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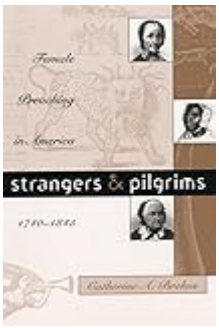

Catherine A. Brekus. *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. x + 466 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4745-9; $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2441-2.

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History's Exiles

At a soccer stadium in India a few years ago, "Bible teacher" Ann Graham Lotz resisted speaking in front of the vast audience, protesting, "I'm an American housewife, I don't belong here." Yet Mrs. Lotz found herself ineluctably drawn into the stadium pulpit. Her fears evaporated, and she "just stepped aside and let God take over." The daughter of Rev. Billy Graham, Mrs. Lotz is not an ordained minister. But like her father, she presides over a successful worldwide ministry she founded in 1988. When *The New York Times* recently identified prospective heirs to Billy Graham's evangelical mantle in the United States, the article named Mrs. Lotz as one of five candidates for the unofficial national pulpit occupied over fifty years by her father.[1]

Mrs. Lotz exemplifies a long, and until the publication of Catherine Brekus's new book, largely forgotten tradition of evangelical female preaching in America begun in the 1740s. An historian at the University of Chicago, Brekus has recovered this fascinating history of women's religious leadership by bringing together the stories of more than one hundred evangelical women who, she argues, tried to forge a visible and voluble tradition of female preaching during the First and Second Great Awakenings. During two short-lived periods, evangelicals offered women–both black and white–unprecedented opportunities to speak publicly in their meetinghouses and, strikingly, allowed them access to pulpits. Whereas seventeenth-century Puritans notoriously suppressed religious women's public speech, colonial Americans briefly opened meetinghouse doors to female exhorters during the 1740s in the North and a decade later in the South. Most dramatically, during the heady revivals of the early republic, unparalleled numbers of evangelical women claimed the right to preach. Confounding historians' claims for the domestication and sentimentalization of women's religious experience in the nineteenth century, a number of evangelical dissident religious groups in the North encouraged female itinerants' labors and thrilled at their fiery sermons.

Brekus makes a powerful case for viewing evangelical female preachers as early biblical feminists who called for women's spiritual equality and as "revolutionaries who defended women's right to proclaim the gospel" (p. 12). But as "reactionaries at odds with an increasingly in-

dividualistic and materialistic society," female evangelists lamented social change and "expressed profound doubts about America's future as a redeemer nation" (p. 11-12). Women preachers' unusual blending of biblical feminism and reactionary populism casts new light on the early sources of nineteenth-century feminism and offers insight into how and why evangelicals promoted female religious leadership. Moreover, because they pursued roles assigned exclusively to men in the Old and New Testaments and violated boundaries of proper "femininity," women preachers offer a uniquely sensitive lens for viewing shifting gender constructions over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Innovations in theology–the "doctrine of light" for Quakers, celibacy for Shakers, spirit communication and human mediumship for Spiritualists– helped to make women's religious equality possible among these radical sects. Though Brekus draws on women's experience among the Quakers and Shakers for comparative purposes, she chooses to exploit the peculiar tensions for female believers belonging to relatively more orthodox evangelical sects and denominations, including New Lights, Separates, Baptists, Freewill Baptists, Methodists, African Methodists, Christians, United Brethren, and Millerites. Unlike Quakers and Shakers, evangelical women were literally caught between the biblical inerrancy of Paul's injunction, "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak," and the empowering message that converted Christians can and should do everything in their power to save unconverted sinners. Brekus examines both sides of this theological and cultural equation, at once attentive to female preachers' strong resolve to preach the gospel and their compromises (conscious and unconscious) with evangelical churches and American society at large. As it pivots on this equation, *Strangers and Pilgrims* reveals with striking clarity the radical expansion and subsequent retraction of opportunity for religious and individual expression by ordinary women during the First and Second Great Awakenings and the American Revolution.

The result of painstaking archival research, *Strangers and Pilgrims* investigates individual female evangelists' backgrounds and families, religious conversions and callings, and careers as exhorters and itinerant preachers. Combing forty-five religious periodicals, scrutinizing twenty church manuscript collections, and hunting down nearly one hundred fugitive memoirs, tracts, and sermons, Brekus has recovered these women's efforts to broadcast their unofficial ministries and set a precedent for women's religious authority. Supplementing this corpus of evangelical women's writings, Brekus has consulted over 150 memoirs by male ministers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The resulting story brilliantly illuminates the intersections among individuals' lives and identities, profound events, and massive shifts in daily experience over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Organized both chronologically and thematically, *Strangers and Pilgrims* seamlessly moves between social, cultural, intellectual, and political history, displaying a mastery of the most significant debates in early American history.

Despite female evangelists' best efforts to carve out an arena for their labor and to be remembered, few are known by scholars today. As Brekus explains, while early feminists saw little currency in women claiming only spiritual, not political or social, equality with men, church historians deemed these women too radical and coarse for their institutional advancement. As a result, only a handful–Sojourner Truth and Ellen Harmon White, for example–have received sustained biographical treatment. But Brekus's notable difficulty in recovering these women's names and stories also testifies to their shadowy presence in the surviving historical record. Reflecting the growing scholarly interest in history and memory, Brekus transforms evangelical women preachers' troubling obscurity into an engrossing research problem.

The reasons Brekus cites for female preachers' absence from current histories and public memory today are alluded to in her title, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, which she uses in overlapping senses. At one level, female itinerants drew solace from the biblical story of Abraham and Sara's plight as "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (from Hebrews 11:1-13). This metaphor of exile helped explain their anomalous scriptural situation as both preachers and women and their sense of estrangement from a rapidly modernizing society. Moreover, although these women were prominent actors in the early histories of American religious dissident groups, they suffered withering ostracism as evangelical sects began to seek respectability and denominational status. Baptists in the late eighteenth century and Methodists, African Methodists, Christians, and others in the nineteenth century compounded their scorn by excising women preachers from their denominational histories. Women preachers therefore became "strangers and pilgrims" within their own denominations. As a consequence of this elision, those women laboring during the first half of the nineteenth century had no knowledge of women exhorters in the First Great Awaken-

ing. Nor, it seems, does Ann Graham Lotz realize that nineteenth-century women evangelized before stadium-size audiences at camp meetings and open-air revivals. "Cut off from their collective past," Brekus writes, female preachers also knew little about medieval or early modern women religious who had proffered viable biblical arguments for women's public speech (p. 15). Poignantly, "Strangers and Pilgrims" depicts successive generations of evangelical women justifying their labors anew.

Brekus expresses hope that contemporary women ministers may find in this recovered tradition of biblical feminism "a window on their past" (p. 17). "Strangers and Pilgrims" is not likely to inform contemporary religious women's struggle for ordination since the contest over formal authority to perform ceremonies and rites is not this book's focus. With few exceptions, the evangelical women Brekus concentrates upon did not seek ordination nor did they want to become settled ministers. Although some carried letters of recommendation from their churches or ministers while itinerating, none possessed official "licenses" to preach. "Strangers and Pilgrims" therefore delineates a subtler and perhaps more momentous struggle over women's ability to speak publicly and interpret biblical texts authoritatively. More than written expression (produced, at least, in the private sphere), women's public speech shocked sensibilities and strained credulity. Female evangelists presuming to translate famously difficult texts for others' enlightenment and salvation usurped men's prerogative of interpretation, sparking profound fears about familial, religious, and political disorder. Nevertheless, a significant number of evangelical women commanded religious authority as public interpreters of God's word during the First and Second Great Awakenings.

Historians frequently cite an 1831 speech by the black reformer Maria Stewart as the first public lecture delivered by an American woman (p. 197). Brekus shows this to be far off the mark. Nearly a century earlier, during the 1740s and 1750s, black and white women emboldened by a new "heart-centered piety" publicly exhorted (although they did not formally interpret Scripture) lay men and women to seek emotional conversions (p. 38). Brekus has discovered the names of only thirteen full-time female public exhorters during this period, none of whom left letters or written accounts of their own. However, after examining ministers' journals, letters, memoirs, and revival accounts, Brekus concludes that "scores or even hundreds of women may have witnessed to their faith every Sunday" by speaking and praying out loud in Separate churches (p. 49).

Although supported by several Separate and Baptist ministers, female exhorters and women who witnessed aloud visibly undercut the authority of state-supported ministers from Congregationalist ranks. Thus far, Brekus's account comports with Patricia Bonomi's and Harry Stout's depictions of the First Great Awakening's individualizing and radicalizing effects for ordinary colonial Americans occupying lower economic and social stations.[2] However, while Bonomi and Stout see these as enduring cultural and political shifts later fueling the American Revolution, Brekus departs from their accounts, finding that the colonial revivals had uneven results for ordinary men and women: for women, the gains proved "surprisingly ephemeral" (p. 11). By the early 1750s in New England and a decade later in the South, women's opportunities for such dramatic public influence ceased as revival energies wound down, as men reasserted patriarchal control over families, and as Separates and Baptists "traded their early radicalism for greater legitimacy and power" (p. 60). From this view, the long-term impact of the First Great Awakening appears less equalizing than several historians argue.

Brekus also investigates female exhorters' sense of identity. Through judicious readings of ministers' accounts and men's and women's conversion narratives, she fleshes out the implications of Thomas Laqueur's provocative argument that gender and body perceptions shifted dramatically between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his view, a "one-sex model" in which women were considered inferior but complementary versions of men "devolved" into a profoundly debilitating (for women) "two-sex model" of "incommensurable" biological difference.[3] Drawing on Laqueur, the historian Susan Juster asserts that the eighteenth-century model held out greater promise for evangelical women's equal participation in religious life than did the nineteenth century's ideology of separate spheres for men and women.[4] Yet in Brekus's recounting, there is something deeply disturbing about eighteenth-century religious women's self-perception: "Raised to view themselves as lesser, underdeveloped versions of men," she writes, eighteenth-century women "found it difficult to believe their bodies had been created in the image of God" (p. 53). Indeed, Brekus detects an alarming "language of pollution and defilement" in women's conversion narratives but not in men's (p. 40). From accounts describing female exhorters, Brekus concludes: "In order to speak as God's prophets, they believed they had to lose their identities as women" (p. 53). Although Brekus carefully weaves together the available evidence, some read-

ers may question her heavy reliance on men's narratives to interpret women's identities.

Brekus sees the period of the American Revolution as the low-water mark in evangelical women's struggle for religious authority. In a chapter entitled "Women in the Wilderness," Brekus offers an evocative and daring narrative interlude in which evangelical female preachers disappear from her story. During the 1770s and 1780s, women's opportunities for religious leadership evaporated, exposing a "harsher truth" about an era of revolutionary political change for ordinary men (p. 71). As Quaker women withdrew into middle-class reformism and evangelical denominations abjured women's public speech, only the Universal Friends and Shakers–two radical sects founded by women, in fact–offered women opportunities for leadership. In a brilliant reading of Jemima Wilkinson's and "Mother" Ann Lee's lives (the sects' founders, respectively), Brekus plausibly argues that both women "took their denial of gender to an even greater extreme" than female exhorters from the 1740s (p. 80). While Wilkinson "claimed that her female self had died and been replaced with the gender-neutral Public Universal Friend," Mother Ann Lee's "seeming celebration of the 'feminine' masked a deep hostility toward female sexuality" (pp. 80, 109). As a result, both "doomed women to striving for an unobtainable 'masculine' ideal" (p. 96).

This grim interlude sets up the climactic action of the early republic. After 1790, "in an ideological shift of stunning proportions," American evangelicals abandoned their view of women as naturally corrupt and reinvented them as apostles of virtue (p. 15). As a consequence, between 1790 and 1830, before a "stultifying domesticity" curbed women's expression, evangelical women–usually poor and lacking education–exerted a decisive public influence as religious experts by exploiting the new ideology of women's special morality (p. 149). Absolute numbers of evangelical women itinerants grew decade by decade until 1830. While the South remained closed to female preachers after the American Revolution (despite their initial acceptance of female exhorters in the 1760s), northern Freewill Baptists, black and white Methodists, Christians, United Brethren and Millerites encouraged female evangelists "to preach as women" (p. 15). Casting themselves as "Mothers in Israel" and "Sisters in Christ," evangelical women "seemed to find the language of 'separate spheres' and female virtue more liberating than confining" (p. 149). The reversal from the colonial and revolutionary eras could not be more striking: evangelical sects born in the Second Great Awakening "allowed women into the pulpit in order to symbolize [the sects'] identity as the chosen people of God" (p. 161).

Reading women preachers' autobiographies, sermons, and religious tracts, Brekus closely investigates nineteenth-century women preachers' understandings of their conversions, callings, and identities. With access to women's own direct voices, Brekus's arguments are powerful and convincing. No sentimentalists, these particular women were "charismatic, forceful religious leaders" who spoke authoritatively and likened themselves to militant Deborah and Joel's prophetic daughters (p. 197). Taking advantage also of the nineteenth-century's broadening "informal public" sphere constituted by churches and voluntary associations (but not the state), these biblical feminists relentlessly asserted women's spiritual equality with men and their right to preach. Even more radically, African-American women preachers simultaneously denounced slavery, racism, and gender inequality. In *Strangers and Pilgrims*, Brekus has recovered an early and unusual brand of feminism drawing on notions of women's special morality and virtue, scriptural evidence of women's exemplary religious leadership, and foreboding about the disintegrating forces of the market revolution. Several decades before the Seneca Falls women's rights convention in 1848, then, these evangelicals had proclaimed women's essential dignity and spiritual equality with men, although they never argued for their political or legal equality.

Evangelical women preachers demonstrate the need for more nuanced examinations of the Second Great Awakening. Neither Paul Johnson's depiction of middle-class revivalism in his *Shopkeeper's Millennium* nor his more recent study (with Sean Wilentz) of the patriarchal Prophet Mattias help make sense of biblical feminism's appearance and influence in the North during the Second Great Awakening.[5] On the other hand, *Strangers and Pilgrims* also shows that evangelical sects formed during the Second Great Awakening were rather less liberal than Nathan Hatch argues in his *Democratization of American Christianity*: as social conservatives, women preachers wanted to establish tightly knit moral communities to stand against the bewildering and isolating forces of the market revolution.[6]

Given nineteenth-century Americans' assertion of women's moral supremacy, it is something of a conundrum that evangelical sects, as they pursued denominational status and respectability, would view women preachers as a liability. But beginning in the 1830s,

a "sweeping backlash" deprived evangelical women of their speaking platform (p. 271). Brekus offers several cogent reasons for this backlash. For one, mainline ministers vituperated against female preaching, sensing it as a cause of their own professional displacement in the early republic's competitive religious marketplace. Second, the socially conservative female preachers had "paved the way for more radical kinds of women's activism," including feminism and abolitionism (p. 278). After the mid-1820s, female preachers were linked in the public's mind with Fanny Wright, Abby Kelley, and the Grimke sisters. Evangelical sects seeking middle-class respectability had no desire for association with "Fanny Wrightism." And as African Methodists, Methodists, Christians, and Freewill Baptists sought worldly success, self-educated female itinerants glaringly reminded them of their lower-class roots. By 1840, the only evangelical denomination welcoming women preachers in meaningful numbers were the Millerites.

These arguments will remind scholars of religion of H. Richard Niebuhr's classic formulation that sects will break with their counter-cultural beginnings in seeking denominational status.[7] However, Brekus contends that northern evangelicals of the early American republic represent a special case: Although they "[chose] power over purity," conservative evangelicals "were still torn between loving and hating the world" (p. 291-92). In a sensitive analysis, Brekus does not accuse evangelicals of hypocrisy for worshipping Mammon. Rather, to safeguard their sects' early dissent, evangelicals "increasingly depended on women to cradle the values of a Christian Republic" (p. 293). "They still claimed that women had the power to save the world from sin" but favored the domestic sphere as women's salvific realm (p. 294).

The Second Great Awakening's evangelical women preachers therefore lost their bid for full spiritual equality with men and the right to interpret Scripture before mixed, public audiences. To what extent, then, did women's labors and advocacy add up to a tradition of female preaching? At one level, some nineteenth-century female preachers knew each other personally and several were inspired to preach after meeting other women evangelists. More lastingly, female preachers indicated their desire to establish a tradition by publishing cogent theological defenses of their work. Yet carefully limiting her case, Brekus characterizes the tradition as "broken and disconnected" (p. 340).

While skeptics may wonder that only about one hundred women can reveal so much, in a skillful historian's hands, their singularity lays open to view an analytic gold mine. Brekus might have confined her mastery to the substantial literature on early American women and religion. She has achieved far more in her chronological sweep and thematic breadth. Essential reading for those specializing in gender, women, and American religion, this ambitious book will stimulate scholars interested in the broadest themes of colonial and early American history. And as for Ann Graham Lotz, though she may assert her legacy to the nation's unofficial pulpit by way of her father, she might also claim lineal rights through the intrepid female evangelists described in "Strangers and Pilgrims."

Notes:

[1]. Gustav Niebuhr and Laurie Goodstein, "New Wave of Evangelists Vying for National Pulpit," *The New York Times*, January 1, 1999.

[2]. Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Harry S. Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34 (1977): 519-41.

[3]. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 150.

[4]. Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 138.

[5]. Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias: A Story of Sex and Salvation in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[6]. Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[7]. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1929).

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