

# SISTERS AND SAINTS



WOMEN AND AMERICAN RELIGION



Ann Braude

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*Women and American Religion*

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*Frontispiece:* Herminia Villaescusa holds a candle, a missal, a rosary, and white  
flowers in honor of the Virgin for her First Communion in a Mexican Catholic  
church in 1932. In many communities young girls are still dressed like brides  
for their first participation in the sacrament.

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Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

*For my grandmother, Vicci Sperry*

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## “Women Are the Backbone of the Church”

An old saying among members of African-American churches can be applied to most religious groups in the United States: “Women are the backbone of the church.” The saying has a double meaning. Women provide essential support for the church and affirm its moral role, but their work happens in the background and their support is invisible. It is the men who play the leading roles in religious organizations. As a result, most people assume that women have had little importance in U.S. religious history. Few groups had women as leaders before the 1970s, and the largest ones still do not. Men administered the sacraments, wrote the prayer books, preached the sermons, and made the decisions.

Throughout American history, however, women have been the majority of members in almost all religious groups. There could be no lone man in the pulpit without the mass of women who fill the pews. Women raised money for churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques through bake sales, community suppers, and sewing circles. They embroidered altar cloths,

taught Sunday school, prepared festival meals, played the organ, and directed the choir. Perhaps most important, they took their children to their places of worship and educated them in their beliefs. Without such women, there would be no next generation to sustain the faith. And without their material and financial support, there would be no churches, synagogues, or mosques for men to administer. There would be no clergy, no seminaries to train them, no theology to teach them, no denominations to ordain them, and no ceremonies for them to lead unless women found it worth their while to support religious organizations. But no matter how great their contributions, women have usually been asked to take a backseat to male religious leaders.

Why have women been so devoted to religion even though they have been barred from public leadership? Women throughout the centuries have testified that they find strength in religious faith to help them survive extraordinary hardship as well as everyday difficulties. In the past, struggling to hold families together through slavery, immigration, poverty, or personal tragedy, women often felt they received help from God and from religious communities when they could get it nowhere else. As they buried infant children, sometimes one after another, they relied on religious faith for the power to endure what would otherwise be unendurable. And when all went well, the religious significance of baptisms, bar mitzrahs, confirmations, and weddings magnified their joy. Trying to make sense of their lives, women looked to religion as a source of both community and personal identity.

Although religion restricted women's roles in some ways, it expanded them in others. Basing their arguments on religious values, women fought for an enlarged role in society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Women who broke accepted rules about their roles often did so because they believed God wanted them to. "What is impossible for woman when the

love of Jesus fills her soul?” asked a Methodist woman in 1859. The power of spiritual experiences emboldened women to seek social as well as religious emancipation.

Religious beliefs have affected every aspect of women’s and men’s roles in society. Legal codes, educational policies, family structures, and personal relationships have all reflected beliefs about how God wanted society to be ordered. For the first century and a half after the founding of the United States, for example, Americans believed that women did not need to vote because God had placed a husband at the head of the family as a guide and protector. Because of men’s God-given role, their votes represented the interests of their wives and daughters. When women began to fight for the vote, they claimed that they should be able to do so because of the moral qualities God had given them as guardians of the home. Religious arguments have been used on both sides of most debates about women’s rights, duties, and nature. Women’s role in religion has both mirrored and provided the model for women’s role in the rest of society.

Because women have played such a central, but often overlooked, role in American religion, understanding their experience is crucial to an understanding of our country’s religious history. Likewise, if we want to understand the history of American women, we need to examine the religious beliefs and activities that so many have found so meaningful.

# Planting Religious Households

When Margaret Winthrop was pregnant with her fifth child in 1629, her husband, John, left England to lead a party of settlers to a distant and unknown place: North America. Margaret shared her husband's passion for the new religious movement of Puritanism, so-called because its followers hoped to purify the Church of England of any remnants of Catholicism. As Puritans the couple applauded the Protestant Reformation, which condemned the Catholic Church as mired in worldliness and ritualism. Neither priest nor people understood the meaning of the Latin mass, reformers claimed, and monetary contributions to the church had replaced personal piety. Henry VIII brought England into the Protestant Reformation when he rejected the Pope's authority in order to divorce Catherine of Aragon. But Puritans believed the Church of England had not moved far enough from the hierarchy and rituals of the Catholic Church.

Margaret also shared John's dream of establishing a new society based solely on the will of God. But her pregnancy and

that of her daughter-in-law required that they stay behind while their husbands made the risky voyage across the Atlantic. While John Winthrop became the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Margaret bore a baby girl named Anne thousands of miles away.

Margaret and John agreed to think of each other every Monday and Friday from five to six o'clock. Their marriage, they believed, was part of God's order among his creatures. As Protestants, they rejected the Catholic Church's belief that celibacy is the highest spiritual state. Instead, they saw marriage as the most godly state for adults. Their God was a God of order. The world he made to reflect his glory embodied his nature in the orderly relations among its inhabitants. God made the world to serve humankind, but he made humanity to serve him. Family, church, and state, in that order, were the instruments he provided to govern relations among human beings. These institutions served to educate human beings and shape them to the will of God. Margaret Winthrop knew that the purpose of her marriage, and of the affection between herself and her husband, was to establish such a family for the promotion of God's order on earth.

In 1631, Margaret Winthrop joined her husband in Massachusetts, where she resumed the role she had played in the Winthrop household in England. As helpmate to her husband, and, with him, head of a large household of children and servants, she had substantial responsibilities. When her husband was away, she took charge. Even when he was at home, she was responsible for feeding and clothing everyone who lived under their roof. She viewed her household labor, as well as her role as a mother, as part of her religious calling to establish God's will on earth. Even her love for her husband was inextricable from her other duties to God, and she accepted her husband's authority

over her as part of her marriage and part of God's will. "Best love and all due respect . . . which my pen cannot express or my tongue utter, but I will endeavor to show it as well as I can to thee, and to all that love thee," Margaret wrote to John while he was away on business. She signed her letter, as always, "your faythful and obedient wife Margaret Winthrop."

Accepting the biblical story that God created Eve from Adam's rib to be his "helpmate," Puritans believed that women were made ultimately for God but immediately for men. "He for God only, she for God in him," wrote the Puritan poet John Milton. The Christian tradition in their view affirmed the subordination of wives to husbands. "Wives be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church," taught the Apostle Paul, and Margaret Winthrop accepted this idea without question. But John Winthrop also followed Saint Paul's advice: "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church" (Ephesians 5:22–23, 25). He loved his wife ardently, but both took care to remember that their love for each other must always come second to their love for God. "My sweet spouse, let us delight in the love of eache other as the chiefe of all earthly comforts," John wrote to Margaret. He believed that even greater comforts wait beyond this world, where the righteous would enjoy God's glory forever. Their marriage would last only as long as they lived, but the relationship of their souls to God would endure for eternity.

The well-ordered family established by marriage perfectly mirrored the divine plan and allowed for the best possible spiritual environment for its inhabitants. The Puritans placed so much faith in the family as an agent of godly living that they required all members of their settlement to reside in one. Single adults were prohibited by law from living alone. Servants, a category that included skilled artisans as well as household and