



Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America

Ann Braude

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Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America Ann Braude ..". Ann Braude still speaks powerfully to unique issues of women's creativity-spiritual as well as political-in a superb account of the controversial nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement." --Jon Butler

"Radical Spirits is a vitally important book... [that] has... influenced a generation of young scholars." --Marie Griffith

In *Radical Spirits*, Ann Braude contends that the early women's rights movement and Spiritualism went hand in hand. Her book makes a convincing argument for the importance of religion in the study of American women's history.

In this new edition, Braude discusses the impact of the book on the scholarship of the last decade and assesses the place of religion in interpretations of women's history in general and the women's rights movement in particular. A review of current scholarship and suggestions for further reading make it even more useful for contemporary teachers and students.

Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America **Details**

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From Reader Review Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America for online ebook

Sean Hall says

A mostly hidden side of history which explore a sort of collective subconscious of the evolution of human rights from abolitionism to women's rights, voices of strength for the repressed, and the lack of cohesion with nearly any organization - yet still, goals are achieved.

Melanie Brewster says

This was an incredible snapshot of a time in American history when women were at the frontlines of social justice movements in exceptionally nontraditional ways (i.e., trance speaking on issues of feminism and abolition). Probably one of the most important pieces of work on historical sexism out there, and lays important groundwork for understanding the rise of modern "wellness" movements among women.

Nicole says

As I read for my thesis, I become more and more interested in the Spiritualist movement and how it related to the early women's rights movement. This book gave me the rudimentary background I needed on the history of Spiritualism in general and made me realize that there was a huge gap in my knowledge of this topic. I had no idea that Spiritualism arose from the Quakers or the basic individualist tenets behind it, nor that the movement wasn't solely comprised of "dark circles" and spirit manifestations in private homes— that it actually provided a platform for women to deliver public speeches on a large scale for the first time in American history.

To read the rest of this review, visit the Macabre Librarian:
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Kristi says

I really loved this book, beginning with the very first sentence in the "Acknowledgments." Braude has written a fascinating and balanced blend of social, gender, and religious history. She examines the social radicalism on Women's Rights as it intersected with the religious radicalism of the Spiritualist movement and the relationship of both movements to the construction of gender in America. Furthermore, Braude successfully treats Spiritualism as a legitimate religion, with the compassion and unbiased attention of a true historian, allowing her subjects' the validation of their own experience, without the critical censure of the future. Braude dates and located the inception of both movements to Upstate New York in 1848. She makes a compelling argument for the the attraction of Women's Rights to Spiritualists, based in the liberation of women's conventionally domestic spirituality into the public sphere, as it contrasted with the legally limited role of women in american society. Braude finds that spiritualists were particularly concerned with women's

physical and moral rights to her own body.

J.B. Shearman says

Nice book about an almost missing piece of history or at least it goes largely uncovered in general history books. It was very interesting to read about the entire movement and how it laid the foundation for the women's rights movement and its role in the abolition movement. There were some heavy hitters during this time period that bought into the movement that gave it some intellectual credibility. I'd be interested in reading more about the core belief and investigation of the religion along with this book's presentation of the religion and its social impact.

Catherine says

Very good intro to the influence of Spiritualism on early women's rights, abolition and other major social movements of the 19th century. Braude does a fine job of providing a higher level overview of the movement and its influence. This book made me want to read more and in greater detail, which is intended as high praise.

Melanie says

Braude offers to answer the following central question: Given the evidence of significant overlap between people who held Spiritualist beliefs and engaged in Spiritualist practices with people who were active in the woman's rights movement in the nineteenth-century United States, what can we discover about the relationship between the two movements? She also poses two sub-questions specific to the analytical categories of gender, politics, and religion, including: 1) Why did Spiritualism appeal to people troubled by mid-nineteenth century gender roles within the white middle class? and 2) What elements of Spiritualism facilitate the movement's generally sympathetic orientation to woman's rights and other radical political and social reforms?

The central claim of *Radical Spirits* is that Spiritualism's radical individualism lends itself to social change work, and that its belief in the particular suitability of women as passive, sensitive, and pious individuals—all highly gendered qualities—to receive messages from the spirit world gives women unique access to authoritative, highly public roles as mediums and trance speakers that they were otherwise denied. Thus, Spiritualism and the woman's rights movement engage in a "two-way exchange" in which Spiritualism helps normalize the idea of women speaking to public audiences and produces trance speakers who become notable leaders for woman's rights, and in which members of the woman's rights movement are attracted to Spiritualism's political potential and religious non-conformity. Spiritualism's appeal to the succeeding generation of the woman's rights movement declines after 1875 once the initial barriers to women's public speaking have been overcome and as Spiritualism shifts from emphasizing trance mediumship to sensational mediumship, a shift that undermines its initial gender subversiveness, and, in the loss of its general credibility, its political thrust. As Braude puts it, "Letters of appreciation and admiration did not follow the appearance of a woman in a sack nailed to the floor."

Braude's argument is based on the premise that Spiritualism is a widespread and politically influential

nineteenth-century movement worthy of serious attention despite its lack of institutions, hierarchy, doctrine, official leadership, or membership. She draws on primary sources about Spiritualism and the woman's rights movement, including books and periodicals, press accounts, meeting minutes, and diaries and correspondence in order to argue that nineteenth-century "identification of piety with femininity" could actually help expand the opportunities available to women and support activism for political and social reform. In arguing this, Braude is countering Ann Douglas and others who have argued that Spiritualism's "feminization" of culture reinforced highly restricted roles for women and encouraged passive sentimentality.

Braude identifies two significant contributions of her work. Because Braude is writing at the apex of the New Age movement, she suggests that her study of a "comparable" religious expression might help us better understand spiritual experiences outside of religious institutions and how people explain and contextualize them. She also suggests that this study might help us better understand how spirituality motivates people to take social and political action. I would agree that these are significant contributions, and I would add that *Radical Spirits* is also significant in how it highlights the extent to which a focus on institutions and denominational identities has impacted the study of religion in the United States. Braude persuasively demonstrates that Spiritualism had widespread popular participation and contributed to major social and political reform movements, yet it has generally been treated as a curious side-note in the history of American religion.

Darla Peterson says

This will change a true heart if it is read. I see where the feminist movement has take us and where it will end up. If your a new age feminist, you will just be angered , offended, and maddened by the honest truth of this book.

Jennifer says

Extremely interesting history of the "spiritual women" of the early to mid 1800s in the U.S. I expected this to be dry, but it is a great subject presented in a compelling manner. I'd been vaguely interested in the Transcendentalists but had never heard of these female Spiritualists whose claims of "possession" by higher powers allowed them to speak before crowds of hundreds on highly controversial topics of abolition and suffrage.

I wasn't keen on US religious history until this book. It opened new horizons for me, and I'll reread it one day.

Betsy Phillips says

This is a really excellent overview of the role of Spiritualism in America, especially its importance in shaping women's history. Ha, which I guess you could tell by the subtitle. So, let me just say that this book is exactly what it claims to be. Braude strikes a nice balance of being respectful of these women's beliefs while still talking frankly about the individual and societal reasons these manifestations took the forms they did.

Christopher Smith says

Braude argues that Spiritualists constituted the radical wing of the women's rights movement during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Spiritualism was a radically individualistic philosophy, which affirmed every individual's access to spiritual truth and in fact considered women somewhat more spiritually sensitive than men. This special sensitivity of women meant that they had the potential to be a very positive influence on America's male-dominated society. This meant that for spiritualists-- who also supported other radical reform movements such as abolition and temperance-- women's rights became the mother of all reforms. The liberation of women from oppressive traditional roles would be the liberation of women's power to cure other social ills. Although spiritualists did not ultimately set the agenda of the women's rights movement, they did contribute substantial energy, talent, and personnel.

Overall, a very interesting and persuasive book, and an excellent example of a religious movement that had a substantive positive impact on American politics and society.

William says

I loved this book. The origin of the Women's Rights movement in the United States is often depicted in a purely secular way, divorced from the religious and spiritual contexts that participated in its origins and development. Braude's book enlarges the standard academic view to include religion, and she does so by focusing on women in Spiritualism (a movement that started in the mid-1800s, which, among other things, highlighted the ability to communicate with the spirits of deceased loved ones, or any other kind of spirit being, through seances, mediums, and trance speakers). At a time when women were prohibited from speaking in church or public, female trance speakers and mediums were addressing large public gatherings (the rationale being that the women were simply instruments through which the spirits were actually speaking). This accustomed audiences to female speakers and helped pave the way for leaders in the Women's Rights movement to break down barriers and redefine gender roles. Braude's style is very accessible and her commentary on historical events is particularly insightful. I got a little bogged down in the very last chapter, which focused primarily on the political intrigues within the Spiritualist organizations, but otherwise I enjoyed the book very much. Two thumbs up!

Dan Gorman says

Read this first in 2011, returned to it this year for grad school. I got a lot more out of it this time around. Braude is a terrific narrative writer and manages to write a critical, academic history of Spiritualism without ridiculing the beliefs of the characters. Spiritualism gave women political and reform opportunities, but most of all it comforted people, promising an end to death. Mothers could talk to dead children; husbands could reach dead wives. The movement lost its radical edge after the Civil War, as cheaper mediums gave sensational performances instead of ghost-inspired political lectures, the free love movement of Victoria Woodhull discredited Spiritualism, and new religions like Theosophy & Christian Science stole away Spiritualists. In the end, Spiritualism lost its revolutionary fervor, but returned to its original form from the 1840s — a way to talk to the dead (in theory). Many people today retain this interest in communing with the death, without challenging the country's existing social order.

Susie Meister says

Ann Braude describes the birth and development of the Spiritualist movement and its connection to the women's rights movement. Women had long been assumed as having a closer connection to God than men, and many women saw the Spiritualist movement as a way to exploit that in order to gain leadership and a voice. Its beginning coincides with the women's rights movement in 1848 and spread at the same rate. Spiritualism was a response to the mid-century "crisis of faith" (4). They used a connection to science as a way to bolster the movement. They were anti-organization (due to their individualistic bent) and it is difficult to nail down stats of membership as a result, however they were keen on publishing. They were closely connected to Quakers for a time due to the Quaker understanding of the "inner light" found in everybody. Because this movement was often practiced within the home, it elevated the status of domesticity. Many upper class members participated, but the spirit world was not a respecter of class. Despite its connection with African spiritism, the group focused on women's rights not abolition. Because death usually occurred at home in the women's sphere, it was a natural transition for them to communicate with the dead. The movement was ultimately unhinged by its mixed messages about women's strength and weaknesses (physically) and its internal disagreement about creating a formal organization. The ultimate challenge came in the form of Christian Science.

Sonnydee says

I intended to skim this book for research, but I ended up reading it more carefully because damn, this is a wonderfully written and researched book about a period of feminist history I knew nothing about. How is it that some of these amazing women have failed to make it into more mainstream women's histories?

I'm especially obsessed with Achsa Sprag. Everyone knows Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton but there were so many more radical voices for women's rights (and abolition and worker's rights) at the time. Maybe disinterring (pun intended) some of these Spiritualists can provide an antidote for the frustrating conservatism of so many suffragette writings.

I only knocked off a star for some of the annoying redundancy that sometimes creeps into this kind of academic book.
