quaker Meeting and other church settings, particularly Unitarians, as well as anti-slavery, women's rights, temperance and peace conferences. Forty-nine of her lectures and sermons are preserved. Her first recorded talk was at the Marlboro chapel in Boston in 1841 on "The Truth of God" and her last was in 1878 at the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Seneca Falls Women's Rights convention, on appropriateness of placing women in positions of equal power. Although there were doubtless many more that were not recorded or preserved, this volume of her talks gives a good record of her developing thought.

For Mott the turning point on the issues of women's rights was the June, 1840 meeting of the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London. Mott was one of several women from the United States who were delegates to this convention. But the British organizers refused to seat the women. This touched off a vehement debate. It also linked Mott with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the young wife of abolitionist leader Henry Stanton. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton spent long hours talking about the injustices to women and resolved to form an organization to address this issue when they returned home.

Stanton's many pregnancies delayed these plans, but on July 19, 1848 Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton opened the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. They presented to the Convention a Declaration of Sentiments modeled after the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.... (but) the history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of men toward women, having in direct object the establishment of any absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let these facts be submitted to a candid world...

The Declaration went on to list all the laws by which the female was defined as rightless, excluded from the vote, from property-holding, education and many other ways of participating in society. In conclusion the Declaration stated that

In entering upon the great work before us, we anticipate no small amount of misconception, misrepresentation and ridicule; but we shall use every instrumentality within our power to effect our object. We shall employ agents, circulate tracts, petition the State and National legislatures, and endeavor to enlist the pulpit and the press on our behalf. We hope this Convention will be followed by a series of Conventions embracing every part of the country.

The three hundred women who attended the Convention adopted the Declaration enthusiastically, adding a series of resolutions that claimed women's equality before God and before the law. Mott proposed a closing resolution that "the speedy success of our cause depends on the

zealous and untiring efforts of both men and women for the overthrow of the monopoly of the pulpit and for the securing to women an equal participation with men in various trades, professions and commerce.” Stanton also added a resolution that “it is the sacred duty of women in this country to secure for themselves their right to the elective franchise.” This was the only resolution that passed with less than a unanimous vote. A call for the vote for women was still seen as very daring and controversial. Henry Stanton, Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s husband, told her he would not support her in this demand, but she made it anyway.

Three years later Susan B. Anthony, a teacher of Hicksite Quaker background, met Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the two formed a life-long collaboration in the struggle for women’s rights, including for the vote. Mott urged the two younger women to take over the movement, but Stanton and Anthony continued to see Lucretia Mott as their mentor, inviting her to speak and to chair meetings which she continued to do into her mid-80s.

In her many speeches and sermons Mott laid out a consistent religious basis for her calls for reform on such issues as anti-slavery, women’s rights and peace. The foundation for these calls for personal and social transformation was the Quaker principle of the inner light. For Mott the inner light was simultaneously a revelation of the true inner spiritual nature of every human being and the presence of the divine in the depths of the self. Possession and access to this inner light was not limited by gender, race or creed. It is the true nature of all humans across all religious and social differences, manifesting a universal divine presence calling for the same principles of truth, justice and love in all times and places.

This divine presence in every human is not a spiritual power given only to baptized Christians through Christ, after a fall alienated humans from God. For Mott, it is natural, that is, inherent in creation. It is the true nature of humans as created in God’s image. It has not been lost, but is still fully present in the depths of every person, although we need to get in touch with it through quiet listening and opening ourselves to its transformative power.

Mott vehemently rejected all Christian doctrines that limited this presence of the inner light in every person; such as total depravity, imputed sin inherited from Adam and Eve, imputed salvation through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, the exclusive divinity of Christ, the Trinity and the inerrancy of Scripture. She also questioned ceremonial forms, such as baptism, Eucharist, Sabbath

observance, and even Quaker plain dress and silence. In her view all these doctrines and forms externalized sin and salvation, God and revealed truth as powers outside the person that could be taken on as outward ideas or symbols without any inward transformation and committed action for redemptive change in the person and in relation to society.

This does not mean Mott repudiated Jesus, Biblical testimony, sin, salvation and millennial hope. But for her these truths became meaningful only when they were freed from their external forms and reintegrated into the reality of divine goodness as the depth nature of every person. The ideas of the Fall and total depravity fixed the human as alienated from God and incapable of doing or being good as an expression of their humanity. It thus gave a powerful excuse for maintaining evil as the way of being human and did not call for anyone to examine the real sins of selfishness and violence to others in which one was actually involved in daily life as a part of an unjust and violent society.

For Mott, the doctrine of vicarious atonement through Christ's death and resurrection was the other side of this same "gloomy doctrine" that justified a formalized "do nothing" Christianity. The individual, defined as incapable of turning to God and doing good through his or her own God-given nature was assured of an outwardly imputed salvation accomplished by an external agent, Christ. They need not be inwardly transformed or commit their lives to be and act rightly to create a society of justice for all, rejecting the real sins, like slavery, that deny some humans their very humanness.

For Mott, Jesus was not divine in a way that set him apart from the rest of us as an incarnate god, but rather he is divine in the same way all of us are; the divine was present in his soul, as it is present in each of our souls. Jesus differed from most of us only because he opened himself fully to this inner divine presence and became a transformed self, committed to truth, justice and love. But this same transformation is equally available to all of us. He is an exemplar of what we are all called to be in his goodness, truthfulness and call for justice for the most despised, not in his dying and being resurrected. Like all true prophets in touch with the inner light, Jesus was a critic of the clerical systems of his day. It was this criticism that caused him to be attacked and killed by the religious and political powers of his day. We too, when we are in touch with the inner divine and act on behalf of truth and justice, can expect to be attacked and suffer at the hands of the defenders of clerical priestcraft and social oppression.

Mott sees the Bible as authoritative insofar as it shows the common truths to which we are all called, but it also contains erroneous views that glorify war, justify slavery and women's subjugation. Its truths must be evaluated in the same way as other books, in the light of the primary testimony to God's truth in the depths of the self in touch with the divine presence. Also the clergy distort Scripture to justify slavery, subjugation of women and war. Their claim that the Bible is inerrant prevents people from reading it and evaluating its good and bad points for themselves.

All these doctrines of inherited sin, vicarious atonement, exclusive divinity of Christ and Biblical inerrancy, as well as various ceremonial forms, are tools of clerical domination by which a priestly caste lord over others and prevent ordinary people from thinking for themselves. It blocks the real message of the gospel which is the call for real transformation of the self and society in living ways of justice, truth and love. Clerical domination serves to shelter the realities of social oppression and prevents people from questioning the social systems and their violence. For Mott, the leading forms of evil to be overcome are slavery, the oppression of Blacks and American Indians, the subjugation of women, intemperance and war.

Women's oppression is one case among others where the unjust treatment of one group in society is justified by distorted religious teaching. God created men and women equally in the divine image, and gave women the same capacity for leadership in society as men. Mott repeats the Grimké's themes that men and women together are assigned to govern and care for nonhuman nature, but no dominion was given to one group of humans over others. The lust for dominion over others arose with the fall, and male domination over women is a prime example of this sinful usurpation of power of some over others. This domination of men over women has been acted out over the centuries by laws that reduce women to rightless dependency, denying them education, the vote and jobs. It has been expressed by distorted cultural ideas that declare women by nature incapable of public political, educational and economic participation. The Christian clergy has reinforced this subjugation of women by false readings of the Bible that prevent people from realizing that women played leadership roles in Biblical times. Women were prophets in the Old and New Testaments and were affirmed by Jesus as equally called to preach.

Although Mott is prepared to claim that the Bible in both testaments contains positive teachings about women, this does not establish its inerrancy. It simply shows a relative enlightenment of the people who wrote the Bible. Christians can use these parts of the Bible to

refute the clerical misuse of the Bible to justify women's subjugation, but the Bible must be read like any other book to discern its good and bad ideas. Or, as Mott like to put it, we must take "truth for authority, not authority for truth."

In order for women to recover their true human powers given them by God, all the oppressive laws against them must be rescinded. Women, like men, must be able to vote, run for elective office, pursue all areas of education and be employed in all skilled jobs. But the emancipation of women and other oppressed people is also an internal process, not just a cancellation of unjust laws. Women, like Blacks and other oppressed people, have been inwardly retarded and damaged by oppression. They need to engage in a process of education and personal and social development to recover their full human powers. Oppression has not changed women's nature or that of other subjugated people, but they have been socialized in distorted ways and need a developmental process to overcome this distortion. Mott, like the Grimké sisters, rejects women's superiority as well as inferiority. They too can abuse power. Both men and women need a new socialization, women to overcome their dependency and men their aggression, in order that both move toward a holistic humanity.

For Mott this redemptive process is this worldly. She is agnostic toward life after death, placing Biblical millennialism in the context of a hope for progress in society toward a better and more just way of life. Her reform commitments after the Civil War focused especially on peace, in the hope that arbitration could replace war as the means of resolving conflicts between nations. "No more war" was for Lucretia Mott the ultimate horizon of hope for human social progress.