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Women's Rights, Abolition, and Moral Reforms in Second Great Awakening Movement:  
Women's Roles and Sphere

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## **Women's Rights, Abolition and Moral Reforms in Second Awakening Movement: Women's Roles and Sphere**

### **I. Introduction**

“The nineteenth-century American woman’s rights movement was deeply rooted in evangelical revivalism. Its theology and practice motivated and equipped women and men to adopt a feminist ideology, to reject stereotyped sex roles, and to work for positive changes in marriage, church, society, and politics”, said by historian Nancy A. Hardesty.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, evangelical revivalism played an active role in gender history in the early nineteenth-century America. Many evangelist leader advocated women’s right and abolition by gaining authority from Bible scriptures. Meanwhile, revolution on the press also created a favorable environment for women and minister to spread their ideas. By publishing articles to the public, it influenced greatly to reconstruct gender roles for both men and women.

Nancy in her book “*Women Call to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century*” shed some lights on how women involved in religious reform by interpreting words and participating in activism in the whole nineteenth-century. While Nancy emphasized women’s involvement in women’s right advocacy and feminism, some others argued that religious leaders used Christianity to limit

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women called to witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), X.

women's role and participation in society. Traditionalist conservatives from Presbyterians, Lutherans and Episcopalians rejected women's participation in ministry publicly. Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* and Nancy F. Cott's *The Bonds of Womanhood* had argued the women in religious revival were confined to domesticity.

These previous historical researches bring some interesting directions to examine women's role and their sphere in the religious revival period in this essay. How did the women reinterpret words to advocate equal rights of both sexes and women's suffrage? Did religious leaders reconstruct gender roles when they interpreted words and initiated social reform, and how? Was women's sphere confined or extended as previous historians had argued? Were women's right movements and abolition movements advocated by religious leaders interrelated? In order to answer these questions, this paper conducts research mainly interprets publications by religious organizations and leaders, that has not discussed in depth previously, in order to show the sexes relationship are social, "how these relationship are constructed as they are" and "how they work".<sup>2</sup> It also provides evidences on men's direct or indirect participation in women activism during the period, which has been always overlooked in women history in previous works.

This paper focuses on the early period and the peak of the Second Awakening Movements, which was in the 1800s-1840s. It argues that evangelists, especially the

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<sup>2</sup> Joan Scott in her journal articles stated that most of the historians fall into the approaches of descriptive or causal usage to theorize phenomena, which could be problematic to miss out analytic power to social relationship on sexes and theories' implications. Joan W. Scott, "A useful Category of Historical Analysis", *American Historical Review* 91, no.5 (Dec., 1986): 1056-1057.

female, did involve a lot in activism trying to equalize the statuses of men and women in family. However, they could hardly achieve the goals of women's rights and extending the women's sphere to the public. They also failed to reject traditional and stereotyped women's role in family and in the public. First, the paper investigates the biblical interpretation for equalizing women's status and rights. Second, as organization of power inequalities along axes in gender, race and class<sup>3</sup>, this paper focuses on the relationship between gender and race that reflects by the women's right movement and abolition movements in the period. Thirdly, it looks at the construction of gender roles reflected by the religious movements and moral reforms. Last but not least, the men's and women's sphere during the period will be investigated.

## **II. Bible scriptures reinterpretation for women's status and rights**

Evangelist writers Phoebe Palmer in her work displayed the holiness of the Bible, “[t]he Bible, the blessed Bible, is the text book. [...] The Bible is the standard, the groundwork, the platform, the creed.”<sup>4</sup> To evangelists and churches, the Bible was seen as a holy book because it was the truth and words of Gods, “[t]he Bible is the voice of God speaking to you, just as truly as though you could hear Him speaking from heaven at this moment”.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the holiness and power of the Bible was upheld among evangelists and its believers. Followers read the Bible and adhere to its teachings. Many Christian women and men discussed biblical definitions of woman's role throughout the nineteenth century, such as Phoebe Palmer's *The Promise of the Father* in 1959 and Sarah Grimké's *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* in 1837.<sup>6</sup> As

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<sup>3</sup> Scott, “A useful Category of Historical Analysis”: 1054-1055.

<sup>4</sup> Guide to Holiness 31 (May 1857): 135.

<sup>5</sup> John Bate, *The guide to holiness, and class leader's magazine* 1, (London: Amos Osborne, 1870), 113.

<sup>6</sup> Hardesty, *Women called to witness*, 57.

the Bible was very important to the evangelists, feminist reformers reinterpret Bible scriptures to make their claims on woman's role.

Sarah Grimké's "depend[ed] solely on the bible to designate the sphere of woman reinterpretation on Bible scripture" as she wanted to show "the simple truths in the Scriptures". She claimed that there were no differences between man and woman. *The Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* in 1837 saying that "[s]o God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female, created he them. [Gen. 1:26-27]". She did not just say man and woman were the same because of the same image from one God, she further claimed that both of them did not have power over each other, but only over creatures other than human. She said "[t]hey were both made in the image of God; dominion was given to both over every other creature, but not over each other."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, women leaders like Sarah Grimké had used the scripture to claim the origin of the equal status between man and woman from God. Both of them were subordinated to God, but no subordinated to each other.

When letters were written for arguing women's right from Bible, they also argued their abilities and responsibilities for voting right. A paper named "Woman's Rights in Church and State" included debates from Dr. Harriot K. Hunt, first woman who practiced medicine in Boston, Sarah Tyndale, a merchant, and Antoinette Lousia Brown, a student in Theology. They showed logical argument on woman's position and equality with men in the Bible. Also, they argued that they were educated and capable for doing business. They were not weak and ignorant for participating in politics. Their debates on women's practical political actions and enfranchisement of

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Grimké, "Letter I: The Original Equality of Woman", *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and Condition of Woman: addressed to Mary S. Parker*, Boston: ISAAC KNAPP, 1837.

women aroused attention in the public, and even Britain. Their writings were reported in *New York Tribune* in October 1850 and an essay entitled “Enfranchisement of Woman” in *Westminister and Foreign Quarterly Review*. The essayist commented:

“[M]ost of our readers will probably learn, from these pages, for the first time, that there has risen in the United States, and in the most civilized and enlightened portion of them, an organized agitation, on a new question [...] This question is the enfranchisement of women, their admission in law, and in fact, to equality in all rights, political, civil, social with the male citizens of the community.”<sup>8</sup>

While debates over the responsibilities and abilities of women in voting, women leaders insisted women were in capability, equal status and moral responsibilities with the men. People overseas appreciated their action to fight for enfranchisement and liberation of women. This led to the rethinking of long standing ideas that women were not capable of political participation.

### **III. Women’s right movement and abolition movements**

When women leaders advocated for their rights, many of them also supported the abolition of slavery. Similarly, women leaders also drew references from the Bible. Angelina Emily Grimké argued that no any race would be subordinated to another race, just like no man or woman would place under another. In her *Appeal to the Christian Women of the Southern States* in 1836, she said “Man, I assert, never was put under the feet of man, by that first charter of human rights which was given by God.”<sup>9</sup> She argues the human rights were given from Bible and also from the Declaration of Independence of the United States. She urged for equality and freedom

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1, (New York, 1877), 225.

<sup>9</sup> Angelina Emily Grimké, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the Southern States*, New York, 1836, 3.

for slaves and denounced slavery and race prejudice. The slavery system should be stopped to treat African Americans with humanity.

Interestingly, Angelina Grimké encouraged women, who did not have voting right at that time, to support the abolition. Regarding the problem that “no legislative power is vested in us[women]”, she suggested that white women could pray, speak and act on the subject of overthrowing slavery. She encouraged the white women to talk with their relatives and friends to show that “slavery is a crime against God and man.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, Angelina Grimké tried to generate support from the white women for the abolition. She encouraged African Americans and whites to join the Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society of New York to support for the black schools and abolition.<sup>11</sup> Although she formed a kind of alliance between Southern white women and black slaves, she showed neither how the abolition of slavery could lead to the women’s votes, nor how the southern blacks could do for the women. This limited the support from different parties to struggle for both abolition and women’s right.

Although many leaders still supported both abolition and women’s right, controversies were shown among leaders on abolition of slavery. Angelina Grimké argued the pace the emancipation with another Christian leader for women’s right, Catherine Beecher. Angelina Grimké called to abolish slavery immediately. She asked “[n]ow why should not all this[emancipation] be done immediately? Which of these things is to be done next year, and which the year after? and so on.” She had “seen too

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> Gerda Lerner. *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina;: Pioneers for woman’s rights and abolition*, (New York: Schocken Books), 158-159.

much of slavery to be a gradualist.”<sup>12</sup> She urged Catherine Beecher should not take the abolition as a gradual process. Instead, she thought Beecher should advocate a radical movement to halt slavery. The difference of aims among the leaders made it hard to mobilize support to both movements for woman or slavery.

Controversies were not only appeared among women leaders, but also between men and women abolitionist leaders. However, they did not argue the pace on abolition movements. Many abolitionist men doubted about women’s right. They thought putting too much attention and energy on woman’s right would divert the effort away from abolition. William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator* reprinted an essay named “Our Own Sex” saying emphasized the importance of ladies on the question of slavery. However, when the first female anti-slavery society, the Providence Female Anti-Slavery Society, was formed in 1832, he did not show his welcome to the society.<sup>13</sup> There were no women invited for the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. Many male abolitionists believed the fighting for rights of African Americans had to come before the fighting for women’s right, even they supported women’s right. As a result, although the abolition movements and the women’s right were suggested by different evangelist leader, the insincere support from the men abolitionists and the failure of gaining mass supports by generating linkage between slaves’ rights and woman’s right posed problems to woman’s right movement.

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<sup>12</sup> Angelina Emily Grimké, “Immediate”, *Letters to Catherine E. Beecher, in reply to An essay on slavery and abolitionism, addressed to A.E. Grimke*, Boston: ISAAC KNAPP, 1838, 12-13.

<sup>13</sup> Angelina Emily Grimké and Sarah Moore Grimké. *The Public years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké: selected writings, 1835-1839*, Edited by Larry Ceplair eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 8.

#### IV. Gender roles constructed by religious movements and moral reforms

The religious claims for gender roles in family were conservative. Firstly, they restated the traditional patriarchal order in family. They ensured the parents had the authority to decide religious issue. Infant baptism was especially important for evangelists, as it was a rite for the parents to fulfill their religious responsibility to their children and their God.<sup>14</sup> The followers of Calvinism, a branch of Protestantism, said that “God has constituted the parent the head of the family, and so it is in nature.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, they thought the parents had the authority to make decision for their babies’ baptism. Among the parents, father and mother, hierarchy of sexes always existed. Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist press always claimed that it was fathers rather than mothers who exercised highest authority and responsibility in the issues of educating children.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the structure of a family was clear that it was always the father on the top.

In terms of parenting, fathers were the one who took higher authority and mothers were the one who were responsible for moral education. A father wrote reminders for his own uses saying that “as soon as my children become capable of attending to my instructions. I would [...] remind them of their baptism and of the duties to which it binds them.” He could also make his children obedient to himself by imposing strict rules.<sup>17</sup> This showed the father was like an instructor to teach his children, and could

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<sup>14</sup> Mary P. Ryan. *Cradle of the middle class : the family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> “Parental Resolutions. Composed for his own use, by a very ious man”, *Utica Christian Magazine*, March, 1815, vol. II. no. 9.

exercise his supreme authority to discipline them. Mothers also somehow exercised their responsibility of educating children, but they were portrayed as more tendered. The close relationship between mother and child was different from the father's absolute authority over the child. New York Female Moral Reform Society stated that mother "is committed in a special manner the formation of the character of your children; you are their best and safest friend, and to you they look for counsel and example."<sup>18</sup> The responsibility of mother was more like a role model for their children to learn from, rather than giving direct instructions. Besides, a mother was to fulfill her religious responsibility for the family. *Christian Palladium* portrayed a scene of a Christian mother praying:

"She[the mother] offered thanks for mercies past, and implored future blessings. She invoked Almighty assistance, that a mother's duties might be well performed, and children dwell together in unity"<sup>19</sup>

The editor then commented to appreciate the mother for her prayers. The duties of mother were performed if she prayed for the God help. It was also believed the family will be well protected and functioned through the religious performances.

For the evangelist families, although fathers were always the one who exercises more power than mothers, more equal status on husbands and wives could be seen. As some women leaders suggested that man and woman were created equally by God, "They[husband and wife] are standing on the same platform of human rights, are

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<sup>18</sup> New York Female Moral Reform Society, "The duty of mothers to their children", An appeal to the wives, mothers and daughters of our land, (New York: 1836).

<sup>19</sup> I. B. M. Christian Watchman "Scene in a Christian Family", ed. Joseph Maarch, *Christian Palladium*, June 1, 1839, vol. VIII, no.3.

equally under the government of God, and accountable to him, and him alone.”<sup>20</sup> Both husband and wife were only subordinate to the God. As a result, exceptional cases may be allowed for the wives not to be subordinate to their husbands. Sarah Grimké discussed the relationship between husband and wives. She thought “[i]f she submits, let her do it openly, honorably, not to gain her point, but as a matter of Christian duty.” She suggested the subordination of wives to husband were not necessary, but they could do it if they thought it was their Christian duties. She added the case of “a wife will naturally converse with her husband” when the wife did that because of “confidence and love”.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the Christian values were more emphasized than the subordination of wives in the family.

Moral reforms during the Religious revival period also helped define the moral and good actions of both sexes in the public and private life. Boston Female Moral Reform Society in the 1930s showed their purpose of reforming “fallen” women and to criticize men who visited prostitutes.<sup>22</sup> Female Moral Society of the City of New York showed their objectives of stopping “the progress of the evil”, especially on the licentious *man* having affairs with the licentious woman. It was more common to find male licentious than woman.<sup>23</sup> For the woman, Boston Female Moral Reform Society described prostitutes in the city as “abandoned girls, who having been ruined

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<sup>20</sup> Sarah Grimké, “Letter XIII: Relation of Husband and Wife”, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and Condition of Woman: addressed to Mary S. Parker*, Boston: ISAAC KNAPP, 1837

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Nancy F. Cott. *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 152.

<sup>23</sup> Female Moral Reform Society of the City of New York, *First Annual Report of the Female Moral Reform Society of the City of New York* (New York, May 15, 1835).

themselves by the treachery and depravity of man”.<sup>24</sup> When a young “abandoned” girl Caroline L. died on a street, she was described as “strayed from virtue”. Her death was also described as the man “desertion of her”.<sup>25</sup> From the above, both man and woman related to licentiousness were not acceptable. However, it was a common that men were found to involve in those issue and were to condemn more heavily. Girl was seen as victims of the immoral men.

In family, the men was the one who provide economic support and food. *Advocate of Moral Reform* described a scene in London to condemn the men for their wrong doings on laziness and drinking. It said “idleness and drunkenness of the husband leave the wife without bread for her little one; and often when the culprit is consigned from the bar to the penitentiary, his sentence, is in fact, the doom of an unhappy wife.” Women were suffered because the men did not work and just drink. Children were also suffered when they did not have “support from their parents, who wander the streets without home or shelter.”<sup>26</sup> In the above publications about moral issues, good man should take care of his family, wife and children, and work hard. Men should act according to moral standard, including not to drunk.

## **V. Man’s and Woman’s sphere**

Patriarchal order had always confined women in family life, but some women had tried to step out of this order to enter public life. Many religious voluntary

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<sup>24</sup> Third Annual Report of the Boston Female Moral Reform Society, quoted in Nancy F. Cott. *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 153.

<sup>25</sup> “A Paragraph for a Villain”, *Advocate of Moral Reform*, vol.VI, no.3., February 1, 1840.

<sup>26</sup> “Females in London”, *Advocate of Moral Reform*, vol.VI, no.3., February 1, 1840.

associations were set up. They allowed the women formed a community of peers outside the family. Women also travelled around the country, but most likely for their fathers' or husband's reasons than their own. This society, prayer groups or moral reform society allowed the female members to share their religious experiences. To add, the female members familiarized themselves in an all-female environment.<sup>27</sup> They wrote and debated, voted on issues, and elected officials in the associations was another kind of duplication of male political system.

Regarding woman's sphere and power in evangelism, there was recognition of more active female role in religious activities. Frederick G. Miller's wife was accepted to be his official associate responsible for preaching in a Christian Conference in Virginia in 1839. Although the recognition of Mrs. Miller's position evoked public criticism, Rebecca Miller wrote an article entitled "Duty of Females" in *Christian Palladium*. She claimed the power of women was from Bible, "in Old Testament times, women were divinely authorized to prophesy". She extended women's religious activities to a larger area, to the church because "prophesying means, and its extent, even to the whole church"<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, women were empowered to give open and public talks. Their role was not limited to the moral or religious performance at home.

However, male Christian often opposed women's extending sphere. Besides the criticism of recognition of Mrs. Miller above, a woman who called Martha Howell, was an itinerant Baptist, was condemned by a reverend James Carnahan because of her discourse on baptism on pulpit. Carnahan used the Bible to condemn that "she

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<sup>27</sup> Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 155.

<sup>28</sup> Rebecca Miller, "Duty of Females", *Christian Palladium*, May 15, 1841, vol. X, no.2.

contradicts the apostle Paul who says: I suffer not a woman to teacher; but to be silent.”<sup>29</sup> This showed the challenge to woman who wanted to take more active role in religious activities like teaching. The challenge was not from outsiders, but also from Christians. Even Bible could be reinterpreted to be a tool against women’ role in the public.

Later, local Baptists helped defend Martha Howell’s case, but their defense indeed confine Martha Howell’s and women’s role. When local Baptists helped defend Martha Howell in Carnahan’s charges, they thought she had only talked about her personal experiences and testimony. They presumed she had “neither to preach nor to teach”. Also, if Martha Howell “attempt[s] to teach in public”, the Baptists “should immediately interpose”.<sup>30</sup> The extent subversion of tradition domesticity of women was limited due to the challenges from Christian men and Christianity value.

On the other hand, men’s role and his sphere were reinforced when the women were challenged to step out of private life. An article was published in *Christian Palladium* to state the duties and qualifications of pastors. It said, “Like all other men, the pastor is person, ally under obligation to God. His being, his abilities, his gifts, and talents, are all derived from the ‘Father of lights’”. The article took for granted that all the pastors were “men”. It also said that it was the God made the male pastor “an overseer of the church”. The men were granted the power to lead religious activities in church,

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<sup>29</sup> James Carnahan, “Christianity Defended Against the Cavils of Infidels and the Weakness of Enthusiasts” (Utica, 1808), 17, quoted in Ryan. *Cradle of the middle class*, 73.

<sup>30</sup> Elias Lee, “A Letter to the Rev. James Carnahan Pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Utica and Whitesborough Being a Defense of Martha Howell and the Baptists Against the Misrepresentations and Aspersion of that Gentlemen” (Utica, 1808), 22-23, quoted in *Ibid.*, 72.

where the believers could come in and out. Regarding the duties of pastor, it was “to show the order of God’s house, the nature and design of every gospel ordinance; the requisite qualification for membership; the relation subsisting between the individual members, and the relative duties of all”.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, men could take the role that contacted with people and members frequently. Their power to deliver sermons and preaches in church and the duties of connecting church members gave stronger position for men to stay in the public.

## **VI. Conclusion**

In the 1800 to 1840s American, the Religious revival allowed men and women to express their religious view publicly. They reinterpreted words from Bible to advocate equal rights of woman and African Americans. They claimed the equal status between man, woman and African Americans were originated from God’s creation of human. However, some leaders were more radical in women’s right and less radical in abolition; some male leaders put abolition movement more urgent than women’s right movement. The differences in aims made the women suffragists and abolitionists hard to mobilize mass support.

Besides, when they interpreted the words and initiated social reforms to monitor immoral acts of men and women, they redefine the traditional role of father and mother in family, and moral man and woman in the public. Father exercised supreme authority in child education, while mother was just a role model with moral responsibilities. Women were not necessary to subordinate to their husband, but another form of subordination was seen in the subordination to the God. In the public,

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<sup>31</sup> John Ross JR. “A Pastor: Qualifications, duties, and responsibilities of a Pastor.”, *Christian Palladium*, March 15, 1840, vol.VIII, no.22.

both men and women should behave well, like not be drunk and not to be licentious. Women often took to role to monitor the men's moral behaviors and were often portrayed as victims of men's wrong doings.

Last but not least, when women engaged in their religious activities, they tried to step out of the traditional private sphere. They talked about their religious experience a testimony in the public. They also formed female community that they could also have a taste on political participation. However, their efforts were often challenged by other evangelists. Male pastor's position and their active participation in public sphere were unshakable. This posed a great limitation for the women to extend to public activities.

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