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Speicher's "The Religious World of Antislavery Women"

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Anna M. Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), pp. xii + 242. Paperback. US \$19.95. ISBN 0-8156-2807-1.

This study is a product of a new direction in the social history of women in the nineteenth century, one that recognizes the centrality of religion in the lives of many women activists in a range of reform and feminist movements. Anna Speicher's focus is the antislavery movement in the United States, and its relation with the women's rights movement that sprang up among some of the women involved in those campaigns. Antislavery meetings provided some of the first occasions when middle-class women reformers in the United States took on the role of public speakers addressing 'promiscuous' audiences (audiences composed of both men and women). The opposition they encountered in so doing rapidly led them also to explore the subjection of their sex. Much has been written on this subject, but there is little that has focused on the religious motivation of such women activists.

Anna Speicher asks, 'What forces sustained women who embarked upon what was certainly an unconventional, and sometimes an unpopular, even dangerous course of action?' Her working hypothesis in beginning her study was that their religious beliefs and values provided them with a keen sense of social justice, and strengthened the will that was needed to embark on and sustain such activities. Anna Speicher explores this argument through five case studies: the sisters, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, Lucretia Mott, Abby Kelley Foster and Sallie Holley. All except Sallie Holley were members of, or had at some time a connection with, the Society of Friends. These cases were chosen, however, according to a particular set of criteria not linked specifically to their religious orientation: a public identity as an abolitionist; a willingness to travel in the cause and speak on it to mixed public meetings; the legacy of a significant body of primary source material, especially in the form of personal letters and journals. As Anna Speicher acknowledges, these criteria together serve to exclude any consideration of some notable African-American women abolitionist speakers. Her discussion moves between biographical and analytical chapters, making this an accessible and readable introduction to debates around the study of the abolition movement.

The findings made by Anna Speicher require her to amend her original hypothesis, however, so that she argues that religion was not simply a sustaining resource for these five women, but 'the fundamental organising principle of their entire lives' (p. 2). She disputes, therefore, a common argument with regard to such reformers, that reform *became* their religion. Rather, she suggests, that their religious world view was the *prompt* to their

abolitionism; abolition did not become their religion, but was one of the ways they *expressed* and *enacted* their religious values. This is a subtle but important distinction, and Anna Speicher argues it convincingly. These were reformers intent on preserving integration between the secular and the sacred. They may in the process have sacralized certain kinds of worldly action, but this is not the same as making a religion of reform.

By Anna Speicher's account, the religious belief of social activists may have a transformative potential in leading them to adopt radical causes and methods of protest, to challenge existing social conventions, to question the legitimacy of powerful social and political institutions, and to build supportive communities of like-minded reformers. Her analysis of these five cases, however, suggests that this may be difficult to achieve within existing church structures. Lucretia Mott, a Hicksite Friend, is the only one of the five who remained within her church—against the opposition of some of her co-religionists who wished she would resign her membership. It is in the nature of her chosen methodology that Anna Speicher finds many shared characteristics in the religiosity of her five subjects, despite their varying histories of church affiliation: a liberal-Protestant theology that was open to heterodox ideas; a critical stance towards conventional piety and toward churches as organizations; a belief in a loving, and not a wrathful, god, and in the inherent goodness of human nature; a conviction of the capacity within every individual for comprehending the divine will, and of the primacy of individual conscience over established sources of religious authority, especially the priesthood and the Bible; a readiness to reassess the meaning of the life of Jesus toward an action-based theology that renders social activism central to a righteous life; a sense of themselves as the heirs of the prophets, the apostles and the early Christian Church. All of this led them to challenge the subjection of their own sex, alongside that of slaves.

These findings provide a helpful, fresh analysis of the relation between religion and social action in this period. It must be said it also leads Anna Speicher to neglect to examine in any detail the differences in church affiliation of these five women—there is a presumption in her argument that these were of little consequence, given the determined originality and unconventionality of her subjects. Yet it would appear that the theological consensus that she constructs among her five chosen cases was, perhaps, closest to the religion of the Hicksites. The analysis presented might have been further developed by a more detailed consideration of the individual religious journeying of these five women, and a comparison of the belief systems of the various churches with which they were at various times linked. Nonetheless, Anna Speicher has provided us with a stimulating and original account that successfully challenges our existing understanding of the place of religion in both the antislavery and women's rights movements.

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R.W. Ambler, *Churches, Chapels and the Parish Communities of Lincolnshire 1660–1900* (Lincoln: History of Lincolnshire Committee, 2000), pp. xii + 274. Paperback. £12.95. ISBN 0-90266-818-8.

In recent years the hunting of church and chapels has become a national hobby and there is a burgeoning literature to occupy enthusiasts on winter evenings or help them plan their