PROJECT MUSE®

*Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and
Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South* (review)

Catherine A. Brekus

The Journal of the Civil War Era, Volume 1, Number 1, March 2011, pp.
101-103 (Review)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cwe.2011.0011>

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/417316>

Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South. By Scott Stephan. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. Pp. 304. Cloth, \$44.95.)

Historians of the antebellum United States have usually emphasized the differences between northern and southern women. While northern women were able to turn the ideology of “separate spheres” into a justification of their involvement in temperance, antislavery, and the women’s rights movement, southern women were supposedly constrained by a patriarchal culture built on slavery. Echoing Mary Boykin Chesnut (1823–86), whose diaries were frank about the ugly similarities between sexual and racial inequality in the South, southern historians have emphasized white women’s powerlessness to create social change.

In his new book, *Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South*, Scott Stephan argues that white southern women enjoyed more authority than historians have realized. Influenced by the groundbreaking scholarship of Christine Heyrman and Cynthia Lyster, Stephan acknowledges that evangelical churches became less egalitarian during the 1820s in order to attract more members, but he also claims that evangelical women continued to serve as fund-raisers, Sunday school teachers, and leaders of Bible study groups. Most important, they were expected (like northern women) to serve as religious leaders within the household. Even though they were supposed to be subordinate to their fathers and husbands, they were empowered by their belief that they had been called to redeem their families.

Using elite women’s personal journals and correspondence, Stephan paints a compelling portrait of women’s religious lives in the antebellum period. To chart their experiences through the entire life course, he examines not only courtship, marriage, childbirth, and child rearing but also rituals around death and dying. Rejecting simplistic arguments about evangelical religion as either liberating or oppressive, he argues that women’s domestic piety gave them a sense of purpose and meaning, and this is ultimately why so many of them joined evangelical churches. “As women struggled to redeem their families,” he explains, “they found their taxing work uniquely meaningful, offering historians an explanation for women’s persistent domination of antebellum southern evangelical congregations in spite of the clergy’s rhetorical celebrations of male authority” (7). At the same time, however, Stephan emphasizes that evangelical women were forced to shoulder the blame when husbands or children failed to live as good Christians, meaning that their religious authority could be more of a burden than a source of satisfaction. If their

children refused to convert, for example, they expressed guilt about their maternal failings.

Redeeming the Southern Family is a thought-provoking book, but because Stephan relies on a relatively small number of manuscripts written by elite women, the papers of twenty-one families, it is not clear whether his conclusions can be extended to southern women more broadly. Future historians will have to determine whether other evangelical women, including lower-class and enslaved women, also claimed to have special religious authority within their families. Moreover, because Stephan did not supplement women's personal documents with sermons, church records, or religious treatises, the women in this book appear only through the lens of the family, and the result is that we do not know how their denominations may have shaped their ideas and practices. He emphasizes the similarities among evangelicals more than the differences, ignoring the heated antebellum debates over free will, infant damnation, and original sin. Even if women did not write about these debates explicitly in their letters or journals, it is hard to imagine that they were unaffected by them.

Echoing the language of scholars Robert Orsi and David Hall, Stephan describes his book as a study of "lived religion" (8). Since this is an odd term, it is worth asking why Stephan is drawn to it—and, more generally, why it has become popular in religious studies. He argues that the lived religion approach is especially valuable because it views religion as a dynamic force that is deeply shaped by ordinary life. On one hand, the scholarship on religious practice has yielded important insights about power and resistance, and the best studies are remarkably sensitive to the relationship between practice and ideas. On the other hand, the danger of the lived religion approach is that it suggests that some parts of religion are not "lived," and Stephan's book is built on the implicit assumption that nineteenth-century evangelicalism can be studied without reference to theology. Stephan focuses instead on "cosmology," which he defines overly broadly as "the way in which southern evangelicals ordered their world" (7). What is missing in his book is an examination of what evangelical ministers preached and what their female congregants actually thought about God, free will, gender, or suffering. He rarely asks how Methodist, Presbyterian, or Baptist women may have either absorbed or rejected their denominations' teaching about human agency, original sin, or any of the other Christian ideas that influenced their daily lives. This is a regrettable omission in a book that is otherwise so meticulously researched.

Despite this criticism, Stephan's book represents an important contribution to our understanding of southern evangelical women's religious

lives. Like the other historians who have studied domestic religion, such as Colleen McDannell, Stephan reminds us that the home as well as the church has served as a crucial locus of religious meaning.

CATHERINE A. BREKUS

CATHERINE A. BREKUS is associate professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Chicago Divinity School. She is the editor of *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past* (2007).

Becoming American Under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship during the Civil War Era. By Christian G. Samito. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009. Pp. 305. Cloth, \$39.95.)

In July 1865, Massachusetts congressman George S. Boutwell drew attention to the diverse sources of Union victory: “The war for freedom and the Union has been carried on by the whites and negroes born on this continent, by the Irish and the Germans, and indeed by representatives of every European race.” Boutwell turned this recognition into a call for postwar rights. “With this fresh experience,” Boutwell declared, “we ought to make it a part of the organic government that no State shall make any distinction in the enjoyment of the elective franchise on account of race or color” (218–19). Boutwell’s words were revolutionary. Before the war, the Supreme Court had deemed African Americans noncitizens. Nativist state legislatures had attempted to limit the rights of immigrants, especially Irish immigrants. But now, and based upon military service, American politicians were calling for political rights for these groups and the federal defense of those rights. This is the main theme of Christian G. Samito’s new book: the Civil War military service of African Americans and Irish Americans compelled a new vision of American citizenship that included former slaves and naturalized immigrants.

Samito traces the military, political, and social experiences of African American and Irish American men throughout the Civil War era. He begins with the 1850s to show a crisis of citizenship. Massive immigration and the ratcheting up of antislavery versus proslavery politics led to an unstable political moment during which the citizenship rights of African Americans and immigrant Americans were profoundly complicated. By the time of the Civil War, Lincoln’s attorney general Edward Bates could claim he found no definitive definition of citizenship in America’s short