From Preachers to Political Activists: Women in the Public Sphere during the Second Great Awakening, 1830-1840

Christian Grevin

HIST 498

Spring 2022

Prof. Jeffrey Koerber
Introduction:

Women’s identity in early American society was confined to the domestic sphere. Yet in the early nineteenth century, several notable figures pushed back against traditional limitations, seeking to carve out a unique place in society undelegated to them by men. The actions of these women, in tandem with changing religious ideals, provided an opportunity for women to widen their role in society and assume prominent leadership positions that influenced religious and political discourse in American society.

One of these trail blazers was the popular preacher Harriet Livermore, the first woman to speak in front of a legislative body in the United States.¹ This momentous occasion did not come until 1827 – over fifty years after the nation's founding – when she preached to a session of the US Congress.² This opportunity arose due to changing religious and societal values in the US during the Second Great Awakening, a religious revival movement that began in the latter part of the eighteenth century and carried into the early nineteenth century. Women became more accepted as preachers during the Second Great Awakening and were even given platforms to preach to as large as the Congressional floor. Though Livermore had no intention of setting a precedent when she spoke before Congress, that is precisely what she and subsequent female preachers did. Activists would soon unknowingly rely on this groundwork to enter into a male-dominated arena. Changing religious ideals and practices during the Second Great Awakening in the US empowered women to deepen their involvement in the public sphere in unprecedented ways, initially in the form of conservative female preachers but later seen in more radical female activists.

The presence of women leaders in the religious realm opened the door for female activists who addressed moral issues like slavery and the temperance movement, which focused on abstinence from alcohol usage in the US. Two of the most notable activists of the first half of the nineteenth century were the sisters Angelina and Sarah Grimké. In 1838, just over 10 years after Livermore’s address to Congress, Angelina Grimké spoke before the Committee of Legislature of the State of Massachusetts about the abolition of slavery. Grimké’s speech marked the second time a woman spoke to a US legislative body and the first time one delivered a political message.

The letters, literary works, newspaper articles, and speeches of the Grimké sisters – as well as contemporary women leaders – serve as the foundation of this paper. These sources illuminate the progress of women leaders and the religious justifications for their public engagement. They reflect the moderate stances of the female preachers but also show the parallels between them and contemporary female activists, highlighting the connection between the two groups.

This paper is divided into six sections, starting with the introduction. The second section provides an in depth look into previous literature on the topic as well as necessary background information. The third section examines women and religion in early America, specifically looking at the effects of the First Great Awakening on women and their participation in leadership roles. The fourth section delves into the impact that the Second Great Awakening had on religious values and how those religious values gave rise to female preachers across the nation. The fifth section focuses on the rise of female political activists following the Second Great Awakening, with specific attention on the Grimké sisters. The final section is the

---

conclusion that synthesizes the entire paper and delineates the insights that resulted from this study.
Background Literature Review

Women’s history and the subtopics that it encompasses were largely neglected by historians until the late 1960s. As the Women’s Liberation Movement in America rose to prominence, several different fields began to be reexamined through a feminist lens. This phenomenon dramatically impacted the field of history, shaking its foundations. Consequently, increased scholarly attention was focused on female historical figures and, more generally, on the reevaluation of history with women in mind. Given the relevance of feminist activism at the time of this change, early political activism of women was one of the initial topics that began to garner the attention of historians. And over the last fifty years, several other topics – including the influence of the Second Great Awakening on women – have been the focus of women’s history scholarship. As the study of women’s history emerged, several key pieces of literature were produced. These seminal works have remained a mainstay within their relative fields despite the publication of considerable academic literature since.

Gerda Lerner’s book, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Women’s Rights and Abolition*, is one of these foundational pieces. In the biography, Lerner explores the lives of Angelina and Sarah Grimké, from their childhood in the American South to their political activist days in the North. Sarah Moore Grimké was the sixth child born into her family on November 26, 1792, in South Carolina. Angelina Emily Grimké was born thirteen years later, on February 20, 1805, making her the fourteenth child in the family. They were born into a wealthy, slave owning family that was part of the political elite. This reality shaped the sisters

---

from a young age, as they were faced daily with the cruelty of slavery. They observed the devastating impact the institution had on the lives of slaves, which ultimately inspired their initial interest in abolition work. Their family’s wealth gave the girls access to educational opportunities unavailable to most at this time. It was difficult for girls, especially those in the South, to receive an education unless their families had the means to access it. And through their education, the Grimké sisters learned about different religious and philosophical perspectives that would later guide their activism. Although they had access to education, many opportunities were still closed to them due to their gender. Both sisters had desired to pursue a career in law, due to their father working in the field. But the legal profession was impossible for women to enter at this time, so instead they found access to political and societal power through religion.

The two sisters also had a very close relationship from Angelina’s birth, which is in part why their activism was so intertwined with one another. Given their mother’s overwhelming responsibilities of raising fourteen children and maintaining the household, Sarah desired to be Angelina’s godmother and to raise her on her own. This relationship is what connected the two on a deeper level.

Each chapter of Lerner’s book focuses on a particular portion of the sister’s lives, with the book flowing in chronological order. Her in-depth study of the sisters explores why and how they ended up devoting themselves to activism and their impactful presence in Antebellum America. Lerner also examines how intellectuals, like Anna Jameson and Florence Nightingale, and their ideas influenced the Grimké sisters and their writings. The sisters’ prolific writings are reviewed by Lerner and placed within the context of their lives throughout the biography.

9 Lerner, The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina, 35.
10 Lerner, The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina, 18.
11 Lerner, The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina, 256.
Works like *American Slavery As It Is*, which was written by the Grimké sisters in 1839, captivated Americans with their gripping religious arguments aimed against slavery, particularly given the authors were two largely unpublished women at the time. Lerner highlights the monumental impact the sisters had as the “first female antislavery agents” who drew large crowds for their speeches. The book provides a deeper understanding of these women, their activism, and their profound societal impact.

In order to provide an understanding of the revolutionary impact the Grimké sisters had on American society, Lerner also briefly delves into the cultural and religious context of America before their activism. Women had been relegated to the domestic sphere since the arrival of the colonists, with little access to education and other tools that offered societal mobility. They were prevented from taking on leadership positions even in the church, with the exception of the Quaker denomination. Their names were largely left out of print, aside from when they married and died, further isolating them from the public sphere that had been gatekept by men. As Lerner points out, religion was often used to justify these strict gendered boundaries through use of scripture and religious rhetoric to delineate what constituted the “proper role” of women in the home. This way of thinking not only ruled over the cultural values at the time but also informed laws that depicted women as lesser beings than men, placing women under the control of the men in their life (e.g., father, husband, brother). This perspective on early American society was relatively new in the field of history. Lerner and others began to pioneer efforts to study the often-harsh historical realities of women in America.

---

Although Lerner’s work provides a rich background on the Grimké sisters, she neglected to examine the religious motives behind the sister’s activism, which this paper explores. She does not include, for example, an investigation into the religious rhetoric that filled their writings and speeches. As a result, she ignores an important aspect of why and how they pursued activism. Instead, she focused on the literary and scholarly work that impacted their beliefs, even though religion was an integral part of their arguments and literature.

America in the 1830s had been experiencing the Second Great Awakening – a religious revival movement that took place from the late eighteenth century to early nineteenth century. The movement altered religious beliefs and destabilized traditional church structures, the ones briefly discussed in Lerner’s work. The movement birthed new ideals that impacted American society and opened opportunities for women to insert themselves into the public sphere. Religion, which was once used to relegate women to subpar citizenship and limit their role solely to the domestic sphere, was changing in a way to provide a rationale for women’s presence in the public sphere. The Grimké sisters’ lives reflected the fact that they had experienced this transformation of the Awakening. Religious rhetoric is embedded throughout their works as the movement clearly impacted their activism. But Lerner makes no mention of the Second Great Awakening in her book, omitting an important element in understanding the sisters and their activism.

While the importance of religion within the Grimké sisters’ lives and their activism has since been discussed by some scholars, it has not been placed within the framework of the Second Great Awakening. Extensive scholarship, however, has been published on the impact the Awakening had on women in general. This scholarship, however, did not focus on how the Awakening influenced activism. The works on this topic have ranged from religious women
writers to the conservative clothes women preachers wore. Scholarship produced in the years following Lerner’s work typically neglects female activists, focusing more on the orthodox women’s relations with religion. It is as if there is a separation between the two subjects. Scholarship is either focused on the role religion played in women’s lives during the early 1800s (e.g., female preachers) or early women’s activism in the abolition and temperance movement (e.g., the Grimké sisters). Scholars have not sought to connect the two subjects, with some going as far as to place the two in opposition to one another.

Female preachers within the Awakening have begun to receive more attention in recent years, though there are relatively few comprehensive pieces on them. Catherine Brekus pioneered this work in her 1998 book titled Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845. Before her work, there were only a few texts on female preachers, and they were not nearly as extensive as Brekus’, who highlights many women that were previously invisible in contemporary writing.

William Andrews reissued the autobiographies of three black female evangelists and Rebecca Larson published a book on Quaker preachers, but aside from these sources, literature on female preachers had been relatively minimal. Brekus argues that this lack of scholarship on female preachers was because they were too radical to be recorded by churches and not radical enough for women rights activists to remember them. Instead, women like Harriet Livermore and Sally Parsons were lost to diaries and other documents until unveiled by Brekus.

In the second part of her book, Brekus investigates how the ideas of the Second Great Awakening impacted female preaching, arguing that the period not only saw an increase in the

---

19 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 7.
20 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 7–19, 119.
number of female preachers, but also a change in their character as they now wanted to be remembered through the literature they left behind.\textsuperscript{21} Women gained access to the pulpit of churches, allowing them to speak before congregations. According to Brekus, they were the first women to speak publicly to the American population.\textsuperscript{22} Since the establishment of the first colonies, women had been locked out of the public sphere and denied access to any speaking platform. Women like Anne Hutchinson became outcasts for their attempts to take on leadership roles, even within their churches. This paradigm shifted, albeit slowly, during the Second Great Awakening. The camp meetings of the Awakening gave women a particularly unique chance to speak to huge crowds in ways they had been unable to in the past.\textsuperscript{23} When considering the muted reality for women in America that was featured by Lerner, the emerging public presence of women in print, at pulpits, on stages, and in literary works only makes sense when considered in light of the shift in societal values and beliefs that occurred within the Second Great Awakening.

Public platforms, including the pulpits of churches, were opened to female preachers due to the acceptance of clergymen and the greater Northern society whose values were impacted by the Second Great Awakening.\textsuperscript{24} Acceptance was heightened when new denominations arose and grew during the Awakening, such as the Freewill Baptists, Millerites, and the Methodists.\textsuperscript{25} A new understanding of gender emerged during the Awakening that distinguished women as moral beings – in fact, more moral than men – whose presence was both justified and needed within church leadership.\textsuperscript{26} Women were now recognized as being morally and religiously important because of their gender, which is part of the reason why they were able to more easily access public platforms than ever before.

\textsuperscript{22} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 6.
\textsuperscript{23} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 5.
\textsuperscript{24} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 9.
\textsuperscript{25} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 11.
\textsuperscript{26} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 14.
The work of Brekus, however, focuses solely on female preachers and their presence in America for over a century. She does not address the women’s activism that grew out of the Awakening and the intersections between women preachers and activists, which this project focuses on. In fact, she makes a point of separating the two. She points to the orthodox theology of female preachers which caused them to be opposed to the advancement of women in the public sphere, specifically in the political realm.\(^{27}\) Only in the twenty-first century has attention been placed on the role religious ideas from the Awakening played in women’s activism in the mid-nineteenth century.

Mark Hall has been one of the scholars to recently focus attention on the impact that religious ideals had on women. Hall points out that most of the scholarship completed on this subject matter concludes that religion was a restricting force on women without considering the ways it opened new opportunities in the public sphere for them.\(^{28}\) Though he acknowledges the increased attention placed on the topic since the mid-1970s, he argues that these works treat evangelicalism as a barrier to be overcome rather than a driving force behind women’s activism.\(^{29}\)

Instead, Hall points to the changing modes of evangelicalism during the Awakening as impacting women’s opportunities in the public sphere. Similar to Brekus, he argues that evangelicalism under the Awakening witnessed a breakdown of church hierarchy and an increased emphasis on an individual’s relationship with God, which opened up preaching opportunities to women.\(^{30}\) While Hall mentions the Second Great Awakening, unlike Lerner, the movement does not serve as one of the main focuses of his paper. He takes a unique approach by

\(^{27}\) Brekus, _Strangers and Pilgrims_, 6–7.


\(^{29}\) Hall, “Beyond Self-Interest,” 480, 482.

\(^{30}\) Hall, “Beyond Self-Interest,” 482.
looking at the way that the political ideas of the Whig party played a key role in the participation of these women, along with evangelical Christianity.\textsuperscript{31} He argues that these evangelical women’s political theory was largely based on the theory of the Whig party and that their religious beliefs served as the main propeller behind their activism.\textsuperscript{32} In order to look at how these ideas impacted women, he explores the lives of several women.\textsuperscript{33}

The work of Hall, however, does not include an in-depth look at the impact that the ideas of the Second Great Awakening had on the political activity of women. He does not draw a connection between the female preachers active during this time and the role their presence and ideas played in the political activism of individuals like Catherine Beecher. Hall used the ideas of the Awakening to explain the call that women felt to get politically involved, but not necessarily the ways that these ideas were part of the reason that they had the opportunity to politically participate.\textsuperscript{34} He argues that for most evangelical reformers, religious ideals served as the motivation for their reform and activist work instead of looking at the way new ideas created new opportunities for women.\textsuperscript{35} The ideals of the Awakening allowed women to participate in the public sphere, as a larger portion of society now became more open to their presence based on religion and morality. Women were now seen as an integral part of religion as the moral beings meant to guide families and society in a beneficial direction. Their public presence was more than justified in certain realms like preaching and on political topics that were centered on questions of morality and religion – like abolition and temperance.

Hall and other scholars have not studied the activism of the Grimke sisters through the lens of the Awakening. Thus, there is a gap in knowledge on the topic. The Grimke sisters,

\textsuperscript{31} Hall, “Beyond Self-Interest,” 478–479.
\textsuperscript{32} Hall, “Beyond Self-Interest,” 478.
\textsuperscript{33} Hall, “Beyond Self-Interest,” 484–95.
\textsuperscript{34} Hall, “Beyond Self-Interest,” 499.
\textsuperscript{35} Hall, “Beyond Self-Interest,” 498.
whether they knew it or not, benefited from the female preachers that came before them and the ideas birthed in the Awakening. Despite this, there is a lack of scholarship on the connection between the two subjects. Brekus’ work shows the way that the Awakening impacted female preachers, but not the activism of women. There has not been much scholarship showing how the work of these women preachers paved the way for political activists like the Grimke Sisters. Even if the female preachers often had orthodox theological views and did not support women’s political activism, as argued by Brekus, their presence in the public sphere opened opportunities for other women to publicly tackle other issues. Female preachers had a revolutionary impact on American society and their public presence inherently justified the right of women to be in these spaces. These would be the same public spaces activists would soon fill. Women activists stood on the foundation built by women preachers, enabling their movement into the public sphere. They both viewed the Bible as important and used it to shape the work they did, although in different ways. The participation of female preachers combined with a shift in society’s views on women and their role in religion during the Second Great Awakening opened unforeseen opportunities for women activists, most notably the Grimke sisters, to participate in the formerly male public sphere.

---

36 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 7.
Women and Religion in Early America

Before the Second Great Awakening, some women attempted to assert themselves in the public sphere, largely in religious spaces, but they were met with tremendous pushback from church leaders and greater society. In the early seventeenth century, Anne Hutchinson led a Bible study for women in her Massachusetts Bay Colony home until male church leaders discovered the gatherings and banished her from the community. Women were often barred from any kind of movement into the public sphere as it weakened men’s tight control over them. Women were seen as bodies to be kept safe within the home, not leaders present in the public sphere.37 These sexist and oppressive attitudes were often justified by using scripture and religious rhetoric that delineated the “proper role” of women.38 For example, many people pointed to the lack of scriptures dealing with women's presence in certain spaces or roles, such as the ordination of females, as a sign that these roles were only meant for men.39 These religious limitations existed even though the number of women in church membership had been increasing drastically since the 1680s, leading to a “feminization” of American Protestantism.40 Societal values, which were largely molded by religious ideas, restricted the purview of women in America, both during colonial times and independence. In order for the restrictive views of women to be altered, significant change first needed to occur within religion to justify women’s movement into previously closed spaces.

Colonial America was composed of a vast number of religious sects, in part due to the religious freedom that was granted in the area. Religious sects varied with the region as the North was home to Baptists, Calvinists, and others, the South largely consisted of Anglican

churches, and the middle colonies had Presbyterians, Lutherans, and others.\textsuperscript{41} Prior to the nineteenth century, the main religious sects in the US — like Evangelical Christianity and Calvinism — effectively barred women from participating in preaching and other types of church leadership. The Catholic Church in the US had a long history of uneven power distribution between the sexes that left women in an inferior position.\textsuperscript{42} It was only fringe religious sects, like the Quakers and Shakers, that allowed women to publicly speak through witnessing and other activities.\textsuperscript{43}

Religious values in America initially faced disruption in the 1730s with the First Great Awakening. A number of new religious sects were developed and popularized during this time, largely due to the fact that they resonated with many people due to their lack of strict power structures. That being said, older religious sects — like Calvinism — were given new life during the movement as new religious practices and beliefs were incorporated into them.\textsuperscript{44}

At this time a number of ideologies and concepts — like “natural philosophy” and evidentialism — seeped into colonial religious discourse.\textsuperscript{45} These new ideas impacted religion, altering practices and belief systems in unique ways. During this movement, there was a rejection of status consciousness and formalism within the church, instead giving way to revivalism.\textsuperscript{46} This led to a shift in power from the traditional church leaders, who had concentrated power for centuries, to laymen.\textsuperscript{47} The transformation from strictly structured church services to more passion-filled and spontaneous sermons embodied some of the changes that

\textsuperscript{41} Smith, \textit{The Great Awakening}, 2.
\textsuperscript{43} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 68.
\textsuperscript{45} Smith, \textit{The Great Awakening}, 40–48.
\textsuperscript{46} Smith, \textit{The Great Awakening}, 2.
\textsuperscript{47} Smith, \textit{The Great Awakening}, 2.
came with the movement. George Whitefield was an evangelical preacher popularized during the First Great Awakening who reflected these shifting characteristics that composed both pastors and church services. Whitefield was known for his colorful preaching style that often engaged the crowd and drew in a large audience.\(^{48}\) His sermons did not follow a strict outline as he often preached without the guidance of notes, which was largely unheard of prior to the Awakening.\(^{49}\) Most preachers and church leaders relied on a particular service structure to guide them throughout their sermons. Even the space in which Whitefield held his sermons speaks to the ways that religious practices in the colonies were changing. He often spoke in outdoor venues to garner larger crowds and connect with the masses in a more natural setting, in comparison to the more formal church setting in which most sermons had previously occurred.\(^{50}\)

The First Great Awakening was also centered around the idea of pietism, or the intimate and durable connection of an individual with Christ.\(^{51}\) This concept of pietism stands in stark contrast to the guiding ideology that was in place within most churches in the colonies prior to the First Great Awakening. The emphasis was previously placed on the knowledge of Christian doctrines and maintaining strict religious practices, which is why the power had been concentrated in the hands of the few within the church.\(^{52}\) At this time in the US, not many people received the education necessary to have a strong intellectual understanding of religious doctrines, meaning the few that did were better able to possess and exercise power.

The ideas of the movement enveloped the nation, as society began to focus its attention on the shifting discourse within religion. During the First Great Awakening, coverage of religion in newspapers increased from constituting 40 percent of the stories to over 60 percent within just

\(^{48}\) Smith, *The Great Awakening*, 111.
\(^{49}\) Smith, *The Great Awakening*, 111.
\(^{50}\) Smith, *The Great Awakening*, 111.
\(^{52}\) Smith, *The Great Awakening*, 19.
the first few years.\textsuperscript{53} This increase shows the relevancy the movement had on American society and the importance it played within everyday life, as people were constantly interested in the development of religion and the disagreements between church figureheads.

The First Great Awakening began in the North, but it eventually found its way into the more religiously conservative South, where the main message of the movement resonated with slave communities and those living in the backcountry.\textsuperscript{54} The focus placed on the role of the layman in religion and in forming a personal connection to God, resonated with those in the South who had historically fallen at the bottom of the power structure. It gave them power in ways that other systems in place had continually denied them. They did not have the same access to power in the political, social, or economic realms, but they were beginning to find it in the religious sector. The devaluing of the professional ministry, which had concentrated power in the church for centuries, also resonated with the laymen who had been under the strict purview of these individuals. It is partially for this reason that a large number of religious converts during this time were women.\textsuperscript{55} The importance placed on the creation of personal connections to God, and the movement away from professional ministry, appealed especially to women who had been locked out under the old, rigid power structure of churches.

Prior to the First Great Awakening, religious involvement had been steadily declining as people gravitated towards more secular ideas and ways of thinking.\textsuperscript{56} This was largely due to the formalized structure of the church and church leaders that often caused members, especially those of lower class, to feel out of place in the church. The First Great Awakening breathed new life into religion, as it connected the average colonist to the church and God by emphasizing the

\textsuperscript{54} Smith, \textit{The Great Awakening}, 3.
\textsuperscript{55} Smith, \textit{The Great Awakening}, 94.
\textsuperscript{56} Smith, \textit{The Great Awakening}, 2.
power individuals hold in their own religious journeys. That is why pietism played such a large role in the movement. It was meant to draw people back into religion through emotionally and personally connecting them with God. If people believed they had a personal connection to God, they would be more likely to be present within the church — whether that be attendance at services or involvement in other ways. And it was for this reason, the simplified connection to religion, that the number of religious converts in the colonies increased at this time.

Despite the First Great Awakening’s initial popularity, it began to decline by the middle of the eighteenth century as the colonies were plunged into war. The movement did not fully revolutionize religion, as many groups were still effectively shut out from participating in church leadership and speaking before the congregation. Women, across all racial groups, were barred from these religious activities in most sects that melded too much into the public sphere — a place society deemed unfit for women. The change in power dynamics did not extend to women; they continued to face significant roadblocks in the public sphere and authoritative positions in the church. Margaret Meuse Clay in the South, for example, was punished for her attempts to preach and sentenced to public whipping in the mid-1760’s.

Women were still constricted to the domestic sphere and often targeted when they attempted to venture outside of those confines. It would take almost another century before religion in the US would be engaged in another reform movement that would crack open the door for women to participate in some form of church leadership and preach before the masses.

Women and the Second Great Awakening

Despite the changes initiated as a result of the First Great Awakening, women remained as audience members in the pews as opposed to preachers in the pulpit. However, many began seeking leadership positions before the congregation. These leaders grew in numbers in the early part of the nineteenth century as the Second Great Awakening provided them with new platforms in the church.

Harriet Livermore, and her speech before Congress, embodied the growing opportunities for women that arose due to the changing religious and societal values during the Second Great Awakening. During this movement, not only did a number of new religious sects develop that were friendlier to women preachers, but even those under the popular and conservative evangelicalism became more accustomed to the presence of women in positions of leadership.59 Women began to hold leadership positions for the first time in evangelical churches, which was momentous given the popularity of the religious sect at the time. Before the Second Great Awakening, only more radical and smaller sects, like the Quakers and Shakers, were open to female preaching.60 The opening of prominent religious sects to female preaching and the normalization of women’s presence in church leadership speaks to the impact that evolving religious values had on society — especially when compared to the struggles experienced by women like Anne Hutchinson decades prior. The popularization of women preaching at this time marked the beginning of acceptance of women in the public sphere, though initially limited to religious topics and spaces.

As a result of these changes, many American women had the opportunity to reach beyond the domestic sphere into religious leadership roles and eventually political life. Female

59 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 119.
60 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 119.
preachers, like Harriet Livermore, Hannah Lock, and Clarissa Danforth, sprung up throughout the movement giving sermons in churches, leading camp meetings, and publishing scholarly religious literature. Harriet Livermore alone published sixteen books throughout the Awakening and in the years to follow.\textsuperscript{61} Publications like Livermore’s stood in stark contrast to the preceding decades when women’s names often only appeared in print upon marriage or death.\textsuperscript{62}

There were only rare instances in which women were published for reasons other than their life status, but their names were often removed as it was largely believed women did not deserve or desire that type of public recognition. For example, in 1755 a piece titled \textit{The Nature, Certainty, and Evidence of True Christianity, In a Letter from a Gentlewoman in New-England, to Another Her Dear Friend, in Great Darkness, Doubt and Concern of a Religious Nature} was published in Boston.\textsuperscript{63} Although the letter was written by Sarah Osborn, a school teacher living in Rhode Island, the author was only credited as “gentlewoman.”\textsuperscript{64} A note was included with the letter from the publisher that stated: “Tho’ this letter was wrote in great privacy from one friend to another; yet on representing that by allowing it to be printed, it wou’d probably reach many others in the like afflicted case, and by the grace of God be very helpful to them; the writer was at length prevailed on to suffer it— provided her name and place of adobe remain concealed.”\textsuperscript{65} This statement reflects the limited and harmful view of women’s place in the public, in areas like publishing, held in the mid-eighteenth century by larger American colonial society. The work was only published due to the informal nature of the text, given that it was a letter that was not written with the intent of being published. The letter was also published since the religious subject matter was seen as providing much needed guidance to other women.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[63] Berkus, “Writing Religious Experience,” 482.
\item[64] Berkus, “Writing Religious Experience,” 482.
\item[65] Quoted in Berkus, “Writing Religious Experience,” 482.
\end{footnotes}
Women also took up other forms of leadership that were more private than preaching. They often led in more informal settings like Bible studies, class meetings, and praying bands, which brought together large portions of the community. Women also started and led organizations, like Sunday school unions and religious newspapers, during this time. The fact that these organizations were centered on religious topics and issues, speaks to the importance that religion had in justifying a female presence in the public sphere. While a woman participating in a religious organization, such as a religious newspaper, may have been largely accepted by society, their involvement in a political organization would likely not have been accepted. Under the banner of religion, women were able to move into the public sphere. The fact that there was some gray area between moral and political topics, such as temperance and prostitution, created an entryway for women to become more involved in political matters.

Public platforms, including the pulpits of churches, were opened to female preachers as the values of traditional male clergymen and the greater northern society of the US were impacted by the Second Great Awakening. Acceptance was heightened when new denominations arose and grew during the Awakening, like the Freewill Baptists, the Millerites, and the Methodists. Large numbers of women were attracted to these new sects, as well as the older ones going through reformation. The Second Great Awakening was unique in that most religious converts were in fact women. For every two men that converted, there were three to four women converts. Not only were women able to speak within these churches, but they often became a key feature of their operations. Many clergymen relied on female preachers — who

---

66 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 128.
67 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 125.
68 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 125.
69 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 9.
70 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 11.
were often captivating speakers — to lead church services. For instance, James Erwin looked to Jane Smith and Alma Wright to lead a church service following the loss of his voice. The handing over of control to two female preachers, although due to a health issue, demonstrated the rising prominence and influence of female preachers.

Camp meetings, which involved large gatherings of people in open spaces in nature, developed during the Second Great Awakening and offered a unique setting for individuals detached from the formal congregation to preach. These meetings were typically located in wilderness near towns to make them more accessible and large enough to accommodate crowds. It was often in these settings that women would have their first opportunity to preach before an audience. Testimonies from these meetings speak to the unique atmosphere created in these events that had not been previously found in any religious space. Andrew Reed and James Matheson, two English pastors who visited the US for the sole purpose of partaking in a camp meeting, stated in their book *A Narrative of the Visit to the American Churches*:

> It was now the hour of morning worship. The pulpit was full; the seats were covered with waiting worshippers. I approached the stand; and was welcomed by the brethren. We rose, and united in a hymn of praise. I had never, in such circumstances, joined in offering such worship. I could scarcely tell what sensations possessed me. I hope I was not void of those which are devotional, but I was chiefly filled for the moment with those of wonder. When I looked round on the scene which had broken so suddenly upon me, every thing was so novel, so striking, and so interesting, as to appear like the work of enchantment, and to require time fully to realize.75

This recollection reveals how camp meetings reinvented religious practices in ways that were more engaging and relatable. The two preachers also touched on what groups of people

---

were present at these meetings. They noted that at one particular meeting there were over three-hundred African Americans in attendance. The presence of African Americans speaks to the ways in which camp meetings were a gathering place for anyone to engage with their spirituality, as many churches at that time barred membership from African Americans. Reed and Matheson also wrote about the presence of women at the meetings, stating:

The singing, which had been sustained in all the interval by some younger persons, now showed its results. Two or three young women were fainting under the exhaustion and excitement; and one, who was reported to me as a Methodist, was in hysterical ecstasy, raising her hands, rolling her eyes, and smiling and muttering. It appeared that she courted this sort of excitement as many do a dram, and was frequent at meetings of this character, for the sake of enjoying it.

The camp meetings not only gave women the opportunity to speak before an audience but also the chance to experience a sense of uninhibited freedom unlike anything before. As the two preachers point out, many jubilee attendees engaged in all sorts of spiritual theatrics that stood in stark contrast to the often-stifling structure of the traditional church services in place prior to the Awakening. Figure 1 illustrates a traditional camp meeting, depicting large crowds and diverse audiences. The theatrical activities of participants is also on display, with the woman in the center of the image on her knees while the preacher speaks to the crowd from the pulpit.

---

Not only did new spaces emerge for women during the Awakening, but also a new understanding of gender that distinguished women as moral beings – in fact, more moral than men – whose presence was both justified and needed within church leadership.⁷⁸ They were described as the “Sisters of Christ” and “Mothers of Israel,” which positioned their femininity in an important place within American society for the first time.⁷⁹ Female preachers even began to draw connections between themselves, and women in the congregation, to prominent women in the Bible, such as Huldah and Phebe.⁸⁰ By taking beloved biblical women that were figureheads and intertwining them with their own identities, women preachers were better able to get the general American society to understand and support the idea of women having a place in religious leadership. Women were now recognized as being morally and religiously important.

---

⁸⁰ Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, 120.
because of their gender, which is one reason why they were able to persuade people that women
had a rightful place in religious leadership.

Despite the growing acceptance of women in the public sphere on the basis of religion,
there was still push back against this movement, especially when it came to preaching. Ministries
across the country tried to limit preaching to educated men in an attempt to prevent the
disintegration of elite power-structured congregations.\textsuperscript{81} The ministries most often opposed to the
opening up of preaching to all — not based on education, income, or gender — were the wealthy
and powerful ones that had prospered under previously popular religious ideals.\textsuperscript{82} The New
England Congregationalists found the presence of female preachers to be “vulgar” and believed
their presence within the church would cause harm to the very foundations of the community.\textsuperscript{83}
The opening up of preaching to women meant a weakening of control over religious power
structures, which explains why those in charge of powerful churches were often opposed to the
changes occurring throughout the Awakening.

The opposition towards female preachers was even more pronounced in the South, where
social conservatism was most prominent.\textsuperscript{84} Much of this opposition was based on religious belief
itself. Clergymen in the South argued that women and slaves were subordinated to the white man
and that this hierarchical relationship was biblically based.\textsuperscript{85} Gender was the main factor in
determining the right of a person to preach in the minds of Southern white men.\textsuperscript{86} Black men
were occasionally welcomed to preach by white church leaders, an invitation that was never
extended to black or white women, especially prior to the Second Great Awakening.\textsuperscript{87} For

\textsuperscript{81} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 125.
\textsuperscript{82} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 125.
\textsuperscript{83} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 125.
\textsuperscript{84} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 126.
\textsuperscript{85} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 126.
\textsuperscript{86} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 130.
\textsuperscript{87} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 130.
example, Harry Hosier, a black preacher, was asked to preach by many white congregations following the American Revolution but no such invite was extended to female preachers.88

Remarkably, some women actively tried to limit the political involvement and leadership of their own gender. Despite the revolutionary actions of female preachers, these women maintained relatively conservative views regarding their role in the public sphere. In their minds, faith always trumped the feminist right to preach.89 Harriet Livermore stated, “The scriptures are silent respecting the ordination of females…I conclude it belongs only to the male sex.”90 Livermore, as did most other female preachers, chose to limit the role of women in the public sphere in ways they deemed appropriate from the Bible. While solidifying their presence in the public sphere, they consciously decided not to rebel against the power structures in place.91 While they stood in stark contrast to the female political activists that were present at this time, these female preachers unintentionally created opportunities for women’s political involvement.

88 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 130.
89 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 6–7.
90 Quoted in Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 6–7.
91 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 7.
The Rise of Female Activism

The Second Great Awakening created a unique context in which activism was not only accepted but encouraged. A major aspect of this movement was the idea of reform, both within the church as well as of the greater society. There was an expectation that certain individuals in the church would seek out ways to reform society and address its sins. Women were believed to play a major role in this effort, in large part because of their increasing numbers within the church and the perception of them as highly moral beings capable of addressing man’s sins. This school of thought enabled women activists to assert themselves and their political beliefs.

As the Second Great Awakening ended, several female activists stepped onto the public stage to take on what they contended were moral issues facing America, most notably slavery. Angelina and Sarah Grimké were two of the most well-known women activists to enter the political sphere as preachers and abolitionists. Similar to female preachers, women activists like the Grimké sisters relied on biblical scripture to justify their presence in political spaces and the arguments they put forth. In her pamphlet “Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,” Sarah Grimké stated:

In examining this important subject, I shall depend solely on the Bible to designate the sphere of woman, because I believe almost every thing that has been written on this subject, has been the result of a misconception of the simple truths revealed in the Scriptures, in consequence of the false translation of many passage of Holy Writ. My mind is entirely delivered from the superstitious reverence which is attached to the English version of the Bible. King James’s translators certainly were not inspired. I therefore claim the original as my standard, believing that to have been inspired, and I also claim to judge for myself what is the meaning of the inspired writers, because I believe it to be the solemn duty of every individual to search the Scriptures for themselves with the aid of the Holy Spirit, and not be governed by the views of any man, or set of men.

---

This is a powerful statement as it shows her dismissal of the King’s James’s Bible, giving power to the “original” version. In doing so, she took power away from the men who translated the King James version and placed the power into her own hands. According to Grimké, it is these Biblical translations by men — not the actual word of God — that have limited the sphere of women. The claim that one is only governed by God was common among female activists at this time and provides an explanation for why they were able to rebel against patriarchal structures and sexist limitations about their role in society. By removing power from men over women, and placing it instead in the hands of God, female activists helped to break down the rigid worldly power structures that limited their self-determination. Sarah Grimké placed an emphasis on finding guidance in scripture, which served to take power away from church elites, who had largely maintained a monopoly over religious knowledge, and give it to the average person. The importance of scriptural guidance is reflected throughout both Grimké sisters’ works, as they often relied on the Bible to contextualize and justify the arguments they put forth.

Following her complaint about prominent translations of the Bible, Sarah Grimké explored a specific verse and claimed it had been misunderstood and misconstrued. She took the verse and repositioned it in a way that positively positioned women in society. As she stated:

Let us pass on now to the recapitulation of the creation of man :—’ The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life ; and man became a living soul. And the Lord God said, it is not good that man should be alone, I will make him an help meet for him.’ All creation swarmed with animated beings capable of natural affection, as we know they still are ; it was not, therefore, merely to give man a creature susceptible of loving, obeying, and looking up to him, for all that the animals could do and did do. It was to give him a companion, in all respects his equal ; one who was like himself a free agent, gifted with intellect and endowed with immortality ; not a partaker merely of his animal gratifications, but able to enter into all his feelings as a moral and responsible being. If this had not been the case, how could she have been an help meet for him? I understand this as applying not only to the parties entering
into the marriage contract, but to all men and women, because I believe God designed woman to be an help meet for man in every good and perfect work. She was a part of himself, as if Jehovah designed to make the oneness and identity of man and woman perfect and complete; and when the glorious work of their creation was finished, ‘the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.’

It is telling that she delved into the creation of man, selecting to investigate the beginning of human life from the perspective of Christianity. She wanted to influence society’s understanding of the Bible from the very moment people were created to further women’s rights and impact how gender roles are thought of. This is reflected in her emphasis of the phrases “in all respects his equal” and “free agent,” where she used italics to make sure these statements stand out within the larger section. Women should have the freedom and ability of self-determination, to make their own decisions separate from men. And according to Sarah Grimké, this is justified as women are equal to men in all respects, a belief that was uncommon at this time. These bold claims are framed within the verses on the creation of man for biblical understandings, both one of the most impactful as well as only way political arguments could have legitimacy at this time. Had she made the free and equal claims without invoking religion or using scripture to provide context to her argument, the validity of her statement would have been starkly diminished in the eyes of American society. The selection of a scripture to end the passage further grounds her argument in religion, and placing her claim between two Bible verses helped the audience become more comfortable with the radical statements she asserts.

During the early part of the nineteenth century, society viewed women as inferior to men, but Sarah Grimké used scripture to dismantle these misogynistic beliefs. She aligned womanhood with the virtues of responsibility and morality, which was a common idea held by female activists and was becoming popular within mainstream society. It was this idea of

morality being brought into the public sphere, a place previously deemed too chaotic for women, that helped justify their presence. Women were viewed as helping to shape society in God’s image and design, a concept that began to be popularized during the Second Great Awakening. Even though she opposed harmful views of women, her argument still contains remnants of misogyny with the base claim that the importance of women is based on the help that they can provide a man — as reflected by God’s intention in the creation of women. This contradiction is not surprising given the time and environment Sarah Grimké found herself in. She was one of the first female activists pushing against long standing gender-based societal boundaries while simultaneously falling victim to limited religious views of women.

Religion was not only used by the Grimké sisters as a basis for their arguments, but it was also utilized in a way that connected the sisters with their audience and enabled them to get others to view topics from a specific point of view — most notably the immorality of slavery. In her pamphlet, “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” Angelina Grimké relied heavily on Christian values shared among the American population as well as scriptures to get readers to view slavery from abolitionist’s perspectives.96 The title of the pamphlet highlights the importance that religion played in women’s political involvement as Angelina tied one’s Christian identity to womanhood when she used the phrase “Christian women of the south.” Religion morally guided women to politically act in a way that reflected God’s will, which is in part why Angelina appealed to these women through religion rather than solely their gender.

The Grimké sisters did not limit the means through which they participated in activism to just one form. Not only did the sisters publish numerous pieces of scholarship but they also used public speaking to garner large crowds and spread the word about the abolition movement. In 1838, the Grimké sisters led a nine-month speaking tour throughout the US to amass support and

inspire women to petition against slavery in their local communities. The tour drew large audiences partially because they were women speaking on a public platform. One of the most iconic speeches given during this tour was the one before the Committee of Legislature of the State of Massachusetts at Pennsylvania Hall. Although no advance notice of the speech was given, the hall was filled with visitors as Angelina Grimké shared her message about the immorality of slavery and the responsibility Christians had to help dissolve the institution. Grimké proclaimed: “Men, brethren and fathers — mothers, daughters and sisters, what came ye out for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? Is it curiosity merely, or a deep sympathy with the perishing slave, that has brought this large audience together?" This opener focused attention on the notion of ending slavery and also gave Grimké the chance to capture the audience’s attention. By using labels like “brethren” and “mothers,” she appealed to family morals while also creating a familial connection with the audience. The formation of this connection early on in the speech helped Grimké gain support for the attack she waged against slavery.

Angelina Grimké would become even more direct in both her political argument against slavery, as well as the right of women to participate in politics, stating:

Mr. Chairman, it is my privilege to stand before you on a similar mission of life and love… I stand before you as a citizen, on behalf of the 20,000 women of Massachusetts whose names are enrolled on petitions which have been submitted to the Legislature… These petitions relate to the great and solemn subject of slavery… And because it is a political subject, it has often tauntingly been said, that women had nothing to do with it. Are we aliens, because we are women? Are we bereft of citizenship because we are mothers, wives and daughters of a mighty people? Have women no country — no interests staked in public weal — no liabilities in common peril — no partnership in a nation’s guilt and shame?... This dominion of woman must be resigned — the sooner the better; in the age which is approaching she should be something more — she should be a citizen… I hold,

---

Mr. Chairman, that American women have to do with this subject, not only because it is moral and religious, but because it is political, inasmuch as we are citizens of this republic and as such our honor, happiness and well-being are bound up in its politics, government and laws.\textsuperscript{101}

Grimké’s bold language reflects the transition from the foundation of female preachers to more radical activism. She acknowledged the presence and importance of both religion and morality in the justification of women in the public sphere, but she took it a step further by arguing that women deserve to be in political spaces since they are citizens. She claimed that as citizens of the nation, women have every right to partake in and shape political discourse for the betterment of the country they are equally responsible for. This excerpt of the speech also touches on the other ways in which women were becoming politically involved during this time. Not only were a select few gaining access to political platforms, but masses of women were becoming politically active through demonstrations, petitions, and other inherently political activities. As Grimké pointed out, over 20,000 women signed a petition that called for an end to slavery that was presented to the Massachusetts legislature.\textsuperscript{102} This type of large political mobilization of women, one that was visible both in the physical signatures on the petition and the act of gathering them, seems unthinkable when considering the restriction women had faced just a century prior to something as minute as running a Bible Study. This serves as a reflection of a changing society, in large part due to changing religious and moral values that shifted both perceptions of and opportunities for women.

Given the bold claims made by Grimké, it is not surprising that many did not respond well to her speech or even her presence in the government building. One article published by a male reporter in a Boston-based newspaper stated:

\textsuperscript{101} Quoted in Lerner, The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina, 7.
\textsuperscript{102} Lerner, The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina, 7.
She [Angelina] exhibited considerable talent for a female, as an orator; appeared not at all abashed in exhibiting herself in a position so unsuitable to her sex, totally disregarding the doctrine of St. Paul, who says “is it not a shame for a woman to speak in public?” She belabored the slave-holders, and beat the air like all possessed.103

This critic's choice of words is telling as they once again reveal the importance religion played in the justification and reinforcement of gendered spheres of power. Citing St. Paul’s doctrine served to separate women from the public sphere, making their presence seem taboo. He went further when describing Grimké as “possessed,” placing her in opposition to God and holiness, and instead framing her as demonic. In her speech, Grimké quoted scripture and evoked an individual’s connection to God to align the crowd in opposition to what she believed was the immoral institution of slavery. This commentary juxtaposed with the content of Angelina Grimké’s speech reinforces the importance religion played in both shaping and validating societal norms.

Female activism began to flourish in the early part of the nineteenth century and built upon the foundation laid by female preachers. Christianity was a thread that connected large portions of the US population, which meant it was a way to not only add validity to one’s argument but also a way to form the connections needed to make one’s viewpoint widely accepted. By appealing to society’s religiosity through the use of scriptures and God’s desires, activists like the Grimké sisters were able to argue against slavery while pushing against strict gendered boundaries.

Conclusion

This paper sought to contextualize the often-ignored impacts of religious values, altered during the Second Great Awakening, both on women’s access to the public sphere and the content they were spreading in the public sphere. If it were not for the newly developed religious beliefs, sects, and spaces of the Second Great Awakening — as well as the work of female preachers — female political activists may not have gained as much support as they had or spoken on the platforms they did.

The Grimké sisters embody the gifts and abilities with which early female activists were able to enter the public sphere and intervene into political life. Their arguments and justifications for both their political perspectives and presence in political spaces were largely based upon religious and moral ideas. And yet they went further and argued that women had a right to contribute to political discourse, for they were citizens of the US, meaning they had every right to shape its policy and guide its future through political involvement. The Grimké sisters represent the initial shift from the religiously based involvement of female preachers in the public sphere to a more inherently political involvement of women in the public sphere.

Although this paper sought to fill a gap in existing research, there are still aspects that need to be examined further. For example, this paper does not address the nuances of race. Race, in conjunction with gender, played a large factor in one's access to leadership roles and involvement in political activism at this time. African American women did not have the same means to enter the public sphere or even the same level of support as both their white female and black male counterparts. However, black women activists and preachers, like Sojourner Truth,

---

still rose to prominence in the nineteenth century as they called for political action including the end of slavery.\textsuperscript{105}

Additional investigation of the Grimké sisters could be conducted given the vast writings and other sources they left behind that provide a view into their beliefs, practices, and strategies. While many of their most important works were discussed in this paper, there are still many that can be brought into modern scholarship and broken down to evaluate the political context for women in the nineteenth century.

The Grimké sisters were certainly not the only women activists at that time in the US, although they are largely recognized as among the first especially in regards to the abolition movement. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony are just a few other activists whose work and presence in American political life in the nineteenth century had a considerable impact on shaping discourse and societal values. Investigation into the ways that the Second Great Awakening and religion in general informed their activism as well as their ability to be politically active could help to broaden the topic of this paper, creating a fuller picture of what was occurring at the time.

It is important to understand the history of subject matter that is connected to societal values, as they have in many ways informed present societal norms. Looking at the ways religious values impact women’s presence in the public sphere, specifically the Grimké sisters’ activism, touches on a number of important topics like gender, religion, and political activism that are key to creating a more comprehensive understanding of society. Only through continued research of these early women activists and preachers can a greater understanding of American history be created, one that acknowledges the vital foundation these women created that has enabled countless activists to shape American society over the past centuries.

\textsuperscript{105} Washington, “Going ‘Where They Dare Not Follow’,” 48.
Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Antislavery Petitions Massachusetts Dataverse. Harvard University.
https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/antislavertypetitionsma.


http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2939t.html


Testimony of Angelina Grimke on Slavery. 1839. Digital History.
http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=285

William L. Clements Library, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Weld-Grimke family papers (1740-1930, bulk 1825-1899)
Secondary Sources:


