THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA:
OPPRESSION OR SELF-DEFINITION?

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The subject of my paper is to be Ann Hasseltine Judson, who lived from 1789 to 1826, and who was among the first handful of persons to leave America on foreign mission in 1811. I would like to examine the religious impulses which led to such an extraordinary action, and to the widespread fame and adoration which she inspired in her own day. In placing her within her wider social context, I would like to show that preoccupations and considerations similar to hers motivated many other women to participate in an ever-broadening spectrum of social activity. Although the antebellum era in American history is usually thought of as encompassing the period between the 1820s and the beginning of the Civil War in 1860, I have chosen to discuss in relation to it an individual whose formative years occurred before that time. There are two main reasons for this choice.

Firstly, the configuration of influences which informed the development of her thought foreshadowed directly the pattern evident in the impulse to activity which affected so many women who came later.

Secondly, the conclusions many commentators have drawn concerning women’s place and activity within the period are belied both by the breadth and diversity of her activities, occurring as they did so early in the century, and the evidence of her own innovative style. Ann Hasseltine Judson stood as an active, self-motivated woman taking part in a range of important social activities. Yet she, and women like her, have tended to be either ignored or misunderstood even by scholars specialising in women’s history.

Before I proceed to discuss her life and work, I feel that some explanation of why women such as Ann Hasseltine have been so neglected is in order. Hence, first of all, I will examine briefly the rise in interest in the history of women during the past two decades and the perspectives which scholars have adopted. This will reveal certain in-built theoretical biases which make the misinterpretation of the significance of such women inevitable in many analyses. I will then move on to consider the nature of the primary source materials which have been available to historians, and show how their use has inadvertently contributed to interpretations which obscure the experience of a Hasseltine. Finally, I will consider Hasseltine’s life and work in order to illustrate the problems I will have identified. I hope as a result to offer a reinterpretation of the role of religious conviction in the experience and perceptions of many women during the first half of the nineteenth century.

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1 This paper elaborates on work undertaken for my PhD thesis (especially Chapters 1, 2 and 3 - “Women’s Sphere” and Religious Activity in America, 1800-1860: Dynamic Negotiation of Reality and Meaning in a Time of Cultural Distortion,” University of Manchester, 1992). Footnotes and references were not included at the time as the paper was not published. Full references appear in the relevant sections of the thesis, as does a comprehensive bibliography. A short Select Bibliography has been added at the end of this paper for those who would like to explore the issues further. (AMN March 2015)
Section 1

The feminist movement emerged in its most recent manifestation in America in the late 1960s. Historians influenced by it began to realise that women were singularly missing from the historical record, save a few token representatives - for the most part queens, courtesans, or wives of so-called important men. Sheila Rowbotham chose to call her 1973 book Hidden from History, a title which admirably encapsulated the problem. Initially, feminist scholars sought to put women back into the historical record by experimenting with new perspectives and redeploying techniques of analysis to uncover female experiences and contributions. At the same time, they hoped to use this work to discern some pattern of social evolution which would explain how their own state of perceived oppression had come about. The initial thrust and tone of much early work was picked up from the ideas of thinkers such as Frenchwoman Simone de Beauvoir, who had previously coined the term 'second sex' to describe women in western society (1949). Betty Friedan, in her epoch-making Feminine Mystique (1963), had identified a conspiracy to encage women in what she saw as domestic prisons, remote from meaningful social participation and the loci of power which society so valued. When considering the attitudes to the influence of religion on women's lives which were reflected in this early work, it is useful to remember that some of the American feminists had undergone a consciousness-raising process in radical movements associated with the civil rights struggle. The natural theoretical framework to which they turned in analysing their own position was that of Marxian class struggle. They tended to apply this model to their historical studies also, and hence, to them, all societies appeared to divide into two sections: 'oppressor' and 'oppressed'. For better or worse, men were the oppressors and women their victims. They were predisposed to dismiss religion as yet another patriarchal ploy in securing women's subordination.

This identification of religion as a negative influence appeared in the work of feminists from liberal backgrounds also. They, too, had been seeking tools in an effort to analyse the place and role of religion in women's experience, and they tended to employ this same Marxian perspective in this regard, if not in other areas of historical analysis. When looking at Christian societies, scholars from liberal and radical backgrounds alike investigated biblical texts and exegeses which patently promulgated and enforced female subordination. They highlighted the fact that historically, women had been - like themselves - relegated to the 'domestic sphere' and areas of activity associated with it, all of which were of little status and gained little respect within society. Most damningly, they pointed to a patriarchal male God who sought utter submission in his acolytes: the ultimate male authority figure, demanding complete obedience and obeisance, much as husbands seemed to do of their wives - and all with biblical underpinnings. Looking at the nineteenth century, commentators such as Barbara Welter in the late 1960s identified a 'Cult of True Womanhood'. She postulated that rigid socio-religious expectations had existed which channelled women into roles as pious, pure, submissive servants of husband and family within a narrow domestic sphere, barred from meaningful economic roles and education. Perceived as being stifled in much the same way as Friedan was to be in the 1950s, some of these women were seen to have attempted to break out of their 'bonds' and assert their 'rights'. Much early scholarly effort went into uncovering the heroic struggles of feminists and 'public women' who broke down the barriers preventing them from equal participation in the 'public sphere', and, if they were pushed aside, how they managed to compensate themselves.

This emphasis on the importance of 'public' representation and activity in historical studies is one issue which I will discuss further in this paper. Of course, from our late twentieth-century standpoint, lack of meaningful participation in politics, workplace, social institutions, and myriad other activities we associate with the 'public sphere' would indeed constitute gross deprivation and
lack of equality. But what exactly did the term 'public sphere' connote in antebellum society? Would we be projecting our own concerns in a less-than-critical way upon a different social reality if we assumed that lack of public profile and voice meant the same thing then as now?

More recent work by scholars such as Mary P. Ryan and Nancy F. Cott would suggest that the neat division between 'public' and 'private' which some historians have assumed and based their conclusions upon did not exist. In addition, they identify in the so-called 'domestic sphere' certain kinds of power, seeing antebellum women themselves as persons who held a deeply-rooted sense of self-identity immersed within the domestic arena. Both scholars acknowledge the centrality of religion to women's lives and sense of self, and argue that, through its manipulation, some women did succeed in transcending their so-called 'bonds' and domestic sphere to engineer wider social participation for themselves and others. Whilst being a distinct advance on earlier analyses, these works still rely on the notion of a dichotomy between 'public' and 'private', however hazy and difficult to pin down it might be. Only recently has a call been made to recast approaches to women's history to eliminate this dichotomy, since the more it is scrutinised, the less functional it seems to be. Linda Kerber has pointed out that a politics of 'separate spheres' within historical analysis fails to investigate how the sexes and aspects of society are related: how men and women participate to reproduce institutional forms. As she concludes, "To continue to use the language of separate spheres is to deny the reciprocity between gender and society, and to impose a static model on dynamic relationships." Indeed, discussing dualities perpetuates the need to find either victim or oppressor, passive or active entity, significant participant in social dynamics or trivialised, marginalised on-looker relegated to the side-lines. In its present form, it also presupposes that what we like to define as the 'public sphere' has always been valued above the domestic, and that not being a participant in it of necessity represents subordinate, deprived status. These constructs do not allow women to be seen and acknowledged as instigators of social dynamics and change. Women can too often be perceived as passive, accepting the irksome roles and mores foisted upon them by predominantly male 'others'. Women would never seem to be 'powerful' because of their position in a narrow 'sphere' we do not associate with social importance. The intrinsic problems with such an approach will become obvious when I discuss the life and career of Ann Hasseltine Judson.

Section 2

I would now like to move on to discuss briefly the resources which were available to the historians who first came to research women's past experience. It would be unjust to assert that only preconceived notions led to a concentration on a dialectic of 'separate spheres' and 'female subordination' in historical analyses. In fact, part of the problem has been the types of sources which have been used.

In the early years, scholars struggled to find historical material relevant to the study of women's lives. Women's manuscripts did not generally feature in archive indexes, and very often they were left uncatalogued in collections of papers orientated around the men in their families. Many such papers had been thoughtlessly destroyed or were still stashed away in attics along with domestic ephemera, waiting to be unearthed. Women's published writings had too often been undervalued as 'pot-boilers' and 'of no literary merit'. Largely, they did not feature in any literary canon or have representation in scholarly collections, and it was by no means easy to find and evaluate the contributions women had made to fiction and non-fiction alike. It was difficult to accumulate satisfactory materials, even relating to the articulate, literate classes which might have been expected to leave such traces, let alone the legions of uneducated, illiterate of semi-literate women whose voices had been silenced by their absence from the written record. Materials which
were of most easy access tended to be published works by men talking about women. For the nineteenth century, many pamphlets, articles and books of this type were concerned with what in male eyes the ideal woman ought to be, and the authors tended to be clergy or physicians. A consideration of these materials unearthed what seemed to be a massive propaganda effort to inculcate in both women and men a view that women were weak, submissive creatures, too pure to set foot out of their narrow domestic arena, and too pious to withstand the rigours of economic and political life. Because much of the literature was written by clergy, and the centres of debate were around biblical texts and exegeses, it is not surprising that American religion was deemed remarkably patriarchal and singularly stifling to women's impulses and legitimate needs.

However, as work in unearthing alternative sources proceeded, a much more complex picture emerged. When women's own private writings were considered, and a more subtle impression of their activities was pieced together, it became clear that many women were also talking in terms of their own predisposition to piety and purity. They seemed to have a self-perception which honoured their religious commitment and philanthropic work above what they saw as the male worlds of politics and economics. Furthermore, women did seem to have certain forms of influence. For example, they built welfare and reform systems from the inconspicuous beginnings of prayer meetings and maternal associations. The poor and orphaned were provided for by female charitable associations, whilst many women agitated against slavery in their female antislavery societies. They also brought to public awareness the workings of the sexual double standard, whereby legions of what they called 'fallen women' were sacrificed to male lusts because lucrative avenues of work were closed to them.

For the historian the two images of women which had been constructed did not add up. Were women 'oppressed' by a religion designed by men and foisted upon them by men? Were some women suffering from a 'false-consciousness' which led them blindly to follow religion when it was really against their wider, long-term interests? Or did women gain strength from the female world they inhabited? Moving in the domestic arena at home among women and in churches whose congregations were dominated by women, did they construct their own sense of self, a self-definition which led them to constructive action and pride in their own, particular abilities? The rhetoric of separate spheres women themselves used seemed to echo that with which the male clergy filled their prescriptive literature. How could these two perspectives coincide when it seemed obvious to historians that social prescription had been so 'repressive'?

The root of the problem was, I believe, in the type of materials the scholars had initially been able to use. The books and pamphlets written by clergy were concerned with prescription, but they had been mistaken for descriptions of social reality. The vociferousness of their tone reflected the widespread uncertainty which was felt at this time of massive social change within America. The frontier was fast moving westward, and waves of economic boom and bust racked the country, which propelled families upwards and downwards in wealth and status with astonishing speed. In the older cities and new industrial settlements, rural, agrarian society was metamorphosing to produce new types of social order unfamiliar to the clergy and settled elites whose opinions the literature expressed. The writers were predominantly of the Old School Presbyterian or Congregational denominations which had only comparatively recently become disestablished. They were faced with the explosion of the much more lay-orientated Baptist and Methodist denominations, both in the larger eastern cities, and the frontier settlements in the West.

In this time of massive uncertainty and cultural discontinuity, such clergy were attempting to create mental bridges with the past, symbols of continuity which would serve to halt the disturbing atomisation of society they appeared to be witnessing. Images of the ideal woman and comforting domestic hearth carried a psychological function of reassurance. The significant point to remember is, however, that the materials the clergy produced were only one part of an ongoing debate about
what future reality was to be. Historians met such materials in relatively large quantities, and it is understandable that they mistook social prescription for social reality, given the comparative lack of materials they could use which reflected other parts of the discourse, especially those originated by women. Fortunately for historians, alternative sources have become and are becoming much more readily available. As women’s history grows and deepens as a discipline, scholars are considering and uncovering aspects of women’s lives that could not have been foreseen some twenty years ago. Due to the study of this material, a reappraisal of the efficacy of adhering to the dialectic of ‘separate spheres’ in our analyses can be undertaken. Furthermore, historians are now able to examine in a much more informed and subtle way the relevance of religious conviction to women’s lives and attitudes.

It is here that I would like to proceed to my discussion of the life and experience of Ann Hasseltine Judson. But first let me recap some of the points that I have made and hope to illustrate:

1. I have touched upon the ubiquitousness of preoccupations with a dichotomy between ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres within historical analyses. I hope to show that this construct is of little help when discussing social reality in the antebellum period by discussing it in relation to Hasseltine’s own world, and hence, to the worlds of many other women who followed her.

2. I have raised the issue of whether religious affiliation was ‘oppressive’ to women in the era, or a means of ‘self-definition’. I hope to indicate that the consensus which judges it on balance to have been a negative influence foisted upon women by others either misinterprets or leaves unconsidered crucial functions of the religious conversion experience itself in activating and motivating women to social participation. Furthermore, it fails to perceive that women’s religious convictions caused them to be at the forefront of contemporary social action and innovation.

3. I wish to draw attention to the fact that, in order to appreciate the full extent of female innovation and social participation in the antebellum era, it is necessary to take new perspectives on historical social reality. Our own twentieth-century preoccupations with formal institutions and formal avenues of influence will only serve to obscure and undervalue the actual experience and significance of the lives and work of many women living in nineteenth-century America who did not seek to participate in the formal arena.

**Section 3**

And now to turn to Ann Hasseltine Judson herself.

When she has been remembered at all, Hasseltine has been regarded as an ambiguous figure. Though she moved in what historians have dubbed the ‘male’ worlds of mission and publishing, she was a highly vocal advocate of woman’s separate, though equal, role in society. She believed, as did other such ‘public’ religious women, that what she thought of as the inherent ‘natures’ of men and women differed, but that together they constituted a whole humanity. In her own life, however, she showed that this distinct separation was in fact extremely blurred. To examine how she lived and constructed her reality is to illuminate some of the central issues already alluded to in this paper.
Hasseltine’s papers appear in a printed memoir published after her death in 1826, and in a long series of letters she wrote from Burma to her friends and family at home in Massachusetts over the period 1812 to 1826 whilst she was in the Far East on mission with her husband. These letters remain since they were finally printed in the *American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer*, where they were used to keep supporters of mission informed of what the missionaries found and experienced in these distant, incomprehensible non-Christian lands. Her biographer James D. Knowles was eager to assess the early life of his subject, since the purpose of his book was not only to commemorate her achievements, but also to show to other young people that they, too, could be as 'useful' and pious as Hasseltine. The terms in which he described and praised her in his introduction are extremely interesting in the context of the prescriptive literature concerning women written at about the same time. Rather than confirming the need for utter submission, weakness and stultifying piety that Barbara Welter identified as a Cult of True Womanhood, Knowles praised Hasseltine’s "ardent feelings," sense of enterprise, and love of reading and knowledge. As he wrote,

Mrs. Judson’s mind was of a superior order. It was distinguished by strength, activity and clearness… no one can review her life, and read what she has written and published, without feeling that her mind possessed unusual vigor and cultivation.

How strange that a woman was thus praised for precisely the ‘masculine’ attributes for which Welter would assert she should have been castigated! This *Memoir* very soon became a popular best-seller in the burgeoning hagiographic literature of the time, and the effect of such praise would have touched the lives of all the pious young women and men who read it. Ann Hasseltine Judson became a by-word in American evangelical circles for what the ideal, active religious woman should be, and numerous later female missionaries noted the reading of this work as a catalyst in their own impulse to join the mission cause.

Hasseltine grew up at a propitious time. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, she was able at twelve to begin study at Bradford Academy in Massachusetts. This was one of the first institutions to afford formal education to girls and her natural talents can only have been enhanced by the experience. In addition, it allowed her to move within a larger peer group of female fellow-students from an assortment of backgrounds. This was another new type of experience, since most girls had tended to be educated at home, if at all, at this higher level, and mixed only with their families or near neighbours. Furthermore, the early years of the century saw the breaking forth of a series of religious revivals that were to change the face of religion in America. Bradford and its Academy became part of this influence, and Ann had serious religious reflections during the years 1806-7. The import of her eventual conversion, set as it was amid this larger peer group of young women, cannot be overemphasised, since it was this which catapulted the intelligent, fun-loving girl into the role of serious, earnest missionary. Precisely how this mechanism occurred and the way it galvanised her mind and abilities is of immense significance when considering the origins and impulses behind women’s activities generally. It goes some of the way to shedding light upon whether religious women were dupes or thoughtful individuals forming their own considered opinions upon religious matters.

During 1806 Ann spent a whole month wrestling with herself over the state of her soul. In her own words, she experienced feelings of "melancholy" and "dejection" at the prospect of her own perceived sinfulness and the likelihood of "perishing." She confided in her aunt, who was also in this state of conviction, and "cried to God for help." God did not answer. Far from meekly accepting her fate and ceasing to think about her religious life, she had an intense spiritual battle, as did many other persons in these circumstances. As she later described it,
I thought it unjust in him [God], not to notice my prayers and my repentance. I could not endure the thought, that he was a sovereign God, and had a right to call one and leave another to perish. So far from being merciful in calling some, I thought it cruel in him to send any of his creatures to hell for their disobedience. But my chief distress was occasioned by a view of his perfect purity and holiness. My heart was filled with aversion and hatred towards a holy God…. In this state, I longed for annihilation.

Like so many other women - and men also - she was unable to come to terms with this seemingly alien, authoritarian Being who arbitrarily condemned his helpless creatures to oblivion at his own whim. Being driven to a desire for annihilation showed the extremity of her distress. In the inexplicable, indescribable way of so much Christian spiritual experience, however, she gradually began to contemplate the figure of Christ in the Christian schema of salvation. She came to recognise him as the saviour she was searching for, and once having accepted this, her view of God changed. Now she saw him as benevolent in giving Christ as a means of salvation. Now he was so holy and good that she herself, as a "polluted creature," could only marvel that he had stooped to touch such a sinner as she. Commentators such as Barbara L. Epstein have concluded from such expressions of utter ignominy that antebellum women had a distinct lack of self-esteem. They conclude that such abasement was possible for them only because social conditioning demanded it on a daily basis in relation to the males in their families. I do not believe that this need be the only interpretation. It may be that in their intense gratitude to God for having plucked them from so intense a state of despair, their sense of obligation, as well as love, caused them to wonder why God would choose to help them as opposed to others. Far from intensifying a sense of dependency, such an experience could lead to a distinct independence in spiritual terms as manifested in everyday life, since now the converts could perceive themselves as on the side of God, in partnership with him, and released from their burdens of sin. We will never know why the vision of Christ replaced Ann Hasseltine's sense of despair. Such things cannot be scientifically analysed. What we can do, however, is acknowledge her serious commitment to her new-found self and faith, and, along with her, accept that the God who was of so much importance to her seemed to have taken direction of her life.

The conversion experience galvanised her into an outward, world-encompassing mind-set, rather than the introverted soul-searching her inner struggle had necessitated. Overjoyed and able to love God for his moral perfections, she was moved to note, "I longed to have all intelligent creatures love him." This sentiment is of the utmost significance when we consider the history of women at this time. Countless young converts felt the same. Now Ann's letters to friends and visits to acquaintances were intended to call them to religion and God. In correspondence with her friend Miss L.K. in 1807, she revealed an extremely important psychological aspect of religious conviction to the individual:

The more grace Christians have, the more clearly they see the contrast between holiness and sin; and while it leads them to hunger, thirst and strive for the one, it leads them to loathe, abhor, and mourn for the other.…. As they are convinced daily of the dreadful nature of sin, so they will feel more anxious to save sinners from the consequences of it.

Any convert was impelled to speak and pursue social action to extend to his or her unconverted peers the benefits of this salvation he or she was so grateful to have received. By May 1807, Ann was confiding to her journal,
Have taken charge of a few scholars. Ever since I have had a comfortable hope in Christ, I have desired to devote myself to him, in such a way as to be useful to my fellow creatures.

Teaching became a bounden duty, not necessarily, as some might suggest, because Ann desired an extension to a restricted 'domestic sphere', or because men pushed her into a female ghetto of employment. In 1807, teaching was largely a male activity, and female teachers were as yet untired quantity. At around the same time, Isabella Graham was warning young women who had spontaneously volunteered themselves to her Society for the Relief of Poor Widows and Small Children as teachers not to be discouraged by adverse reaction:

My dear young Ladies, the sacrifice you have made to virtue, shall most assuredly meet its reward: but, you will experience much painful banter…

You have already embarked on this design; there is no remaining neuter now; your names and undertaking are in every mouth; you must press forward, and justify your cause; and justified it shall be, if you persevere…

The benevolence you contemplate, is as superior to that already in circulation, as the interest of the soul is to that of the body; and it is your own: the very scheme originated in a young mind in this company.

These young women were innovators. In their galvanised state as active Christians among a female peer group of similarly activated women, they looked outwards to discover what they termed "spheres of usefulness," areas where they could bring others to God. In 1807, such spontaneous creativity manifested in this seemingly 'public' way was unexpected of women. Many clergy were suspicious, and, according to Graham, many men met the efforts with "painful banter." But surely this is not the most significant aspect to note. Graham presented her young friends as heroines who were in the vanguard of social usefulness and change: they were notorious, and their names public property. The honour and word of women was at stake, and they had to persevere to show that their word and actions counted. Graham was proud of their benevolent, virtuous intent and, most important to her, the scheme had originated with one of the young women themselves.

Teaching has often been viewed as work growing out of the domestic role of nurturance, and hence as something which has always been perceived as natural for women to do. It is forgotten that it was an area which women had to pioneer. Eighteenth-century prescription viewed the role of instructor as male, and the spiritual fate of children to be the concern of clergy and fathers, who were believed to have the impartiality and abilities to inculcate religious doctrines into 'depraved' young minds. In taking upon themselves the role of instructor and teacher, Hasseltine and Graham's circle were indeed innovators. This was perhaps the first generation of young women to be well educated, and it is significant that, rather than choosing to teach as a way of aggrandising their own status, they felt impelled to do it to spread what they saw as the benefits of religion to others. The evangelicals tended to believe that all who did not know God would be condemned to eternal damnation, and so this moral intensity to work with the young, the poor, and the ignorant to give them the opportunity to hear the 'Truth' was a distinctly religious impulse. This was an active Christianity, and, in 1807, the endeavour constituted the beginnings of the feminisation of the teaching profession - a feminisation in which women themselves fervently believed and which they sought to forward. Thousands of young women were to echo the words of Ann Hasseltine, who said,

I was enabled to open the school with prayer. Though the cross was very great, I felt constrained, by a sense of duty, to take it up…. O may I have
the grace to be faithful in instructing these little immortals, in such a way as shall be pleasing to my heavenly Father.

Evangelical zeal also caused young women to take over specific religious instruction of the young by opening Sabbath schools. Books and pamphlets used in these schools were very often written by women. A profound shift was occurring. Formal catechising and religious instruction had been expected to be the province of clergy and fathers, but now it came to be much more informal and undertaken by women in their homes or in church and school, depending on how settled and developed their communities were. Ann Hasseltine’s own vision extended even further: it came to encompass the world. In a prayer she recorded in 1809, the development of her thought was clear. She asked God to help "myself, my friends, the church at large, the heathen world, the African slave." These circles of religious concern were ever-widening, and, far from confirming the thesis that women were mentally and physically confined to a narrow, private, domestic sphere, it indicates that, at least in their imaginations and intentions, they ranged far and wide. Hasseltine was one of the first persons to be exercised about the fate of what she termed "heathen lands," and her interest was emerging at the same time as that amongst male theology students in newly-established evangelically-orientated colleges such as Williams College and Andover (and later, Lane Seminary and Oberlin College). Both she and they were able to read about the efforts of English missionaries, especially in India, and she recalled devouring the recorded life of David Brainerd, whilst her future husband Adoniram Judson was inspired by Dr. Buchanan’s *Star in the East*. Judson was one of the group of young men who suggested and pioneered American foreign missions. It is clear that the sentiment to serve in 'heathen lands' was growing amongst men and women, who were, once again, at the vanguard of innovation. Ann had attended the Congregational meeting of the Massachusetts Association in Bradford in June 1810 when Judson and his friends put the mission proposition to the meeting. She was evidently fired with enthusiasm, for her close friend Harriet Atwood (soon to become, as Harriet Newell, the first American martyr to the mission cause) recorded in her journal for that October that Ann’s resolve to become involved in mission sparked off her own interest. Adoniram Judson proposed marriage to Hasseltine with the intention of taking her with him to the Far East, and it is here that her real grit and religious conviction become obvious. Judson’s letter of proposal to her father was astonished in its forthright statement of the future she might face:

I have now to ask, whether you can consent to part with your daughter early next spring, to see her no more in this world, whether you can consent to her departure for a heathen land, and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of a missionary life; whether you can consent to her exposure to the dangers of the ocean; to the fatal influence of the southern climate of India; to every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution, and perhaps violent death.

Hardly calculated to inspire joy and happiness in a parent at his daughter's prospects, this did at least show that the prospective missionaries realised the enormity of their intentions. Though they were unaware of the exact dangers or circumstances they might encounter, they did know that in all likelihood they would never return to America or see their families again. As Hasseltine’s biographer noted, for her the decision was indeed complex and difficult:

The general opinion [of people] was decidedly opposed to the measure [of women going on mission]. It was deemed wild and romantic in the extreme, and altogether inconsistent with prudence and delicacy. Miss H. had no example to guide and allure her. She met with no encouragement from the greater part of those persons, to whom she applied for counsel…. She was
forced to decide from her own convictions of duty, and her own sense of fitness and expediency.

Knowles praised her "adventurous spirit" and "decision of character" - again, qualities which are not generally thought to have been desired in women at this time. He indicated the crucial wider consequences of her decision. She became a role-model: "She decided to go, and her determination, without doubt, has had some effect on the minds of other females, who have since followed her example." Hasselline came to be a symbol of the strong, determined, independent Christian woman, who was yet able to be meek and submissive to her God. In pursuing her vision of extending what she believed to be salvation to the millions of "perishing heathen" across the world, she inspired other women to have the same expansive view. Perhaps they did not themselves become foreign missionaries; but it is certain that the thousands upon thousands who taught school, collected money for charity and philanthropy, or travelled West to evangelise their fellow-migrants and the American Indians, shared this outward-looking vision of extending what they saw as the good, Christian society, and ushering in the Millennium.

Although the wives of missionaries are usually discounted as missionaries themselves by commentators because they did not earn an independent wage from the mission boards, it is by no means clear that their duties were less arduous or important than those of their husbands. Often they coincided. Such commentators seem to believe that only if women were hired to travel alone in the way that some male missionaries did, could they be classed as 'equal' members. When the frequent hardships and loneliness that husband and wife teams shared together is remembered, this seems to be an inadequate view. Judson himself clearly thought of the women in his mission in Burma as co-workers and missionaries. In 1821 he mourned "one of the heaviest losses, that our mission could sustain" - the death of "our dear sister Price." When Ann was forced to return to America for medical treatment in 1822, he wrote a letter to the Board of Mission commending her to their care "as one who has faithfully laboured many years in their service." The Judsons both learned Burmese, and, under the guise of being teachers of English, tried to explain their religion in an alien language and environment. In fact, Ann, not Judson, gained most influence in Burma, working to win the favour of the female members of the elite families at a time when Judson himself was ignored by the King and Viceroy. When Judson and other European men were imprisoned during the Anglo-Burmese War in the 1820s, Ann - at severe cost to her own health - worked to ameliorate their circumstances and avert their execution by trying to convince her Burmese contacts to help. Without her, they would not have survived. When Judson was away from their mission centre for months visiting the Burmese court, she proselytised to any Burmese men or women who showed interest, once welcoming and entertaining a large delegation of males from a distant village. She began the uphill task of opening schools for Burmese women with the intention of evangelising the sector of the community which, in true American style, she felt had potentially the most influence - the mothers. These were all key elements in any mission endeavour, and were replicated in every location where missionaries settled. Marrying a missionary came to be one way in which a woman could gain a useful, spiritually satisfying vocation, although the hardships encountered in some mission fields indicate that it was not a decision made lightly or with a view to a life of ease. The self-sacrifice involved must have been immense in many cases, and this alone points to the spiritual and religious nature of the choice, whilst in addition it underlines the independent, strong-willed, adventurous qualities many such women possessed.

In practice, there was no 'private' or 'public sphere' when it came to active mission, however much rhetoric in written reports of missionary lives tried to make it seem as if there was. In what might be called 'domestic life', the Judsons were totally reliant upon each other. Ann motivated Judson in his translation work when his eyesight failed, whilst when their first child was
born in 1815, she noted, "I had no physician or assistant whatever, excepting Mr. Judson." Ann contributed to translation work by learning Siamese and composing catechisms to distribute - much as Judson did in Burmese. Their letters to America were among the first to acquaint the domestic reading public with life in such distant lands, and it is significant that hers, filled as they were with detail of how she perceived the Burmese, their religion, society and domestic arrangements, did much more to form the way American evangelicals viewed the wider world than his or anyone else's. When she returned to America in 1822 for medical treatment, she was hailed by the Mission Board as a true missionary in her own right. She travelled, giving lectures and visiting churches, as well as raising money for female schools in Burma, and awakening wide interest both in herself and in mission amongst all the denominations. She met with officials of the Mission Board and missionary societies to tell them about the many difficulties and few triumphs of the missionary enterprise. Ann Hasseltine Judson had become a respected authority.

It is easy to overlook the fact that this woman had what we would term a 'public' profile, that her life and works did so much to raise the missionary consciousness of generations of women as well as men. She herself would have recoiled at being termed a 'public woman' and would have maintained that doing such 'public' work remained a 'cross' to be undertaken only because God required it of her. Nevertheless, the significance of her example cannot be overestimated. She inspired countless women to religious activity which manifested itself in direct action. Many did become missionary wives, or teachers, or workers in benevolent and reform societies. Others may well have been inspired to evangelise their own children and families by her example. As Anne M. Boylan has pointed out, female evangelical activity was a commitment to an ideal. Women could select the level of activity to suit their own lives. Devotion to family and home, teaching Sabbath school, commitments to any number of female associations, school teaching, or full-time missionary work - all these were stopping points on the same spectrum of activity devoted to establishing what women saw as true religion, and - most significant for us - evangelical womanhood as a viable respected role-choice for nineteenth-century women. By the 1840s and 1850s, prescriptive literature written by male clergy was extolling all these activities as naturally fitted to women. This fact has obscured the true extent of the social changes evangelical women helped to engineer. Each aspect of their commitment and role had been pioneered. Most clergymen - though not all - had not initially encouraged them, but when the efficacy of their efforts was clear in terms of evangelical effectiveness, no minister sought to reject it. Thus, during the antebellum period, a gradual expansion of the work and role of women occurred which came to encompass what we might call 'informal public activity'. Contemporaries would have termed it 'social' - that category which covered virtually the same geographic spaces as the public, but which in discourse was so sharply divided from it. It is the boundary between what they called the 'public' and the 'social' which caused so much controversy; which the clergy sought to maintain to retain social cohesion in a time of social dysfunction. They were certainly not relegating women to uselessness and a narrow domestic sphere. They needed the contributions of women such as Hasseltine, and valued them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to raise again some of the issues I set out to discuss. What I hope this paper has indicated is the extent to which women who have too often been dismissed as 'conservative', 'domestic', and 'inactive' because they did not espouse the much more eye-catching and famous arguments concerning women's rights in the era, were active and were social innovators. I hope that it has been shown that their true role and contribution only becomes 'hidden' when we devalue their religious commitment - a commitment which galvanised them into the activities and mind-set without which the small group of women's rights activists emerging in
the late 1830s and 1840s could never have existed. Considering the life and work of Ann Hasseltine Judson has, I believe, shown that the perspectives on antebellum history I discussed previously are inadequate precisely because they devalue or ignore what we would call 'informal', 'private', or 'domestic' activities and influences. Contrary to the conclusions many such analyses draw, religious conviction was a crucially significant catalyst in its own right in activating women's impulses to social participation and usefulness. Most importantly, those religious convictions gave women a sense of self-esteem and self-identity which manifested itself in a distinct independence and innovation in social terms. Evangelical women throughout the antebellum period who worked to extend what they saw as the good, Christian society far outnumbered those who chose to speak specifically on the 'rights' of women and their legal and political disadvantages. Yet in most studies they appear as problematic anomalies, or persons who failed to awake to what has been perceived by commentators as their own degradation and subordination. I would like to postulate that this has been a facet of the perceptions of commentators themselves. Their agendas have, in some cases perhaps unwittingly, tended to concentrate on finding the roots of feminism, and have mistakenly taken as normative the experiences of the few women who were primarily concerned with women's rights and disabilities. Furthermore, a feminist consciousness has been assumed to be the point to which women should have been progressing, so that attention has been focussed on precursors of public participation and representation as we would recognise them. Those women who did not reach such a consciousness, or who actively opposed women who did, inevitably appear as retrogressive purely because of the mode of analysis and priorities commentators choose to employ. I hope that the case of Ann Hasseltine Judson has encouraged us to see that we need to look at women of the period with different eyes: eyes which will perceive the genuine importance of religious commitment to antebellum women, and its role in allowing them to construct satisfying, worthwhile lives whatever their material circumstances.
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Concerning Ann Hasseltine Judson and the Judson 'missionary project' in particular, see:


- For more detail of the work this paper was based on, see:


- For more information on some of the issues raised, see:


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