“Neither Male nor Female”: Gender and Religion during the Great Awakening in Virginia

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In the early years of Baptist influence during the Great Awakening, Margaret Meuse Clay was ordered to stand trial on the charge of unlicensed preaching in colonial Virginia. With eleven other Baptists, all male, Clay was found guilty and sentenced to a public whipping.\(^1\) Clay was one of the only known female exhorters in the colonial South during the Awakening, and her trial represents the complex attitudes toward female involvement in the public sphere. While the revivals spread to the South with the same amount of fervor they introduced in New England, the Great Awakening did not carry with it the religious authority women in the North enjoyed during this period. The Separate Baptists were unique in that they were the only denomination in the South that allowed and encouraged women to publicly participate in religion, namely as exhorters and deaconesses. The Baptists offered women the opportunity to worship in the church as equals to men, arguing that women were accepted as equals with their male counterparts as the children of God, doctrine that was truly revolutionary in the eighteenth century. However, evangelical religion both challenged and confirmed gender roles in colonial society. Along with their emphasis on personal faith and emotional religious experience, the Separate Baptists during the Great Awakening introduced a sharp contradiction in the Southern colonies: that between the South’s patriarchal society and the democratic religious doctrine of the dissenting faiths.

Gender identity is never a concrete definition of what it means to be male or female; these definitions are specific to historical periods and places. In her now classic article “Gender: A Useful Category for Historical Analysis,” Joan Scott questions the “timeless permanence [of] binary gender representation,” the belief that gender identities are fixed and permanent throughout time.\(^2\) On the contrary, gender identities differ according to varying social conditions.

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This flexible nature of gender is especially evident in religious communities. The egalitarian nature of evangelical Protestant doctrine mitigated the traditional divisions between men and women, and yet this message of spiritual equality was also tested as male and female congregants negotiated power relations within the church. This paper seeks to illustrate that female identities were constructed in colonial society by religious discourse and practice, and also by the existing traditions of temporal society. Female self-perceptions were infused with patriarchal values gained from religious discourses and the society in which they lived. It will also demonstrate that the religious authority granted to women by the Separate Baptist church, though limited, threatened the patriarchal values on which colonial Virginia society was based, and men responded in ways that illustrated the perceived threat presented by the rise of evangelical Protestantism.

Most important, it will argue that while the Separate Baptists did challenge the patriarchal views of colonial society toward female involvement in the public sphere, the complete reversal of female subjugation in temporal society was never its intention; the church remained a part of that society and continued to be dominated by its patriarchal values. While women were allowed greater involvement in the church than was characteristic of the Anglican or other evangelical Protestant sects, the patriarchal society in which the church was founded remained in tact, fundamentally explaining why the church saw little contradiction in taking away the small amount of power granted to women upon their reconciling with the Regular Baptist church in the 1780s.

An understanding of the concept of patriarchy is vital to this study. In *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs*, Kathleen Brown defines the domestic form of patriarchy as

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“the historically specific authority of the father over his household, rooted in his control over labor and property, sexual access to his wife and dependent female laborers, his control over other men’s access to the women of his household, and his right to punish family members and laborers.” A patriarchal society then, is a community based on this social organization, a society defined by male authority over their wives and other women of their households, as well as male interactions with one another. The acceptance of male authority was seldom questioned in colonial society; both men and women believed that a patriarchal community and household were designated by God as the most favorable relationship between citizens, and man and wife.

Historians have largely ignored the role of women in the Great Awakening, and in doing so, have missed one of the most enduring legacies of the revivals, which was the unprecedented number of women who served in the public religious sphere throughout the colonies. The changing role of women must certainly be considered one of the “most enduring legacies” of the Great Awakening. “Mainstream” religious historians have yet to consider the experience of women as a vital part of their story, which is especially troubling considering that women formed the majority of colonial church membership in America. In her influential essay “Women’s History Is American Religious History,” Ann Braude emphasizes that the numerical dominance of women in most religious groups “constitutes one of the most consistent features of American religion, and one of the least explained.” Seminal works by historical giants, for example, Alan Heimert’s Religion and the American Mind or Sydney Ahlstrom’s A Religious History of the

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American People, ignore the religious experience of women entirely or discuss women only briefly. Of course, one would not necessarily expect these works, published before the advent of women’s history in 1966 and 1972 respectively, to offer a substantial analysis of women in America’s religious history. What is even more troubling, however, is that works on American religious history written after this period continue to consider the experiences of women only marginally. Women and gender historians such as Catherine Brekus, Janet Moore Lindman, and Marilyn J. Westerkamp have made great strides in rewriting the religious experiences of American women, in turn illustrating that “women’s history is American religious history.” These historians would certainly agree with Braude’s assertion that “we cannot expect to understand the history of religion in America until we know at least as much about the women who have formed the majority of participants as we do about the male minority who has stood in the pulpit.”

Much the same trend is evident in histories of the colonial South, in which the experiences of women are considered only marginally, if at all. Two of the most celebrated works on southern history, Rhys Isaac’s *Transformation of Virginia* is still considered one of the most influential syntheses on colonial and Revolutionary Virginia. Isaac attributes the democratic ideology that emerged in the colony in the late eighteenth-century with the “counterculture” presented by Virginia’s evangelical sects. The lack of attention dedicated to colonial women, however, has led contemporary historians to question the extent to which evangelical religious sects represented a “counterculture” in colonial Virginia. As exemplified by the works of Isaac and Gewehr, past historians have tended to overemphasize the democratic nature of evangelical religion, particularly when considering the involvement of women. By

8 Ibid., 107.
ignoring the experiences of colonial women, it is much easier to conclude that Baptist ideology stood in stark contrast to the patriarchal traditions of the Virginia gentry.

By illustrating that the Baptists and other evangelical sects continued to uphold the patriarchal traditions of the surrounding temporal society, gender and women historians such as Janet Moore Lindman, Kathleen Brown, and Cynthia Kierner have cast doubt on the connectedness attributed by Isaac to religious groups and democratic political doctrine. Brown points out in *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* that Isaac “problematically implies that the gathering of white men embodies the entire Anglo-Virginian social order.” Although colonial Virginia was dominated by men, it was not an exclusively male society.\(^\text{10}\)

Historians today acknowledge the contradiction present in Isaac’s work when one considers the religious experiences of colonial women, and this paper is a result of this line of thinking. While evangelical sects, particularly the Separate Baptists, offered women an unprecedented amount of religious freedom in the church, referring to these denominations as a “counterculture” ignores that colonial men and women, regardless of religious convictions, continued to adhere to the colony’s established social hierarchies.

In 1742, around the age of 20, Eliza Lucas Pinckney wrote to her brother concerning her thoughts on religion, which remained essentially unchanged for the rest of her life. She surmises in her letter that the most agreeable way to live a comfortable and cheerful life with happiness in eternity is through the Christian religion. “To live agreeably to the dictates of reason and religion, to keep a strict guard over not only our actions but our very thoughts before they ripen into action, to be active in every good word must produce a peace and calmness beyond expression.” In advising her younger brother who had recently entered the Army, Pinckney

\(^{10}\) Brown, *Good Wives*, 455, 279.
wrote, “[Y]ou can’t be at a loss to know what is right when The Divine goodness had furnished you with reason, which is his natural revelation, and his written word supernaturally revealed and delivered to mankind by his son Jesus Christ.”

Eliza Pinckney was the daughter of a wealthy British Army officer who moved his family to South Carolina in 1738, when Eliza was fifteen. Pinckney’s religious views reflected those of most Southern Anglicans, who valued the rational exercise of religion. As the Great Awakening began its move to the South in the 1740s, Pinckney appears to have remained unaffected; her letter illustrates that she continued to emphasize a rational piety, a view that Pinckney perceived as rooted in God’s Word.

In marked contrast to Pinckney’s rational religious views were the experiences of Sarah Edwards, wife to evangelical minister Jonathan Edwards, which were also recorded in 1742. Edwards was often moved to tears during her reading of Scripture or recitation of a hymn. She records in her narrative that she “fell into a great flow of tears, and could not forbear weeping aloud,” when contemplating how impossible it was for anything to separate her from the love of God, a message found in Romans 8:35. Later during a passionate discussion of God’s goodness, Edwards experienced another emotional reaction: “My mind was so deeply impressed with the love of Christ, and a sense of his immediate presence, that I could with difficulty refrain from rising from my seat, and leaping for joy. I continued to enjoy this intense, and lively and refreshing sense of Divine things, accompanied with strong emotions, for nearly an hour.”

Edwards’ religious experience was vocal, dramatic, and physical, which starkly contrasts the religious views of Eliza Lucas Pinckney expressed in the letter to her brother. Throughout her narrative, Sarah Edwards records that she was moved to leaps of joy in response to the presence

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of the Holy Spirit, whereas in other instances she lost all her strength and sometimes fainted when moved by the presence of Christ. In the religious experience of Sarah Edwards, therefore, her body can be seen as a reflection of the specific state of her emotions. The same is not true, however, for the religious practices of Pinckney, who, though no less pious than Edwards, valued a rational approach to religion and the study of Scripture, which she considered a “natural revelation” from God.

The writings of these two women reflect the differences between Anglican and evangelical religious practices and experiences. Although written during the same year, the two accounts differ markedly over their approach to religion, and represent the increasing conflict present in the colonies between traditional and evangelical religion. Like his wife, Jonathan Edwards and other New Light evangelicals supported an emotional religious conversion, and even considered it necessary for an authentic salvation experience. In Some Thoughts on the Present Revival, Edwards asserts, “True virtue or holiness has its seat chiefly in the heart, rather than in the head…The things of religion take place in men’s hearts, no further than they are affected with them. The information of the understanding is all vain, any farther than it affects the heart.”¹³ For Edwards, emotional religious experiences were natural and uncontrollable, and confirmed the validity of the revivals; he considered outbursts as a sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence in his service, not as a distraction. In contrast, Anglican ministers and Old Light evangelicals, those who disapproved of the revivals, labeled the Great Awakening as a product of women’s emotions, women whose outbursts they considered artificial and produced not by religious conviction, but by silly women caught up in the excitement of these new religious experiences. Charles Woodmason, an Anglican itinerant minister, wrote that the audience of the

Baptist services “would have imagined themselves rather amidst a gang of frantic lunatics broke out of bedlam, rather than among a society of religious Christians.” He castigates the evangelicals for their encouragement of public and emotional religious experiences, and describes the responses of converts to the dissenting sects as “ludicrous and ridiculous.”

Traditional and evangelical religious sects differed in their views on the role of emotion in religion and by association their views on the role of women, which will be discussed later.

The writings of these two women, however, also demonstrate some similarities between the religious experiences of Anglican and evangelical women. Firstly, they illustrate the importance of religion in the lives of all colonial women, regardless of class or denominational affiliation. Secondly, their writings reflect an acceptance of female submission to both God’s authority and that of their husbands, a resignation by colonial women that transcended denominational lines. Upon the death of her husband, Eliza Lucas Pinckney pleads for God to enable her to continue the tasks of “resignation and submission” which He requires of all his followers. Sarah Edwards begins her narrative by revealing that she is acutely affected by the ill will of her husband toward her, his reproach of her based on her perceived lack of prudence in conversation with a neighboring minister. It can be surmised from the writings of Pinckney and Edwards, therefore, that piety and submission were traits that colonial women were expected to possess by both God and the temporal society in which they lived. While the eighteenth-century revivals offered women an unprecedented opportunity to serve in the religious public sphere, they would ultimately do little to reverse this perception of women in the colonies for either evangelical or Anglican female adherents.

Prior to the Awakening, women were excluded from holding positions of political or religious authority in their communities. Though they praised women for their piety, colonial ministers prohibited women from any roles in the church they considered inappropriate for a virtuous woman.17 The Puritan minister John Cotton was an outspoken critic of female participation in the churches, and used Scripture to support his argument. Referencing the Apostle Paul’s command to the Corinthians to “let your women keep silence in the churches,” Cotton supposed that,

It is apparent by the scope and context of [the] Scriptures that a woman is not permitted to speak in the Church…By way of teaching, whether in expounding or applying Scripture. For this the Apostle accounteth an act of authority which is unlawful for a women to usurp over the man…and besides a woman is more subject to error than a man, and therefore might soon prove a seducer if she became a teacher.”18

It was on religious, physical, and emotional grounds that ministers dismissed the ability of women to serve in an authoritative role in the church. The writings of colonial ministers such as Cotton were loaded with gendered terminology utilized to remind women of their inferiority to men inside and outside of the church, and of their dangerous connection to original sin. Cotton not only references Scripture to support his firmly-held belief that women must not participate publicly in service, but also states that since women are intellectually inferior to men, they have no right to exercise any religious authority over those who are their logical superiors.19

Despite their lack of power, more women held church membership than did men. Church membership offered women an identity outside of their familial roles, and their participation gave them the fulfillment of belonging to a larger religious community. Most importantly, church membership provided women with the public duty of promulgating the Christian faith.

19 Ibid.
Since women could not serve as ministers or deacons, church membership was one of the few public distinctions available to them in the early eighteenth century.  

In contrast to the Anglican Church, women maintained a dominant presence in Baptist churches in colonial British America from their establishment, becoming numerically superior in Virginia’s churches by the end of the eighteenth century. In Virginia, Baptist women outnumbered the men in their congregations throughout the colonial period. This feminization is exemplified in the membership records of Antioch Baptist Church of Sussex County, where women remained a numerical majority in the church from its founding. In 1772, the church had 91 female and 81 male members; by 1789, there were 92 women but only 54 men. By 1813, women comprised sixty-two percent of the church’s congregation. Although outside the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note that a major factor in the dominance of female membership in this particular church was the increase in the number of black female participants. White males, therefore, left the church as it increasingly underwent both Africanization and feminization.

It is necessary for the formation of a predominantly female congregation that there be societal objectives that required female piety and also in essence excused men from it. In colonial Virginia, these objectives were the association of female piety with the protection of the family and the necessity for men to devote themselves fully to the economic and political spheres of colonial society. In her article “Saints and Sisters: Congregational and Quaker Women in the Early Colonial Period,” Mary Maples Dunn offers an interesting paradigm for the feminization of the New England church that can be applied to this process as it occurred in Virginia as well. Dunn argues that upon the decline of male piety in New England, the Puritans adopted a more

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21 Lindman, A World of Baptists, 115-116.
rigorous differentiation of gender roles and turned their church into a feminine institution. For Dunn, the feminization of the church was a result of the decline of male piety, with females now being called upon to personify Christian values.  

Therefore, feminization of the church was in a sense caused by, and attributed to, the decline in male church membership in the eighteenth century, exemplified in Cotton Mather’s lamentation in 1691 that, “There are far more godly women in the world than there are godly men.” Of course, men continued to be deeply dedicated to religious values, and passed on their beliefs to future generations. On a broader level, however, men were becoming more secular due to their growing participation in the colonies’ market economy. Provided with ample opportunities for leadership in other facets of colonial society men no longer looked to the church for positions of authority, fundamentally leaving the church in the hands of their wives and daughters.

Women could find reinforcement in religion for the female image most of them had always accepted, which fit well with their important role in the family. “To be a good woman was to be a good Christian. But to be a good man was to be a good citizen, active, competitive, self-confident.” The church, therefore, used gender to assign different societal roles to men and women. Women were given the task of preserving and promoting the Christian values found in the family. Women, then, subscribed to a pious role developed in light of male needs to pursue social goals no longer validated by religion.

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23 Ibid., 592.
27 Ibid.
continuation of the Christian community, whereas men accepted responsibility for the economic, social, and political continuation of the community as a whole.

In *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*, Kathleen Brown argues that Virginia colonial society had been thoroughly masculinized by the 1750s, leaving little opportunity for women to hold public positions of authority. As men found other outlets to exercise their power, the church was fundamentally left to the women of the community and the ministers as their overseers. Men participated in a public and homosocial culture, exemplified by activities such as horse racing, cockfighting, wrestling, drinking, gambling, and such events as court days and militia musters. Landowning white men were expected to participate in these events while old, young, and unfree men, and women, served as witnesses. These rituals confirmed for the spectators and the participants alike the importance of male property owners to the social order.28

The public nature of white male culture signified an important difference in the experiences of men and women in the colony. While men had the ability to develop their personal identities and reinforce more broadly-defined masculine attributes publicly, women had no such opportunities, and were even cautioned against spending too much time in the public sphere. In his *Sermons to Young Women*, Presbyterian minister James Fordyce explained to his female reader that,

> [If you lead too public a life, young men will find you pleasurable ‘companions of the hour.’] Companions for life, if they ever think of such, they will look elsewhere. They will then try if they can [to] find women well bred and sober-minded at the same time, of a cheerful temper with sedate manners: women of whom they may hope that they will love home, be attached to their husbands, attentive to their families, reasonable in their wishes, moderated in their expenses, and not devoted to eternal show.29

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For Brown, the limits placed on women’s appearance in the public sphere reflected a male need for control in which the eradication of women from the public sphere and their confinement to their domestic space protected fragile male individual identities, as well as the ideals of the colony’s male public culture.30

In her influential article, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Judith Butler explains gender as “an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.” Butler argues that gender identity is a “performative accomplishment,” an identity that is formed by the repetitive performance of gendered tasks, not an identity that is determined prior to such acts. For Butler, therefore, the constitution of gender is intentional and performative, comparative to the performance of actors on the theatrical stage.31 The performance of actions associated with male or female in the public sphere reinforces societal gender identities as well as those of the actor. This is particularly applicable to colonial society, where one’s masculinity was often measured by his participation in the public realm. As colonial men were increasingly encouraged to distinguish themselves in colonial politics and business, their masculine identities came to be defined by their success, and measured in the public sphere. The growing emphasis placed on the necessity for men to, in a sense, prove their masculinity in the public sphere partly contributed to the decline of their participation in the church. In colonial Virginia, “Male success involved vaunting male identity publicly—celebrating it as an entity distinguishable from domestic relationships.”32

In some sense, the identities of colonial women were formed in opposition to the celebrated attributes of masculinity. Not only were female identities formed by religious

30 Brown, Good Wives, 277-282.
32 Brown, Good Wives, 295.
discourse and practice, but also by the existing traditions of temporal society. Female self-perceptions were infused with patriarchal values gained from these religious discourses and the society in which they lived. It is interesting to note that most women accepted this belief in their inferiority to men, which they considered firmly rooted in Biblical teaching. For example, Martha Laurens Ramsey noted in her memoirs, “In practice, as well as theory, she acknowledged the dependent, subordinate condition of her sex; and considered it as a part of the curse denounced on Eve, as being ‘the first in the transgression.’”33 Women learned of this perceived inferiority to males at a young age, where as children they were exposed to lessons of innate differences between them and their male counterparts.

Women in the colonial period were expected to lead pious lives, attend church services, teach their children, and aid their husbands.34 The relationship between husbands and wives in the colonial period echoed the lessons women had learned as children; women were to serve their husbands in subjection, be modest in speech and dress, and become good housewives. Advice literature of the colonial period warned young women that men preferred to marry women whom they hoped will love home, be attentive to their husbands and families, and not be concerned with public ostentation.35 In return for her obedience, her husband would “guide, defend, and provide” for his wife.36 For example, the Virginia Gazette offered its female readers these “Rules for the Advancement of Matrimonial Felicity”: “Never dispute with him [your husband] whatever the occasion...And if any altercations or jars happen, don’t separate the bed,

35 Fordyce, Sermons to Young Women, in Women and Religion in America, 216.
whereby the animosity will cease…Read often the Matrimonial Service, and overlook not the important word OBEY.”37

To what extent women subscribed to these rules is not entirely clear. However, written records left behind by colonial women illustrate their belief in their primary role as supporter of their husband. As her marriage approached, Elizabeth Foote Washington noted, “[I desire] to please my husband in every thing that is not against the divine Laws…may it be one of my daily petitions to the throne of grace to conduct myself as a dutiful obedient wife.” After four years of marriage, she recorded that she was satisfied in her conduct as a wife, and hoped that by God’s grace she would continue to be an obedient supporter of her husband.38 In a society that stressed the importance of religion in the lives of its people, especially those of women, purposefully disobeying Scripture and male temporal authority would have been undertaken with purportedly great spiritual and societal risks.

The Anglican Church in Virginia officially endorsed this view of women’s roles; no religious authoritative position in the Anglican Church was open to female congregants. Weekly worship in the Anglican Church did accord women a spiritually equality of sorts in religious thought, feeling, and belief. Culturally, socially, and institutionally, however, white women were subordinate and dependent.39 It appears then that the women of Virginia were in a peculiar position for the acceptance of evangelical Christianity. The theology of evangelical Protestantism, especially that of the Separate Baptists, stressed the equality of all believers, regardless of gender or race, as worshippers before the throne of God. This explains why women tended to join evangelical sects in high numbers, and men tended to question the veracity of such doctrine and in many cases, rejected its validity.

37 *Virginia Gazette*, May 20, 1737.
As the time of the revivals drew near, conflicts arose in Virginia between the patriarchal society of the colony and the egalitarian rhetoric of the increasingly popular dissenting religions. Religious interactions within the evangelical traditions offer an example of unique gender roles in early American society. While male evangelical leaders were committed to a patriarchal structure that assumed the inferiority of women to men emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually, they also valued the potentiality of all individuals, women as well as men, to discover God and personally interact with Him. The evangelical Protestant tradition, therefore, brought a change in the religious experience of the ordinary believer. Set on destroying the belief that an intermediary was needed to communicate with God, the evangelicals believed that this experience was available for everyone.

*Revival Comes to the South: The Great Awakening and the Separate Baptists*

The Great Awakening reached the Southern colonies in the late 1740s, the same time at which it began to lose its spirit in New England and the Middle Colonies. With the Great Awakening in the South came “the demand for a recognized social standing, the abolition of the Established Church, the recognition of the principle of religious freedom, and a democratic constitution.” While the Great Awakening came to the South later than it did the north and mid-Atlantic colonies, it found religious groups there ready for its propagation. Peculiar to Virginia above the other American colonies was the rapidity with which evangelical sects were established and spread. Presbyterians, Separate Baptists, and Methodists were ready to evangelize the area, and were therefore the perfect groups for the proliferation of the spirit of the Great Awakening. The Presbyterians effectively introduced the Great Awakening to Virginia under the leadership of minister Samuel Davies in the 1740s, while both the Separate Baptists

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and Methodists gained substantial numbers during the 1760s and 1770s. When Davies ended his mission in Virginia in 1759, the Baptists in the colony were so few that they practically went unnoticed. Within a few years, however, they had renewed the revivalist spirit in Virginia and by the time of the Revolution their membership was estimated at ten thousand, a number which had doubled by the 1790s.\textsuperscript{41}

The Separate Baptists were the only religious denomination in the South that permitted women to speak publicly during the revivals. Arminian in their theology and much more experimental in their church practices than Regular Baptists, the Separates expanded women’s roles in the church to an unprecedented level in the colonial South.\textsuperscript{42} Their tolerance can partly be attributed to their New England origins, where women’s service in the public sphere was more common. Partly in order to establish themselves as “outsiders who rejected [the] dominant religious values” of the Congregationalist church, the Separate Baptists allowed women as well as men to pray aloud during church meetings. Due to a lack of historical evidence it is impossible to know how many women spoke in the Separate churches, but clerical memoirs and church records indicate that hundreds of women may have publicly attested to their faith every week. The Separates were the only sect that allowed women to exhort, which verified in their minds that they, and not the Congregationalists, were the true heirs of the early Christian church.\textsuperscript{43}

Following the example of their New England counterparts, the Separate churches in the South supported public female involvement in the church due to their decided reaction against the South’s dominant culture of patriarchy and class hierarchy. Just as the New England Separates purposefully presented themselves as “outsiders” of the Congregationalist church, so too did the Virginia Separates hope to establish within the colony a denomination that appeared

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{42} Lindman, \textit{A World of Baptists}, 136.
\textsuperscript{43} Brekus, \textit{Strangers and Pilgrims}, 47-49.
radically different from the Anglican Church. Referred to as an “evangelical counterculture” by historian Rhys Isaac, the Separate Baptists that migrated to Virginia brought “their vision of an austere way of life that eschewed the refinements of gentility and the customary indulgences of traditional popular culture.” In addition to leading an ascetic lifestyle and valuing somber piety, the Separates recognized that allowing females greater religious participation would further differentiate their sect from the Anglican Church in the eyes of the colony’s inhabitants. The newness of the Separate Baptist church during the early years of its establishment greatly influenced the sect’s openness to female exhorting and public participation within the church. As the Separates gained popularity and thus became more institutionalized during the Revolutionary era, the church began to withdraw the powers it had initially granted to women decades earlier, a topic that will be returned to later.

The Separate church’s message of simplicity found popularity among the working class of the colonial South, whose members found comfort in a religion that regarded all members, regardless of class or gender, as equals. The evangelical doctrine of personal faith and equality before God stood in contrast to the Anglican tradition that stressed hierarchy and status. As illustrated by the presence of women in religious positions of authority, the Baptists offered equality before God to both men and women, eschewing the lines of class and gender which for so long had dominated colonial Southern society. In contrast to the Separate Baptists, neither the Presbyterians nor the Methodists permitted women to speak publicly during the Great Awakening. These religions tended to be more respectable, drawing converts from the yeomanry, and supported more so than the Baptists the southern traditional hierarchy. This illustrates that while the dissenting sects together shared a doctrine that emphasized personal

faith and emotional fervor, they often disagreed over whom the evangelical message of religious independence was directed.

The Awakening in the South shared many characteristics with earlier revivals in the North, namely its participants’ emotional response to conversion and repentance. Some women claimed they had received divine visions, while others gained attention by “crying out under the ministry” or “falling down as in fits.” In the most striking similarity with the North, Separate Baptists permitted women to speak publicly in religious assemblies.46 The Separate Baptists were unique in that they were the only denomination in the South that allowed women to participate in religion in the public sphere, namely as exhorters. The Baptists offered women the opportunity to worship in the church as equals to men, arguing that women were accepted as equals with their male counterparts as the children of God. This call for participation resonated strongly with women, with females making up the majority of Baptist church membership by the close of the eighteenth century.

An “exhorter” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries encouraged other followers of Christ in their spiritual lives. He or she could make Scriptural references, but unlike a preacher, was not expected to offer commentary and interpretation of a specific Biblical text. For many women, this public role may have seemed similar to their role as the spiritual leaders of their families, in which context they had served as “exhorters” for most of their adult life. Yet the presence of women in the public sphere marked a “profound transformation.” Unlike the women prone to emotional outbursts during church services, women who served as exhorters identified themselves as public speakers, emphasizing the authority and merit which accompanied the role.47

46 Ibid., 81.
47 Ibid., 54.
Determining the number of female exhorters is difficult, especially in the South, where primary accounts of these women are few. The most well-known female exhorters emerged from the Separate Baptist church in Virginia. Perhaps the best-known exhorter is Martha Stearns Marshall, who migrated to Virginia from her home state of Connecticut in 1754. Marshall would often break into prayer and exhortation when moved during times of worship. The Regular Baptists of the region disapproved of a woman speaking in public assembly, but her “own people,” the Separates, thought it perfectly acceptable for a woman to utilize her spiritual gifts in any company.\textsuperscript{48} Marshall was described by her contemporaries as a “lady of good sense, singular piety, and surprising elocution” who “in countless instances, melted a whole concourse into tears, by her prayers and exhortations!” Careful to shield her from criticism, Reverend Robert Semple, the first Baptist historian, assured his readers that Marshall was free from any accusation of seizing authority from the male leaders of the church by speaking.\textsuperscript{49}

Margaret Meuse Clay also gained a reputation in Virginia as an unusually talented speaker. Like Marshall, Clay enjoyed the support and encouragement of her family, who also appear to have been deeply committed to the Baptist faith.\textsuperscript{50} Clay was renowned for her piety, intelligence, and charm, and because of this, ministers frequently suggested she lead the congregation in public prayer. According to her descendents, Clay was ordered to stand trial for unlicensed preaching along with eleven male Baptists. As noted in the introduction, the Baptists were found guilty and sentenced to a public whipping. In the moments before Clay was to receive her punishment, however, an unknown man paid a fine which spared Clay from public

\textsuperscript{48} Lumpkin, “The Role of Women,” 164.
\textsuperscript{49} Robert Semple, \textit{A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia} (Richmond: Published by the Author, 1810), 381.
humiliation. This story is said to have been used widely in the conversion of sinners, and that following her trial men stood in awe of Clay’s spiritual power.51

While most women did not serve in such public capacities as exhorters, deaconesses, and elders, lay women still experienced some amount of authority within the Separate Baptist church. Some churches permitted female members to attend church business meetings, and a smaller number allowed women to vote on business matters. For example, the Waterlick Church in Shenandoah County asked of its preacher in 1787, “Whether a sister in the church is at liberty to have a vote therein?” The question was referred “to the serious consideration of all members of both sexes so as to be furnished with an answer thereto against next Church Meetings.” A month later, the church voted to allow women to participate in church meetings.52 Another illustration of the increased forwardness of women in the Baptist church was the commonality with which wives began to win their husbands to evangelical religion during this period. A story of such an experience is recorded by the Baptist historian James B. Taylor. Against her husband’s wishes, Mrs. Jeremiah Moore attended a Baptist meeting with her mother-in-law while her husband was away from home on business. Much to his annoyance, the women returned home at 11:00 PM, after waiting to hear a man preach by candlelight. Relaying to Moore what they experienced at the meeting resulted in his conversion a few days later. His wife relayed to him that, “Until now I never knew anything about my situation as a poor miserable sinner, against the best of beings.” Taylor records that this conversation was “like a dagger to [Moore’s] heart; a heavy gloom oppressed his mind, to a degree he had never felt before.”

51 Lumpkin, “The Role of Women,” 164-165.
52 Lumpkin, “The Role of Women,” 160.
Following his conversion, Moore became a distinguished preacher and founder of the Baptist church in Alexandria.\textsuperscript{53}

Perhaps the most popular way for Separate Baptist women to participate publicly in the church was through their vocal expressions of emotion during the worship service. The Separate Baptist women of the South were as vocal and contentious in their emotional responses as their New England counterparts. Charles Woodmason, an Anglican itinerant minister, noted that some “[were] singing—some howling—these ranting—those crying—others dancing, skipping, laughing and rejoicing. Here two or three women falling on their backs, kicking up their heels, exposing their nakedness to all bystanders.”\textsuperscript{54} Instead of clearly expressing their religious experiences, evangelical women would jump into the air or fall to the ground in hysterics. Other women moaned or cried uncontrollably from the comfort of their pews. Such traits are found throughout the narrative of Sarah Edwards, who reveals that her feelings were so intense during a worship service that she could not help “rising up and leaping with joy and exultation.” She also discusses multiple bouts of weakness where she felt on the verge of fainting due to such emotional experiences.\textsuperscript{55}

Judith Butler’s argument on the constitution of gender through a “stylized repetition of acts” elucidates how women’s displays of their religious affections further reinforced colonial gender norms.\textsuperscript{56} As Butler has skillfully demonstrated, the performance of actions associated with male or female in the public sphere reinforces gender identities in the temporal society, as well as those of the actor. The very actions that women thought equated them with male congregants in the eyes of God reinforced gender distinctions in the eyes of their audience. These

actions that women such as Sarah Edwards meant as an outward expression of their religious
devotion were, in actuality, actions that made it easy for bystanders and ministers to ascribe
gender onto the bodies of female congregants. In the minds of Charles Woodmason and other
male onlookers, women’s emotional outbursts reinforced the attributes they associated with the
female gender, such as excessive emotionalism and weak bodies and minds that swayed easily
under religious conviction. The “howling” and “ranting”, and “leaping” and “falling” made it
easy for critics of the revivals to excuse them as nothing more than the product of women’s passions.

The refusal, or inability, of women to express their feelings articulately made it possible
for ministers and bystanders to interpret the meaning of such outbursts in multiple ways.
Mention of such vocal expressions by female congregants occurs throughout the diaries and
journals of evangelical ministers, and their responses are varied. This variation demonstrates the
difficulty in determining the true extent of female witnessing and exhorting during the revivals,
and whether the accusations made by ministers such as Woodmason in regard to female hysterics
were representative of what women were actually doing. The sources that remain are not only
fragmentary, but contradictory. As New Lights, those who supported the revivals, and Old Lights
debated whether or not the Great Awakening was a work of God, the significance of women’s
participation became a much debated issue. Some ministers felt that such outbursts provided
validity to their ability as ministers and the revivals as a whole, whereas others designated these
displays of emotion as distractions which undermined their clerical authority.

The Separates were the only denomination in the South that allowed women to pray
aloud alongside men during church meetings. Because of the lack of historical evidence, it is
impossible to determine how many women spoke in Separate churches, but through careful

57 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 44.
scrutiny of church records, clerical memoirs, and religious periodicals, historian Catherine Brekus asserts that scores or even hundreds of women may have publicly expressed their faith every Sunday. As noted earlier, Separates may have allowed women to exhort as a sign of their “countercultural thrust” and as a sign of their open opposition to the Congregationalist and, particularly in the South, Anglican denominations. The Separates prided themselves on the differences between their church and the mainstream religious denominations in the colonies, celebrating the egalitarian and emotional nature of their own religious experiences. When critics complained that their support of female exhorting made them appear different from other denominations, the Separates responded that they were different, that they had been chosen by God to be the leaders of the religious revival now taking place. The Separates considered themselves, not the colony’s Established Church, to be the true church of God, and the church modeled itself after early Biblical churches of which women occupied a significant part.

Unfortunately, there is very little evidence of how women defended their right to speak publicly in the church. Without their own letters or memoirs, historians must rely on the accounts of ministers and observers, who often ridiculed women as excessive enthusiasts. It is possible though, that a few women may have followed the example of Separate Baptist minister, Ebenezer Frothingham, who scrutinized the Bible for every mention of women speaking or prophesying in his apologetic work, *Articles of Faith and Practice*. Frothingham compared Paul’s instruction to keep silence with other passages that discussed female prophetesses and evangelists. For example, Frothingham examined a passage from Luke that described a woman who “lifted up her voice” during one of the speeches of Jesus. Jesus did not castigate the woman for crying out, but instead replied “blessed are they which hear the Word of God and keep it.”

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58 Ibid., 49.
59 Ibid.
Frothingham interpreted this passage, though brief, as an irrefutable defense of women’s right to speak in the church. Frothingham responded, “Doth Christ, who is the great head of the church, say, women, be silent, and not disturb the public worship of God, by speaking with such a loud voice, whilst I am a preaching; Was this Christ’s reply to the woman? Surely, No! but the contrary.” 60 Since female exhorters were evangelicals who accepted a literal translation of the Bible, they surely would have found encouragement in stories of female involvement in the public sphere, such as those addressed by Frothingham.

Based on available evidence, however, Catherine Brekus supposes in Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, that most eighteenth-century female evangelists argued that they could publicly take part in religion despite their sex, not because of it. 61 This interesting assertion is supported by the writings of a number of colonial women, who describe a sort of out-of-body experience upon their interaction with the spirit of Christ. Sarah Edwards makes multiple allusions to such an experience in her narrative. When reflecting on a sermon of a Mr. Williams, Edwards wrote “my soul seemed to be gone out of me to God and Christ in heaven, and to have very little relation to my body. God and Christ were so present to me, and so near me, that I seemed removed from myself.” She also records that during a worship service she was so moved that she became “entirely swallowed up in God,” and “seemed to be drawn upwards, soul and body, from the earth towards heaven.” 62 Catharine Hummer, a young Pennsylvania woman, had an experience similar to Edwards and claimed to have been “transferred in spirit out of my visible body into heavenly principalities, just as if it had happened bodily.” 63

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60 Ebenezer Frothingham, Articles of Faith and Practice, quoted in Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 49-50.
61 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 52.
Implicit in these texts is Brekus’ assertion that evangelical women often sought to shed their gender through their religious experiences. By emphasizing that their religious connection with Christ took place outside of the body, these women were, in effect, denying their femininity in order to provide some amount of validity to their claims. Ironically, the very actions that women thought nullified their gender reinforced it in the eyes of their audience. Gender theorist R.W. Connell explains that, “In relation to the distinction of male from female bodies, social practices sometimes exaggerate [and] sometimes deny” these differences. When publicly displaying their religious affections colonial women were, in a sense, both denying and exaggerating their gender. While women thought their physical expressions of their spiritual connection with God obliterated their gender, ministers and bystanders believed such outbursts demonstrated their femininity. These women viewed their sex as a hurdle to fully experiencing the presence of Christ, and also as an impediment to publicly expressing their experiences without reproach. Paradoxically, by claiming a loss of self during worship services women felt they were giving greater legitimacy to their religious voice.

Rather than likening themselves to Biblical women, women who described a religious out-of-body experience implied they had transcended the limitations of their gender. Whatever Paul’s meaning in Galatians 3:28—“There is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus”—female evangelicals interpreted his words in light of their own cultural assumptions. Most likely influenced by colonial images of female inferiority, evangelical women believed that before they could preach, they had to become more pure and virtuous, and therefore less “feminine.” Women purported that during their religious experiences they were “neither male nor female,” but a believer in the body of Christ. As Brekus asserts, these women never articulated their understanding in sexual difference between male and female because they took

64 Connell, *Gender*, 10.
it for granted; they did not need to explain these differences because they assumed other people in their culture shared their perspectives. It is clear that female exhorters saw their femininity as a curse rather than a blessing, and they “longed to obliterate their sex in union with the divine.”

*Gender Relations Following the Awakening: The Southern Tradition Continues*

Despite their defense of female evangelism, the Separates never suggested that women were the equals of men. While the Separate Baptists should be recognized for their allowance, even encouragement of female involvement in the public sphere, past historians have tended to overemphasize the egalitarian nature of evangelical religion, particularly in regard to women’s participation. Perhaps the most celebrated work on eighteenth-century Virginia is *The Transformation of Virginia*, in which author Rhys Isaac attributes the extraordinary social and political change occurring in the colony to the challenge of evangelical religion. Isaac polarizes the secular worldview of the upper classes with that of the evangelicals when he noted that the “vivid culture of the gentry with their love of magnificent display,” had to co-exist with “the austere culture of the evangelicals, with their burden of guilt.” While Isaac’s work is still considered a significant contribution to the political scholarship of the colony, Baptist evangelicalism did not hold the same liberating potential for women and blacks as it did for white men. By overlooking the experiences of female and black congregants in the Baptist church, historians could more easily conclude that evangelical religion produced a “counterculture” in the gentry’s colonial Virginia. By doing so, however, one also overlooks that white men continued to adhere to the colony’s established social hierarchies, despite the challenge presented by the egalitarian nature of evangelical religion.

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The extent to which women were allowed participation within the Baptist church was never clear-cut, and was discussed in Virginia’s churches until the end of the eighteenth century. Following the Revolution, the rise in female membership and the increased lay activity of women both in and outside the church contributed to the perception of male members that the roles of female members had to be clearly expressed and enforced. In 1784, the Ketocton Association received an inquiry from a member church regarding the role of women in the church. The church questioned “whether the female members possess equal power with the males, in the government of the church or not, and if not what their power is.” The Association answered that, “according to the tenure of God’s word and the superiority nature has endowed the males with,” women “have not equal power” in the church.68 Although Virginia women possessed greater religious authority following the Great Awakening than did their early eighteenth-century counterparts, the church as well as temporal society continued to adhere to Scripture’s purported message of inequality between the sexes. Baptist churches continued to debate the role of female members at the local level, illustrating that churches differed in their interpretation of Scripture according to locality and the size of female membership in the church.

Harassed by both the Anglican establishment and their fellow Baptists, the Separates eventually renounced their support for female exhorting. The revivals in the South subsided during the American Revolution, and in 1787, the Separates merged with the Regular Baptists following the creation of the new republic. In doing so the Separates forsook the egalitarian nature of their doctrine in favor of greater respectability and acceptance. The church not only repealed the positions of deaconesses and eldresses but also forbade women to exhort or preach in public, consolidating the authority of the church in male members alone.69 As the church

68 Ibid., 155.
69 Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 66.
gained more converts it became more institutionalized and professional, hiring educated, literate ministers and attracting converts from the upper echelons of Virginia society. Baptist historian Robert Semple commented that their ministers had become “much more correct in their manner of preaching. A great many odd tones, disgusting whoops and awkward gestures were disused. In their manner, also, they had more of sound sense and strong reasoning. Their zeal was less mixed with enthusiasm, and their piety became more rational.” Forsaking the aspects of their religious doctrine that had initiated their popularity decades earlier, the Separates rescinded the liberties granted to women within the church that they had originally valued, fundamentally gaining a larger number of male converts in the process.

The outcome of the Great Awakening in the colonies was not political or social equality as initially predicted. While the Separate Baptist church gave women more religious authority than other denominations, by no means did they consider men and women equal in regard to intellectual ability, and had no intention of reversing the patriarchal order of colonial society. American religious historian Jon Butler holds that while the revivals did upset the “familiar patterns of worship and social behavior” in the colonies, these results vanished as the congregations they produced “blended into the traditional social system.” The revivalism of the eighteenth century, then, ended without shattering the established social order of the colonies.

While the Separates allowed women to exhort, the church still expected women to submit to the authority of their fathers and husbands as advocated by Scripture. While the evangelical rhetoric of the Great Awakening encouraged the increased participation of women within the church, most denominations still valued and supported the domestic role of women. Women’s inclusion

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in public life was grounded, as firmly as their place in the domestic sphere, in patriarchal values and practices.\textsuperscript{72}

As illustrated by the writings of colonial ministers, moralists, and women themselves, female identities were constructed in colonial society by religious discourse and practice. The gendered language utilized by revivalist ministers and their critics continued to enforce the inferiority of women intellectually, spiritually, and physically to men. By implying that only “weak” and “silly” women were moved to physically express their religious convictions, colonial men demonstrated that the Great Awakening was not a religiously-freeing event for all; indeed, the religious authority granted to women during the revivals was recanted entirely following America’s War for Independence. The ability of women to exhort, pray publicly, and vocally express their religious convictions in the Separate Baptist denomination was always accompanied by ambivalence over what the expansive role of women meant in the church. While their responses to the public role of women varied, all ministers, including the Separate Baptists, continued to value and support the domestic role of women throughout the revivals. In doing so, Separate Baptist ministers who supported female congregants in their public role in the church illustrated that they saw little contradiction between women’s increased religious activities and their subordination to men in most other aspects of colonial society. Although the Separates should be recognized for their encouragement of female involvement in the church, evangelical religion ultimately did not hold for women the same liberating effects as it did for men. While the Separates interpreted Scripture as allowing women to participate publicly in religion, they never inferred that the Bible supported equality, spiritual and otherwise, for both men and women.

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