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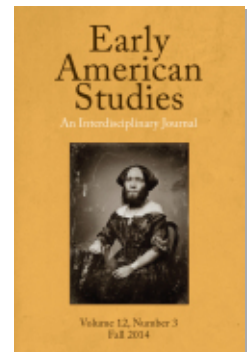
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T. R. Noddings

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Consecrated Merchants and Midnight Criers

Commercial Evangelicalism and a Jazz Theory of Gender
Distinctions in Nineteenth-Century America

T. R. NODDINGS

Northwestern University

ABSTRACT Drawing on Jeanne Boydston's "aesthetic of jazz" and the contributions of queer theory, this article complicates notions of a "normative" gender binary and feminized Protestant religion in nineteenth-century America. Evangelical tract and book sellers known as colporteurs constructed spiritual personalities that failed to organize neatly into a gender binary, combining private, passive, and dependent roles as servants and employees with conquering public identities as sellers of the gospel message. Moving away from a focus on female preaching and the liminal gender fluidity of "fringe" sects, this paper argues that colportage reflected a larger cultural instability in the gender binary whereby spiritual selling collapsed conventional masculine and feminine traits, opening a queer space for expressions beyond the gender line. Tracing colporteur identities from the American Tract Society and Millerites of the 1840s to the International Bible Students of the 1890s and early 1900s, this article suggests that colportage was one expression of the vast variation and instability of potential gender identities that marked America in the nineteenth century.

In 1843 the image of William Miller flooded America in tracts, magazines, and books proclaiming the end of the world. Four years earlier Miller had been a regional Jeremiah in the burned-over district of western New York, only one voice in a sea of prophets and exhorters who continued to fire the heartland of the Second Great Awakening. But when the Christian publisher Joshua Himes decided to publish Miller's theories in a semimonthly journal titled *Signs of the Times*, Miller was transformed in a matter of months from a local celebrity to the leader of a national movement. "Millerism" was made in four million tracts and books distributed across the

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United States in four years, a religion created, sold, and consumed through its own press, demonstrating the new power of commercial consecration in a rapidly changing America.

Yet Himes and his magazines influenced no one by themselves. Tracts and books were purchased and distributed by converts who volunteered to spend their time and energy warning Americans of the imminent Second Coming. Known as tract sellers or colporteurs, these workers were crucial to the success of both fledgling movements such as Millerism and established antebellum publishing empires such as the American Tract Society. Colportage was a term born in the braiding of religion and selling in the nineteenth century. Adapted from the French *colporteur*, literally a cognate of *col* (neck) and *porteur* (bearer), the term entered English parlance by the 1840s to mean a seller of religious tracts and books. Though at first it was used interchangeably with the terms *peddler* and *hawker*, gradually it grew into a distinct term for sellers of religious works.¹ Millerite colporteurs were referred to as watchers or “midnight criers,” terms adapted from the parable of the ten virgins in the Gospel of Matthew. Ten virgins are invited to a wedding and told to wait outside in the night for the arrival of the bridegroom. At midnight, the cry announcing the bridegroom is raised, but only five of the virgins have bought oil to light their way to him. These virgins are welcomed into the feast while the others scramble to find oil sellers.² Millerites were the midnight criers, traders in oil, and wise virgins who filled and trimmed their lamps: identities written and comprehended in terms of both the Bible and the market revolution. Less concerned with millenarianism, the American Tract Society preferred to refer to its colporteurs as “consecrated merchants,” a label that also implied that selling was a mark of election that fused secular markets with spiritual work. Both identities connected the modern world of print and selling to the spiritual romance of sanctification and service as workers in Christ’s harvest.

Nineteenth-century colporteurs lived in a fluid world that conflated the metaphorical identities of seller and evangelist. Consecrated merchants and

1. *Colporteur* first appeared in dictionary form in 1846, where it was defined as a synonym for a “pedler of books.” See Joseph Emerson Worcester, *A Universal and Critical Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Wilkins, Carter, 1847), s.v. “colporteur.” The American Tract Society had already defined colportage as the selling of religious works by 1841, and it was this meaning that became dominant among evangelicals from the early 1840s until the end of the century. See David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 97–98.

2. See Matthew 25:1–13, *KJV*.

midnight criers, colporteurs and volunteers who sold tracts and magazines were at once militant entrepreneurs and passive servants of Christ. They formed themselves through distinctions that were messy, tangled, and blurred at the edges, combining traits that were conventionally both masculine and feminine. In doing so, they were a group whose identity raises questions about how gender was understood and articulated among many evangelicals in the nineteenth century. The spiritual worlds of colportage and tract selling suggest that, for at least some evangelical Protestants, distinctions of gender remained complex, unclear, and irreducible to the gender binary.

Gender historians have long been interested in how religion has shaped, limited, empowered, or otherwise defined the lives and bodies of women. Protestant religion has frequently been interpreted by feminist historians as an integral piece of the nineteenth-century “cult of domesticity.” By the 1840s women were marked as more spiritual and less worldly than men, isolated inside the private sphere along with the feminized Victorian church.³ Religion could empower women to defy gender norms in radical moments like the Second Great Awakening, but it ultimately was part of the rationale that marked “womanhood” as outside the public world of work and politics.⁴ Modern historians looked to the Victorian era to explain when and how women were subordinated in the home, and in religion and the cult of domesticity they found a narrative that explained women’s systematic domestication.

This historiography turned on a definition of normative gender relations that understands women and men as confined within a set of specific social roles in the nineteenth century. Victorian women were expected to be pious, sentimental, and domestic, while men were marked as active, independent, and rational, masters of themselves and their families.⁵ Feminist historians always acknowledged that women’s experiences did not match the ideological demands placed on them, but they tended to assume that these fixed gender ideologies defined a stable ideal of “womanhood” and “manhood” in

3. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Women’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151–74.

4. See Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

5. For one study of Victorian masculinity, see Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), esp. 111–13, 214–15.

the nineteenth century that flesh-and-blood women and men acted within or against.

More recent historians of women and gender have begun to criticize and dismantle many of the assumptions that underpin older understandings of “separate spheres” and normative gender roles, and they in turn have problematized the relationship between religion and sex. Critics have pointed out that the lives of many American women did not conform to public and private worlds and have instead explored how class and race intersected in creating womanhood.⁶ Others challenged the older assumption that antebellum churches were “feminized” and dominated by women, suggesting instead that many women experienced significant tension in their relationship with the church.⁷ The trend was toward greater complexity and ambiguity in understanding how gender could be organized and articulated, which made easy associations between women and religion appear increasingly misleading.

The critique of separate spheres became for some a critique of gender itself, or more precisely a critique of how historians understand and categorize gender in the past. In a particularly powerful and insightful challenge to the field, Jeanne Boydston recently questioned whether historians are able to imagine gender outside the terms of a male-female binary conflict. Going back to the foundational work of Joan Scott in “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” Boydston criticized Scott for fashioning her definition “on the model of a scientific claim” that gender was a “primary signifier of power” that divided men and women.⁸ Though she praised Scott for helping move gender history from stable categories of man and

6. See Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988): 9–39; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Beyond the Sound of Silence: Afro-American Women’s History,” *Gender & History* 1, no. 1 (March 1989): 50–68; Helen Lopata, “The Interweave of Public and Private: Women’s Challenge to American Society,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55, no. 1 (February 1993): 176–90; for a historiographical overview, see Kim Warren, “Separate Spheres: Analytical Persistence in United States Women’s History,” *History Compass* 5, no. 1 (January 2007): 262–77.

7. Karin Gedge, *Without Benefit of Clergy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); the “feminized” church thesis is associated especially with Ann Douglas; see Douglas, *Feminization of American Culture*.

8. Jeanne Boydston, “Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis,” *Gender and History* 20, no. 3 (November 2008): 563; also see Joan Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053–75.

woman to a study of how masculinity and femininity signify difference, she pointed out that in doing so Scott had actually reinforced the gender binary and made conflict a constitutive part of what “gender” was: “We are left once again with a concept of gender as a natural oppositional binary. . . . Gender is as much hard-wired in the human psyche as Freud would have had it hard-wired in the human anatomy.”⁹ Boydston further noted the influence of Michel Foucault on Scott, “universalizing a modern and Western definition of power across time and place.”¹⁰ Without rejecting the importance and value of Scott’s approach to gender, Boydston effectively demonstrated the universalizing tendencies of those influenced by her work: “They accepted the oppositional binary as the neutral categorical formation within which specific cultures might impose specific variations. . . . Manifestations of ‘gender’ altered over time and space, but ‘gender’ itself did not.”¹¹ Scott’s influence in the field had made nonbinary expressions of gender difficult or impossible to imagine and thus limited how historians could conceptualize difference in the past.

As an alternative, Boydston suggested an understanding of gender as a “system of distinctions.” The prescriptive “normative” gender binary identified by historians was always only one way of organizing difference among a nearly infinite number of possibilities. Instead of presuming the universal power of the “normal” to eliminate its rivals, Boydston called on historians “to take variation as the rule and to understand categories with ‘normative’ claims as but instances of the epiphenomena of that variation.”¹² Distinctions allow gender to be understood as a complex, variegated phenomenon that can be articulated in both binary and nonbinary ways. They also make possible what Boydston termed an “aesthetic of jazz,” an approach alive to the “discordant notes,” unrealized possibilities, and fluid potentials in how gender can be organized and understood.¹³

This work aligns closely with queer theory, a theoretical perspective that has been applied largely to gender and sexuality but that also has great utility for the history of religion. Queer theory differs from other deconstructive methods by its refusal to “fetishize difference” as the beginning

9. Jeanne Boydston, “Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis,” 563.

10. *Ibid.*, 563–64.

11. *Ibid.*, 568.

12. *Ibid.*, 569.

13. *Ibid.*, 577; Boydston adapted the jazz aesthetic from Elsa Brown. See Elsa Barkley Brown, “‘What Has Happened Here’: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics,” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 2 (1992): 295–312.

and end of inquiry; the works of queer theorists such as Eve Sedgwick instead call for the study of “the making and unmaking and *remaking* and redissolution” of categories, privileging fluid process over static space.¹⁴ This has led to the development of the theoretical verb *to queer* or *queering* as a project dedicated to the incoherencies, blurred spaces, and braided relationships hidden within seemingly stable systems of meaning.¹⁵ Queer theory offers a particularly cogent theoretical language to those committed to pushing beyond binaries, and it has begun to influence academic disciplines not traditionally concerned with sex or gender.¹⁶

Boydston’s “jazz aesthetic” and queer makings and unmakings challenge how historians have constructed “normative” gendered identities—pious, passive women and independent, mercantile men—as a constitutive part of the field of gender studies. Even while criticizing separate spheres as reductive, many scholars have continued to refer to the gender binary as a taken-for-granted cultural norm in the nineteenth century. Work has been done to chart changing standards of femininity and masculinity, but the basic contours of gender remain remarkably fixed in the binaries of public-domestic, active-passive, and rational-religious.¹⁷ Historicizing these traits has done little to deconstruct their power; historians still tend to see men and women in the past in relation to these normative definitions, even if in practice some extraordinary men and women defied them.¹⁸

14. Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 23; for a study that applies Sedgwick’s approach and attempts to “queer” sexuality in American history, see Ann G. Myles, “Queering the Study of Early American Sexuality,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (January 2003): 199–202.

15. For a lucid description of *queering*, see Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press 1996), 3.

16. For an example of this tendency in religious history, see Kathryn Lofton, “Queering Fundamentalism: John Balcom Shaw and the Sexuality of a Protestant Orthodoxy,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 3 (September 2008): 439–68.

17. To give one example, Michael Kimmel set out to chart American masculinity from the eighteenth to the end of the twentieth century, but his work remained confined to the general image of men as naturally active, forceful, and independent (i.e., not feminine), even if certain traits are highlighted more in some centuries than others. See Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

18. Historians outside Europe and the Americas have been more successful in imagining new systems of gender distinctions. See Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

The antibinary turn has also begun to permeate and reshape long-standing divides in the study of religious history. Many scholars have rejected older models that posit a division between the spiritual worlds of Americans and the material realities in which they live. In particular, R. Lawrence Moore and others have argued that the commercial revolution of the early nineteenth century undermined (or perhaps “queered”) the distinction between religious and secular activities.¹⁹ Many evangelicals, inspired by the expanding power of the marketplace, began to see religious work in terms of a business enterprise, becoming early and enthusiastic participants in the market revolution rather than hostile outsiders looking on from the margins. Robert Orsi and the “lived religion” school have provided another theoretical challenge to binaries, emphasizing that material and spiritual worlds were “braided” together in individual religious persons’ experiences of their faith.²⁰ Privileging intersubjectivity, scholars of religion have become more interested in sites of connection than those of difference, expanding the definition of religion to encompass relationships that blur the line between sacred and secular. This work harmonizes with developments in the field of gender and sexuality studies, as both fields search for ways to think outside binaries in order to encounter the full complexity of human identities and interactions.

Historians of gender and religion are still only beginning to imagine their fields “beyond binaries,” and a great deal of work and theoretical exploration remains before the full contribution of such an approach can be known. This article will attempt to connect developments in both fields to explore how evangelical colporteurs articulated gender distinctions in the middle of the nineteenth century in ways that did not fit the gender binary. Colportearing created spiritual identities that were at once submissive and militant. At times it allowed workers to construct themselves in ways that suppressed sexual difference beneath consecration as a midnight crier. Rather than simply being a margin where exceptional women could defy patriarchal institutions, tract work organized gender as a system of distinctions that was never entirely reducible to a masculine or feminine identity. A history of colportage that is

19. R. Lawrence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

20. Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 9; for other important work on lived religion, see David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989); for more on “braidings,” see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

alive to the “discordant notes” and fluid possibilities of gendered distinctions may be an example of how a nonbinary framework can reveal new connections that destabilize how we define and categorize gender and religion in the past.

This essay is not an exhaustive foray into the tracts, magazines, advertisements, theological texts, polemical books, and newspapers in which the world of nineteenth-century commercial evangelicalism is reconstructed by historians. Rather, it is a heuristic attempt to see if a wide and creative reading of neglected sources may reveal relationships that are usually hidden within the binary grid of gender. To this end, I have favored a broad rather than deep source base, from the printed magazines and letters of millennial Millerites and International Bible Students to the published tracts, annual reports, and miscellanea of the more conventionally mainstream evangelical American Tract Society. It is my hope that by doing so I can demonstrate that gender fluidity was not a “fringe” experience in nineteenth-century America—an argument already common in the field—but rather a constitutive part of how gender distinctions were articulated and expressed in many different places at many different times. This article should be viewed as an initial incursion into a territory where more sustained work might follow. A precondition of a nonbinary history of gender is that we teach ourselves to see the world outside the distinctions we have inevitably spent most of our lives taking for granted. Creative and exploratory readings may at this moment serve as a useful tool to help us think about gender in new ways; if we want to play jazz, we must first learn its scales.

CONSECRATED MERCHANTS AND SELF-DENYING MEN:
COLPORTEURS, COMMERCIALISM, AND GENDER IDENTITIES
IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The American Tract Society of New York (ATS) was one of the first national religious organizations in America to make full use of the 1820s revolution in printing to transform evangelical work. Founded in 1825 amid a network of earlier tract societies of varying success, the New York ATS exploited the rapid expansion of transportation networks following the completion of the Erie Canal and the increased availability of stereotype plates and steam-powered presses, which drastically slashed the cost of both freight and paper.²¹ Organized with the capital of a group of wealthy Christian investors, the ATS was a nondenominational corporate venture that

21. See Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 77–78; David Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 60.

concentrated production and distribution of print to a degree where it was possible to effectively blanket America with religious publications.²²

To distribute its literature, the ATS relied on groups of volunteers and after 1841 a paid class of employees it termed colporteurs. Anyone could volunteer to distribute tracts—and the Boston ATS alone claimed to have ten thousand male and female tract volunteers in the 1840s—but colporteurs were limited to a class of men recruited and trained by the American Tract Society to work as full-time evangelists.²³ In effect book merchants who received training and oversight from the ATS, these colporteurs were paid a modest salary to distribute tracts and books door-to-door, the emphasis being on work where demand was weakest. Though earlier organizations had experimented with power printing and wide-scale distribution of literature, the ATS represented the emergence of a new model of Christian faith and business that reflected the physically and economically transformed America of the 1840s. By relying on professional merchants to sell the gospel message everywhere for a nominal fee, the ATS helped popularize new religious practices that combined entrepreneurship and evangelism with a commercialized faith, thereby shaping how many Protestant Americans would understand and experience their religious identity in the years that followed.

R. Lawrence Moore and others have explored how the early nineteenth century was a time when the logic of the marketplace was rapidly extending to every aspect of American cultural life, transforming how religion was “marketed” and experienced. In Moore’s analysis, American evangelicals adapted to commercialization by learning to “sell” their faith, peddling religion in the marketplace as one product among many: “Religion itself took on the shape of a commodity . . . under the purest rules of *laissez-faire* left extant in our ‘modern’ state.”²⁴ While highly prescient, Moore’s argument

22. Local ATS societies predated the national organization of the ATS in New York, but they generally worked closely together in tract work. See *A Brief History of the Organization and Work of the American Tract Society; Instituted in Boston in 1814* (Boston: American Tract Society, 1855), 17; for additional literature see Elizabeth Twaddel, “The American Tract Society, 1814–1860,” *Church History* 15, no. 2 (June 1946): 116–32; Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789–1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Kyle Roberts, “Locating Popular Religion in the Evangelical Tract: The Roots and Routes of *The Dairyman’s Daughter*,” *Early American Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 233–70.

23. *A Brief History of the Organization and Work of the American Tract Society*, 15–16.

24. Moore, *Selling God*, 6–7.

tended to secularize how American evangelicals viewed commercial mission work. Rather than selling to accrue profit in this world, groups like the ATS commodified the spirit to “lay up treasure in heaven,” a commercial enterprise dedicated to giving away its product for free and making “supply drive demand.”²⁵ The Society certainly benefited materially as a result, but worldly rewards always remained secondary in importance. The ATS understood itself as engaged in a spiritual quest to awaken America, transforming colporteurs into consecrated merchants who labored not for earthly things but to save souls for Christ.

David Paul Nord has effectively argued this point, demonstrating that nineteenth-century religious publishers saw themselves as engaged in “non-commercial” business ventures. But his analysis tended to fall into the opposite extreme by insisting that groups like the ATS viewed the market as “their most wily and dangerous foe.”²⁶ According to Nord, the ATS reacted to commercialized culture by using modern methods of organization “to save the country from the market revolution.”²⁷ This model implies that evangelicals encountered a changed America in the nineteenth century that they sought to tame by reappropriating the secular tools of commercialization. But consecrated merchants did not exist outside the terms of the marketplace to protest it; rather, their identity and sense of mission were created in the meeting between religion and selling. Instead of sacred evangelists manipulating a secular market, both worlds braided into and shaped the other: “a relationship that was, by turns, symbiotic and conflictual, complementary and contested,” to quote Leigh Schmidt.²⁸ The ATS was produced in this space between evangelism and the market, blending colportage into a ritual of consecration in which selling constituted religion and religion constituted selling.

Consecrated colportage was a complex religious identity that confused divisions between commercial and spiritual work. This ambiguity was never absolute, however: the ATS was organized around a gender binary that determined who could and could not be a colporteur. Women were excluded from the most public forms of tract distribution, although they remained important as part-time volunteers. But even while marginalizing

25. Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 62.

26. *Ibid.*, 7.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 14.

women, the messy, tangled world of ATS colportage blurred the active-passive distinctions that underpinned the idea of separate spheres. Colporteur men were spiritual pioneers venturing to “afflicted and destitute” populations depicted as devoid of religion, overcoming opposition from “Romanism” and unbelief.²⁹ But they were also represented as “humble and unpretending” mouthpieces of Jesus Christ being “used” in the work: “The colporteurs are not profound theologians. . . . [but] they tell them of Calvary, and its wonders of love . . . for their own souls glow with it. Every book that goes forth—bears a testimony for God that his religion is true. . . . It is a voice from God.”³⁰ Colporteur merchants by their very nature existed in the public sphere, but the ATS also demanded that they be “self-denying men.”³¹ A consecrated merchant aggressively retailed for Christ, but he sacrificed his material gains and personal ambition for a life of service and humility where the only reward was heavenly. And unlike evangelists of previous generations, colporteurs could rarely expect to become preachers or celebrities in their own right. Handing out literature and following the orders of a central organization required that the participant act as an employee, subordinating his personal identity to both Christ and the institution. While colportage always retained active components, it was idealized through the language of service and dependence. In an obituary for one committee member, the ATS described its ideal consecrated merchant: “His Christian life was one of prayerfulness, self-denying activity, [and] meek persevering endeavors for the good of men.”³² Colporteurs were expected to be humble and dependent servants who sold for Christ in the public sphere, a representation of Christian masculinity that queered core components of the masculine-feminine binary.

Historians have noted that this passive and sacrificial model of evangelicalism highlighted traits that closely approximated Victorian American assumptions of femininity, partially explaining the tendency of women to be more heavily represented in the church.³³ But though some scholars have

29. *Report of Colportage in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina for the Year Ending March 1, 1855* (New York: American Tract Society, 1855), 17–18.

30. *Nineteenth Annual Report of the American Tract Society* (New York: American Tract Society, 1844), 9.

31. *Ibid.*, 88; *Twenty-second Annual Report of the American Tract Society* (New York: American Tract Society, 1847), 68.

32. *Thirty-second Annual Report of the American Tract Society* (New York: American Tract Society, 1857), 12.

33. For one example, see Virginia Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation: Stories of Women's Conversions, 1800 to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

contrasted the selfless, penitent role of evangelical converts to the aggressive, public life of men in the marketplace, colporteurism was an activity that bridged both worlds. As such, it challenged the binary structure of male and female signifiers with passive, sacrificial, enterprising, and public identities that bore little relationship to “normative” gendered ideals.

Colporteur letters and testimonials in ATS literature often stress sacrifice and humility as defining features of the work, which suggests more subtle and complex forms of masculine identity than the conventional stereotype of Victorian manhood. One man presented the public world of business as a harsh reality that contrasted sharply with the spiritual comfort of home, blurring public and private spheres in a way totally alien to conventional understandings of masculinity: “How great is the sacrifice one makes in leaving the dear home circle to engage in a self-denying mission like this.”³⁴ Another colporteur described how his “heart filled up when I saw how gratefully they [tracts] were received. . . . I felt it was a privilege to be an humble bearer of the word of God.”³⁵ A third wrote that he felt “strengthened in purpose to toil on in this blessed work as long as the providence of God will permit, even until life expires.”³⁶ Rather than being independent, a self-denying man was required to surrender his personal freedom and ambition to Christ to receive the “true wealth” of the spirit. In the poem “The Colporteur,” the ATS described this self-denying ideal: “what courteous stranger at the door . . . his bearing frank, his gentle mien . . . his brow serene, proclaiming peace within. . . . He speaks again, in accents low, of Christ and all of his love. . . . A bosom-friend departs.”³⁷ A binary model of gender might suggest that these colporteur men were “feminized” because of their rejection of conventional norms of manhood. Instead, ATS colporteurs represented a different model of evangelical masculinity that combined aspects of both conventional male agency and feminine passivity. Colporteurs lacked both independence and worldly ambition; they existed as a class of men who championed meekness and service as the means by which they successfully competed to sell Christ and achieve salvation.

The ATS did not recruit women to work as colporteurs, however, thus

34. *Report of Colportage in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina for the Year Ending March 1, 1855*, 8.

35. *Ibid.*, 15.

36. *Ibid.*, 24.

37. *Nineteenth Annual Report of the American Tract Society*, 96.

limiting how far the gender binary could be destabilized within the organization.³⁸ While the ATS encouraged colporteurs to be meek and humble, it closely observed its employees and emphasized respectability and decorum in their public personas.³⁹ It further described ideal candidates as young seminary or university students on summer break, men whose youth, unmarried status, and institutional dependence already partially removed them from the realm of masculine independence.⁴⁰ The ATS also published tracts on the ideal sphere of women that fit within Victorian tropes of domesticity, even as it partly queered its own message by passionately calling women to devote themselves entirely to Christ: “The work of preaching the gospel is committed to *men*; but this is only one wheel in the vast and mighty machine which is radically to change the character, feelings, and habits of the world. In the gospel kingdom much is to be done. . . . So much, that your last talent is needed, your last effort is called for in the kingdom of Christ.”⁴¹ The ATS was institutionally limited in how far it could stray from binary understandings of male and female roles, even as the call to transform the world muddled both identities.

WATCHERS AND MIDNIGHT CRIERS: MILLERITES AND THE GENDER BINARY

In the early 1840s a new generation of evangelicals adopted the methods of groups like the ATS and constructed fresh religious identities at the intersection of business and evangelism. The Millerites were a loosely defined group of millenarians organized around the theories of William Miller, who in the early 1830s determined through biblical study that Christ was due to return to Earth some time in the fall of 1843.⁴² “Millerism” achieved a

38. Women were, however, encouraged to participate in informally distributing tracts as volunteers. For informal tract work, see “Address of the Executive Committee,” *Tracts of the American Tract Society*, vol. 1 (New York: American Tract Society, n.d.), 4–5.

39. Nord, *Faith in Reading*, 103–6.

40. The annual report for 1848 related that of 397 active colporteurs, 106 were students on summer vacation. The report went on to declare that the ATS took a “peculiar satisfaction” in attracting students, claiming that tract work would invigorate young men and prepare them for the ministry. See *Twenty-third Annual Report of the American Tract Society* (New York: American Tract Society, 1848), 40–42.

41. Reverend Nathan S. Beman, “Female Influence and Obligations,” in *Tracts of the American Tract Society* 7, no. 226 (1855): 9; also see Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures*, 112–14.

42. When the 1843 date failed, anticipation moved to the fall of 1844, leading to the “Great Disappointment” when no discernible millennial event occurred. For

notable presence on the American landscape when in early 1840 the publisher Joshua Himes convinced Miller to allow him to print and distribute his views in a magazine entitled the *Signs of the Times of the Second Coming of Christ*. Within four years, a whirlwind of print had transformed the Millerites from an obscure fringe into a national movement with fifty thousand adherents and hundreds of thousands more sympathetic to Miller's views.⁴³ By 1844 the Millerites had produced and distributed over four million pieces of literature, a frenzy of religious publishing that demonstrated the new power of print to create religious sects virtually overnight.⁴⁴

Fledgling Millerite journals won new subscribers through the celebrity of Miller and his views, but they relied most heavily on the work of volunteers who distributed magazines. In contrast to the highly centralized ATS, readers of Millerite publications could fully participate in spiritual work simply by giving or selling copies to friends and acquaintances, and distributors were invited to live on their earnings by charging a commission for every subscription they sold.⁴⁵ Miller considered this tract and magazine work essential, acknowledging that it was the primary means through which Christians were reached and converted: "they can be sent where the word of God cannot at first be received; in one word, they are the harbingers of light, the forerunners of the Bible."⁴⁶ While some Millerites were also called to preach and exhort directly, many more participated to some degree in

one recent historical account, see David L. Rowe, *God's Strange Work: William Miller and the End of the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 192–225.

43. Calculating membership among the Millerites is notoriously difficult, given the diffuse nature of the movement. Miller estimated in 1845 that fifty thousand people in the United States and Canada had left their churches, along with two hundred preachers, a number that scholars have tended to accept as reasonable. But the search to define who was or was not a Millerite tends to reify an identity that was by no means fixed in the 1840s. Many Christians read and passed on Millerite magazines without withdrawing from their churches, even if they were sympathetic to Miller and confidant of the 1843 date. See William Miller, *Apology and Defense* (Boston: J. V. Himes, 1845), 22; George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite Adventism* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1993), 213

44. Michael Barkun, *Crucible of the Millennium: The Burned-Over District of New York in the 1840s* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 132.

45. In 1841 this commission varied from seventeen to forty cents for a one-dollar annual subscription. See *Signs of the Times of the Second Coming of Christ*, January 15, 1841, 157; reprinted in *Adventist Heritage* (Loma Linda, Calif., n.d.); *Midnight Cry!* November 17, 1842, 2.

46. *Midnight Cry!* December 16, 1842, 4.

the distribution work, demonstrating through their time and energy that they truly awaited the Advent.

Perhaps because of a relative lack of work connecting gender to commercial Christianity, the Millerites have received comparatively little attention from historians of evangelical print culture.⁴⁷ Gender historians have found more of interest in the movement. Catherine Brekus has connected the history of female Millerite preachers to the radical revivalism of the Second Great Awakening. Brekus argued that Millerism was “both the culmination and the exhaustion of antebellum revivalism,” a movement that embraced the strategies of the market revolution to win converts but rejected the “corrosive forces of individualism and materialism” it engendered.⁴⁸ Like earlier marginal groups in the eighteenth century, the Millerites allowed some women to lecture in churches and publicly exhort their faith. They also could publish articles and testimonials in Millerite publications such as *Signs of the Times*, *The Midnight Cry!* and *The Advent Message to the Daughters of Zion*, the last magazine explicitly marketed to women. But the Great Disappointment of 1844 marked a watershed moment of transition from the fluid potentialities of the Second Great Awakening to the more rigid gender binary of Victorian America.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Millerite women’s tendency to preach alongside their husbands or other male relatives suggests that they were “particularly conservative” in their attitudes toward the family and therefore less likely to radically challenge the gender hierarchy than earlier preachers.⁵⁰ This narrative fits well with other feminist histories of Christian revival: young and radical churches allowed women to preach alongside men in order to win converts, only to exclude women from positions of authority once the church became established and more concerned with respectability than devotion.

Though this model certainly holds true in many cases, histories of public female preaching have also tended to search for and emphasize conflict

47. Candy Gunther Brown briefly mentioned the Millerites in a list of groups that “withdrew from the world to avoid its corrupting influences,” but she considered them outside the nineteenth-century evangelical community that made up the subject of her book; see Brown, *The World in the World*, 41–44. R. Lawrence Moore described Millerism as a “passing fad” that was notable mostly for the controversy it attracted; Moore, *Selling God*, 138; David Morgan’s work is an important exception to this larger trend; see Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures*.

48. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, 309, 316.

49. *Ibid.*, 332–34.

50. *Ibid.*, 325.

between women and patriarchal institutions, sometimes explicitly connecting these struggles to modern-day feminism.⁵¹ The danger of such an approach is that it tends to impose current understandings of gender and power on the past, concealing more fluid examples beneath too rigid categorizations. Returning to Boydston, an emphasis on the struggle to preach in public has limited historians' ability to search for other ways gender might have been articulated and blurred among nineteenth-century evangelicals. Different kinds of consecration and preaching work coexisted among the Millerites, and the forms that are the most public and comprehensible to historians (women who preached to audiences in churches and public spaces) may not have been the most radical in blurring the gender binary.

Consecrated selling identities created ambiguities in the Millerite gender system that, rather than simply defining alternative masculinities and femininities, destabilized the boundaries of gender altogether. Colportage for the Millerites achieved a pitch of religious intensity that far exceeded that of the ATS's mission work, calling followers to "sacrifice all" as proof that they believed that the millennium was upon them: "let us arouse ourselves, one and all, to the battle. . . . Bring in your whole strength to the field, give your enemies no advantage over you, put on the whole armor, be immovably fixed in this one thing, to stand whole nights on your watchtower . . . faithfully warning the wicked and impertinent of their danger."⁵² The "midnight crier" was by far the most common metaphor for Millerite religious work, one of the wise virgins "immovably fixed" on the return of the bridegroom and a consecrated worker who labored to warn others of the imminent feast, a spiritual identity that demonstrated how male and female signifiers became tangled. This role had both active and passive components, but the call to break loose from the world and be "used up" in the harvest overrode all other concerns:

I will cut loose from worldly care,
And hope, but never fear;
My daily cry, and nightly prayer,
Is "Jesus, now appear."⁵³

51. See, for example, Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

52. *Midnight Cry!* November 19, 1842, 1.

53. Sylvester Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller* (Boston: Joshua V. Himes, 1853), 273.

Distinctions of gender could not easily be imposed over the daily cry and watch of the Millerites, in contrast to the work of the ATS. Both men and women of faith were to act as the biblical virgins, “trimming their lamps” to bring the light of the bridegroom’s return in 1843 to the world.⁵⁴ Miller’s rhetoric allowed little room to maneuver: “Fly, fly for succor to the ark of God. . . . Do you want to join that heavenly choir, and sing the *new song*? . . . Then join in heart and soul this happy people . . . become a pilgrim in the good old way.”⁵⁵ The spiritual immediacy of the New Kingdom not only subsumed gender but made all earthly distinctions anathema to those who sought imminent consecration with Christ.

As gendered distinctions in spiritual tract work blurred, Millerites constructed metaphorical identities that were at once active, sacrificial, militant, and submissive. The revivalist and Millerite John Truair admonished his brethren to “separate themselves from every sentiment and practice which will not stand the audit and fiery process of that great day of the Lord. . . . Be ye then, my dearly beloved in the Lord, mighty and fearless for the honor of your king,—bold as the lion in his truth,—immovable as the eternal rock in your faith in his word of promise, and kind and gentle as love itself in your treatment of men . . . and God will crown you more than conquerors in the Kingdom of our Lord at his coming.”⁵⁶ The Millerite preacher Sarah Higgins agreed: “He that is to come WILL COME. . . . Dear reader, are you ready for the event? . . . Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: these are the moral elements of that kingdom for which we are waiting.”⁵⁷ Magazine work demanded confrontation with the worldly, as one midnight crier remarked, “how ought we to cry in the ears of our fellows, ‘Fear God and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come.’”⁵⁸ But it also called for displays of meekness that reflected Christ’s love and singular power to bring about salvation: “Let the brethren all do this in the spirit of holy love and brotherly kindness. . . . stand only in the Lord, and in the power of his spirit, and he will give them a mouth and wisdom which no enemy shall be able to resist,” as John Truair put it.⁵⁹ Handing out magazines and tracts required both a surrender to Christ and the courage to be a conqueror alongside him, a place between

54. *Midnight Cry!* December 16, 1842, 3.

55. Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 216.

56. *Signs of the Times of the Second Coming of Christ*, November 15, 1840, 125.

57. *Advent Herald and Signs of the Times Reporter*, August 28, 1844, 2.

58. *Advent Herald and Morning Watch*, August 20, 1845, 13.

59. *Signs of the Times of the Second Coming of Christ*, November 15, 1840, 125.

the celebrity of formal preaching and the passive piety of the humble parishioner.

In fact, it was the fervent belief in consecration as midnight criers, rather than an understanding of William Miller's complicated theology, that for many defined what it meant to be a Millerite. Miller's theories were labyrinthine and changeable and required a detailed knowledge of biblical prophecy and numerology to understand fully.⁶⁰ But followers did not need to be able to explain all Miller's views to consecrate themselves to his message. The Reverend R. B. Medbury of Portland, an ardent Millerite, declared that for those who heard Miller speak, "the things of eternity assumed to them an unwonted reality. . . . It was not so much the belief that Christ might come in 1843, as it was the certainty of that event. . . . I know not that any one has embraced all his [Miller's] peculiar views. But many have been made to feel that time is short. . . . Earth has receded, and their attachment to all sublunary objects has been loosened. . . . In a word, they profess to have consecrated themselves unto the service of God, and to labor and be found watching whenever the Master of the house should come."⁶¹ The desire to be "found watching" when the Lord returned permeated Millerite belief and invested the daily work of informing others with spiritual urgency. As one isolated Millerite put it, "while we remain in the flesh, we can but pity" the world, "but there we shall have no oil for them. Their lamps of profession will go out, and will not afford them one ray of light in the pit of woe."⁶² The fleshly body of a midnight crier was compelled to urge others to fill and trim their lamps as a sign that they truly "watched" and "cried" for the bridegroom to come. Emily Blackington told readers that "none should stand between us and God. . . . Are we dead to the world and alive to God? . . . [If so,] all desires for honor, all superfluities and needless expenses, all unprofitable and foolish talking . . . will be laid aside."⁶³ Such sentiments reflected the profound disruption of conventional identities that Millerite religious work required. For midnight criers who labored to distribute Miller's warnings, gender—like all other "worldly" distinctions—became one more superfluity to sacrifice as an act of faith.

These identities could be expressed in ways that were actually inimical to normative ideas of gender and femininity. Some women could and did construct consecrated identities that were active and militant. Abigail Mussey,

60. See Rowe, *God's Strange Work*, 75–101.

61. *Signs of the Times of the Second Coming of Christ*, June 1, 1840, 37.

62. *Advent Herald and Signs of the Times Reporter*, September 4, 1844, 37.

63. *Advent Herald and Morning Watch*, August 20, 1845, 14.

the “Yankee woman preacher,” started her long religious career as a Millerite colporteur. A subscriber to *Signs of the Times*, Mussey began holding meetings in her home in 1842, despite opposition from her brother, who briefly threatened to disown her. She justified her efforts to participate in the Millerite work in the following terms: “We believed, and therefore we spake; lived out our faith, and were condemned of the world, but owned and blest of God.”⁶⁴ In later years she extended her belief in consecration to a militant Christian identity that combined a sacrificial, penitent self with warrior rhetoric: “I knew God had spoken, and I had obeyed. The door was open, and none could shut it. . . . I moved on, with sword in hand and the gospel armor on, with loving all and fearing none.”⁶⁵ Catherine Brekus linked women like Mussey to exceptional female Millerites who were able to act as public “lecturers” and speak before congregations in churches (though not as ordained ministers), a group of “lovely” women who fulfilled Joel’s prediction that “your daughters shall prophesy.”⁶⁶ But the fluid potential of colporteur work may have challenged the gender line more deeply than even the presence of a few “lovely” preachers could, a group that never made up more than one in twenty Millerite evangelists.⁶⁷ Though the possibility of female ordination would be quickly suppressed by the Millerites after 1845, consecrated tract sellers sidestepped many traditional objections to female preaching by reducing the role of evangelist to that of a servant and employee. Colportage was not a masculine identity women could adopt or recode as feminine; spiritual selling combined and collapsed the conventional traits of each gender, opening a queer space where Millerites expressed their faith beyond the gender line.

Men also expressed colporteur identities in ways that confused the gender binary, embracing a sacrificing, penitent model of religiosity. Whereas Millerite women like Abigail Mussey imagined themselves as defiant warriors for Christ, some Millerite men constructed identities as dependents and servants of the organization who reveled in their submission and inadequacy before God. “I most cheerfully admit that I am a debtor,” wrote one grateful male reader: “they [the magazines] hold a prominent place in my feeble prayers. . . . I think and speak of nothing else, indeed, my little soul is so filled, that there is no room for any other subject. . . . The strength of my

64. Abigail Mussey, *Life Sketches and Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Dakin & Metcalf, 1866), 68.

65. *Ibid.*, 163–64.

66. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, 319–20.

67. *Ibid.*, 319.

faith will lead me. . . . [I] subscribe myself, though unworthy, your ever loving, and anxiously waiting brother.”⁶⁸ Miller himself frequently maligned his own power as a preacher—referring to himself as the “old stammering man”—self-deprecations that one biographer labeled a “sardonic weapon” he used to disarm his opponents.⁶⁹ But Miller’s humility also reflected a more complex gendering of men in the movement. Gentleness and self-effacement constituted part of the identity of all midnight criers: “I speak not these things boastingly; God forbid; but rather to show my weakness and incompetency, and to magnify the wisdom and power of God, who is able to take worms to thresh mountains and the weak things of the world to confound the wise and mighty.”⁷⁰ By admitting his inadequacy, Miller made the success of the midnight criers miraculous. In fact, a great deal of Miller’s religious authority and charismatic appeal was linked to his aura of humility and self-denial. One Millerite described Miller: “in temperament, a mixture of sanguine and nervous. . . . We see in his head great benevolence and firmness, united with a lack of self-esteem. . . . there is a peculiar expression in his blue eye, of shrewdness and love. . . . In his social relations he is gentle and affectionate, and insures the esteem of all with whom he mingles.”⁷¹ Other colporteurs—male and female—mimicked Miller when they constructed identities that emphasized gentleness and self-denial. Both sexes affectionately referred to Miller as their “father,” taking on spiritual identities as children in the movement who were free to embrace dependence and service.⁷² To describe these roles as androgynous or a feminization of the church would impose a gender binary on a process that was simply too fluid, inventive, and queer to be bound by our conventional definitions of what counted as “masculine” and “feminine” in the nineteenth century.⁷³

Feminist historians have long noted how the language of surrender to Christ and self-denial were integral components of evangelical women’s religious identities that allowed them to criticize men while remaining within the boundaries of normative gender.⁷⁴ It is less often recognized that

68. *Advent Herald and Signs of the Times Reporter*, September 4, 1844, 37–38.

69. Rowe, *God’s Strange Work*, 104.

70. *Midnight Cry!* November 18, 1842, 1.

71. Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 249.

72. See Rowe, *God’s Strange Work*, 172–74.

73. For a history that argues for an “androgyny” model of evangelicalism in the eighteenth century, see Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

74. See especially Brereton, *From Sin to Salvation*.

passivity and meekness were also essential to evangelical men's religious experiences. The sacrificial, humble performances of midnight criers raise questions about whether historians should automatically assume that passivity and gentleness are traits that were represented only as feminine in the nineteenth century. Instead, denial of self, a gentle demeanor, and dependence on others were qualities that both men and women could experiment with when they imagined their religious work. After all, the Apostle Paul served as their example: "The servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men. Apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those who oppose themselves."⁷⁵ With ambiguity written into the fabric of their religion, gendered representations among evangelicals were sufficiently fluid and multifaceted that they could not be organized around a stable gender binary.

After the Great Disappointment of October 1844, Joseph Himes and other Millerite leaders worked to centralize the disparate groups of consecrated midnight criers into a new Adventist movement. In the process, they targeted the fluidity of gender identity as a threat to the stability of the new sect. In the 1845 Albany conference called to quell division, Himes accused individual Millerites of engaging in "promiscuous feet-washing" and the "spiritual kiss." These were customs whereby Millerites embraced and kissed one another on the lips as an affirmation of spiritual love and washed one another's feet as a show of mutual humility. Himes now marked these acts as indecent because they encouraged physical contact between the sexes.⁷⁶ He also attacked as extremists Millerite men and women who shaved their heads and acted "like children in understanding" to demonstrate their consecration to Christ.⁷⁷ In earlier years Miller had taken no issue with such displays of affection in devotion, and in fact he implicitly endorsed them in a letter to his son: "One half of the congregation wept like children when I parted from them. Mr. Medbury, the Baptist Minister, a good man, wept as if his heart would break. . . . He and many others fell upon my neck and wept and kissed me, and sorrowed most of all that they should see my face no more."⁷⁸ Spectacles like this allowed Millerite converts to experiment with identities that were organized far enough outside

75. 2 Timothy, 2:24–25, *KJV*.

76. David Rowe, *Thunder and Trumpets: Millerites and Dissenting Religion in Upstate New York, 1800–1850* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), 147–55; also see Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-Day Adventism and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 34–35.

77. Knight, *Millennial Fever*, 271.

78. Bliss, *Memoirs of William Miller*, 145.

the masculine–feminine binary that they desexualized even physical contact between the sexes. By 1845 increased organizational oversight and a concern for respectability led the leadership of the Millerites to attempt to repress practices that undermined a division between male and female identities. The post–Albany conference reaction against the spiritual kiss also demonstrated that not all Millerites had embraced the fluid potentialities of the midnight crier. One correspondent, a “subscriber to the *Midnight Cry* and *Watch* from its first commencement,” declared, “I am well persuaded the Adventists, as a body, have more to fear from moral anarchy and disorder, than sectarianism and consolidation.”⁷⁹ The balance shifted from fluidity to coalescence; at the same conference, Himes and other Millerite leaders voted to forbid female ordination, formally solidifying the gender binary in the organization of the new Adventist church.⁸⁰

The Millerites experienced a process of centralization that matched a larger and well-recognized trend in fringe religious sects that sacrificed spiritual fervor for mainstream respectability. But though this process of consolidation was certainly meant to reify masculine and feminine identities, it is unclear how successful it was in actually doing so. In the 1840s and 1850s many Millerites would drift into other Adventist and millennial Christian movements, taking advantage of a glut of new evangelical magazines and the continued need for religious colporteurs. Many of these later movements experienced the same fluidity in distinctions of gender as the Millerites had, precluding a neat narrative of declension.

The International Bible Students, the organizational predecessor of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, demanded that both men and women engage in tract and magazine work from the first publication of *Zion’s Watch Tower* in 1879. Ordinary Bible Students, without any direct encouragement from the *Watch Tower*, also began to engage in the same practice of the “spiritual kiss” that had divided the Millerites in the 1840s. Men and women, especially full-time colporteurs, caressed and kissed one another upon meeting as a sign of their mutual consecration to Christ, a practice that the movement’s founder, Charles Russell, eventually decided had let “down some of the barriers of reserve which society has found by experience are absolutely necessary for the world.”⁸¹ In 1908 Charles Russell formally forbade the practice of the “spiritual kiss” and moved to reaffirm what he termed “the metes and

79. *Advent Herald and Morning Watch*, October 1, 1845, 59.

80. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, 332.

81. “Pay Thy Vows unto the Lord,” *Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence*, June 15, 1908.

bounds of the sexes.”⁸² A storm of outcry resulted, especially after Russell asked his followers to swear an oath not to be alone with members of the opposite sex to whom they were not related. Russell’s insistence on sexualizing his colporteurs’ consecrated embraces helped spark the departure of several hundred Bible Students from the organization.⁸³

Examples such as this suggest that the Millerites were not a radical exception in the American religious landscape or a holdover from the Second Great Awakening. Sixty-five years after the Great Disappointment, American evangelicals continued to experiment with consecrated identities that were not neatly organized by a gendered binary, identities that often became visible only in the liminal moments when they were limited and proscribed. Bible Student colporteurs published letters in the *Watch Tower* that presented their work as consecrated enterprises and a loss of self in Christ. Neither of these representations was necessarily tied to a masculine or feminine identity, and they were frequently combined in ways that defy our expectations. “My heart’s desire is to esteem all things a loss . . . and with my whole being . . . to press along the line toward the prize of the high calling.”⁸⁴ “My being cries out with anguish—hard pressed by the flesh and Satan. . . . Verily God has been leading me; I have no purpose of my own.”⁸⁵ “I could not be contented to settle while there is such a favorable time to be at work. . . . The harvest [is] truly ripe.”⁸⁶ “I am free with the liberty wherewith Christ has made me free, and with his help, I will never again be entangled with the yoke of bondage.”⁸⁷ To divide these expressions of consecrated identity by gender would impose a categorization on the Bible Students that was in practice messy and unfixed in their world.

The fluidity of consecrated work challenges the usefulness of the normative gender binary in the study of evangelical religiosity. While the Millerites were certainly utopian radicals in some regards, their practices were not unique. Colporteur identities had been developed previously in groups like the ATS, and they always contained a degree of play in the ways they

82. Charles Russell, *Studies in the Scriptures*, vol. 6 (New York: Watchtower Bible & Tract Society, 1904), 266–67.

83. “Pay Thy Vows unto the Lord”; “What the Word Vow Signifies,” *Zion’s Watch Tower*, October 15, 1908; also see James Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of Jehovah’s Witnesses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 41–42.

84. “Extracts From Interesting Letters,” *Zion’s Watch Tower*, June 1, 1889, 2.

85. “Extracts from Interesting Letters,” *Zion’s Watch Tower*, February 1887, 7.

86. “Extracts from Interesting Letters,” *Zion’s Watch Tower*, October 1, 1888, 2.

87. “Encouraging Words from Faithful Workers,” *Zion’s Watch Tower*, June 15, 1893, 176.

expressed gendered distinctions. The Millerites were one group that experienced a particularly profound process of destabilization, but the pattern of evangelism in which they participated predated them and would continue to exist until after the end of the century. The Millerites may be better understood by invoking Boydston—not as an exception that proves the rule, but as an expression of the vast variation in gender relations that marked America in the nineteenth century, one that calls into question how “normative” gender is defined and categorized by historians.

CONCLUSION

Colporteur cultures of identity contained distinctions that cannot adequately be explained within the context of the gender binary. In the blurry realm where religion met sex, gender could and did become a permeable and unsettled system of distinctions in which multiple identities beyond “male” and “female” came to exist. Though evangelicals are often seen today as firmly supportive of patriarchy and separate roles for men and women, numerous traditions and systems of gender distinctions competed and overlapped in the nineteenth century, and it is unlikely that this complexity ceased in the twentieth.⁸⁸ To quote Boydston once again, we should resist the impulse to subordinate evangelicals in the past to “a narrative that assumes the eventual triumph of the binary as we presume it to have existed in the late twentieth century.”⁸⁹ If variation is to be our rule, it may be necessary to assume a process of “making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution” as our norm, rather than hierarchy and difference punctuated by occasional moments of fluidity. Additional research that is alert to the ambiguous possibilities of consecrated identity and the constant instability in all systems of difference will probably reveal that the gender binary has always been blurred and unstable in the practice of daily life.

This is not to dismiss power or the persistent use of gendered distinctions to establish hierarchies of difference, a field of inquiry that should remain crucial to the discipline. It is, rather, to call new attention to what Derrida once named “the place where the system does not close . . . where the system constitutes itself, and where this constitution is threatened by the

88. For one study that demonstrates complex systems of gender distinctions among twentieth-century evangelicals, see Marie R. Griffith, *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

89. Boydston, “Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis,” 566.

heterogeneous.”⁹⁰ The interruptions of a syncopated rhythm can reveal patterns that are otherwise inaudible to us. “Discordant” notes are discordant only to the ears of the uninitiated; if we take them as our starting point rather than as an exception to the proven rule, we may be able to move beyond a search for blurred spaces to a place where fixed categories are the curious exception to a fluid and dynamic world.

90. Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), 5.