

The Grimké Sisters of Charleston, SC: Abolitionist and Feminist Leaders

Amy Thompson McCandless, Dean of the Graduate School and Professor of History, College of Charleston

Abstract

Sarah and Angelina Grimké (1792–1873; 1805–1879) were among the first American reformers to compare the condition of women to the plight of enslaved Africans and to call for an end to exploitation based on race and gender. During the decade of the 1830s they energized the abolitionist movement in the United States and elucidated its connections to the feminist cause. The source of their abolitionism and feminism was one and the same—the Scriptures. Whereas their contemporaries used the Bible to justify the subjugation of women to men and of slaves to their masters, the sisters used its authority to undermine the very foundations of the patriarchy. If God recognized neither gender nor race nor class, why should His children? Paternalism was not an excuse for denying personhood.

The religious fervor that inspired the Grimkés' activism also contributed to their success as abolitionist and feminist leaders. Effective leaders know how to be persuasive, and they do this by using language and illustrations that touch the hearts and minds of their listeners and/or readers. For antebellum Americans—North and South—the definitive authority was the Bible. Sarah and Angelina used Biblically based arguments to justify their defiance of racial and gender conventions and to inspire others to join their crusade. They challenged the chivalric premise that women and non-whites were weak and helpless and needed to be protected by and subsequently obedient to elite white men.

Introduction

The elite white culture of antebellum South Carolina which was the Grimkés' heritage posited a paternalist view of society. The Southern plantation was compared to a family, where a benevolent father cared lovingly for his white and black dependents. As the knightly lords of yore, he expected obedience in return for his protection. Gender and race were seamlessly interwoven in the fabric of Southern society: paternalism was used to justify the subjugation of women and of blacks. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argued in *Within the Plantation Household*, "The distinctive forms of male dominance in the South developed in conjunction with the development of slavery..."¹ Apologists contended that this patriarchal social hierarchy reflected God's natural order. Slaves were enjoined by Scriptures to obey their masters and women to honor and obey their fathers and husbands.² As abolitionist and feminist leaders in the 1830s, the Grimké sisters would challenge this dominant chivalric ideology and its Biblical premises.

¹ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 43.

² One of the earliest religious justifications of slavery came from Richard Furman, who wrote after the Denmark Vesey Insurrection of 1822. Furman's "Exposition of the Views of the Baptists Relative to the Coloured Population of the United States in Communication to the Governor of South Carolina" was published in Charleston in 1823 and

Bearing Testimony

Given their family background and the plantation society into which they were born, the Grimké sisters seemed unlikely challengers to the status quo. Their father, John Faucheraud Grimké, was a wealthy planter and judge; their mother, Mary Smith Grimké, the descendant of prominent planters and politicians. Both were pillars in the Episcopal Church. The daughters were educated, first by tutors on the family plantation, and then in the female academies of Charleston. Such schools, educational historians have contended, reinforced the patriarchal hierarchy of plantation society by rewarding conformity, dependence, and piety and by stressing social and domestic rather than intellectual accomplishments. Biographer Gerda Lerner, describing Sarah Grimké's education "at one of the numerous institutions provided for the daughters of wealthy Charleston," observed that "The most important thing to learn was manners, the proper way for a young lady to comport herself in company. It was a curriculum offering a little of everything and not very much of anything, designed not to tax excessively the gentle female mind."³

Sarah Grimké's earliest education, albeit brief, exposed her to much more than manners, however. Because she was first tutored with her older brother Thomas, she was exposed to "knowledge...considered food too strong for the intellect of a girl"—i.e., subjects like mathematics, natural science, geography, and Latin. Judge Grimké allowed Sarah to attend most of Thomas' lessons and even let her participate in the family debates intended to prepare the boys for the profession of law, but he drew the line when Sarah asked to study Latin; it simply was not appropriate for her sex.⁴ Although John Grimké recognized her intellectual gifts—once commenting that "if Sarah had only been a boy, she would have made the greatest jurist in the country"—his veneration for the traditions of aristocratic culture was too strong to provide a man's education for his daughter.⁵ Thomas was eventually sent to Yale and Sarah to a private academy in Charleston where "Painting, poetry, [and] general reading [not Latin or law] occupied her leisure time."⁶

Sarah's disappointment with her own education is revealed in her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women*. She described women's training as "miserably deficient," designed only to give girls enough "external charms" to catch a husband and consisting "almost exclusively [of] culinary and other manual operations." She compared those men who "would limit a woman's library to a Bible and cookery book" to "the slaveholder, who says that men will be better slaves, if they are not permitted to learn to read."⁷ And Sarah clearly disagreed with the latter. Although chastised by her father for teaching her "little waiting-maid"

reflected the beliefs of most slaveholding families of the times. See: James A. Rogers, *Richard Furman: Life and Legacy* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001), xxxiv.

³ Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Rebels Against Slavery* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 17.

⁴ Catherine H. Birney, *The Grimké Sisters: Sarah and Angelina Grimké: The First American Women Advocates of Abolition and Women's Rights* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1885), 7.

⁵ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters*, 18.

⁶ Birney, *The Grimké Sisters*, 18.

⁷ Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* (Boston: I. Knapp, 1838), 46-49, 62.

to read in violation of state law, she continued her instruction secretly. In her co-biography of the sisters, Gerda Lerner speculates whether Sarah was not already drawing parallels between racial and gender discrimination: “the very books of law cited against her were the books denied her because she was a girl, denied her maid because she was a slave.”⁸

Sarah’s younger sister Angelina wrote little about the substance of her early schooling, although she dated her loathing of slavery from her days at a female academy in Charleston where “‘nearly all the aristocracy’ sent their daughters.”⁹ Here Angelina first learned of the horrors of the Charleston workhouse where blacks were sent to be punished by their masters. The young enslaved boy who worked at her school was constant evidence of its brutality: “his back and legs were scarred by whip-marks...encrusted with blood and scabs.” As she later told an assembly of abolitionists, “As a Southerner I feel that it is my duty to bear testimony against slavery....I know it has horrors that can never be described. I was brought up under its wing: I witnessed for many years its demoralizing influences, and its destructiveness to human happiness.”¹⁰

The sisters’ vociferous reading in the family library compensated for their lack of formal training. In a lecture to the South Carolina Historical Association, historian F. Dudley Jones asserted that Sarah and Angelina’s egalitarianism followed naturally from their reading. They took the statement “all men are born equal” and applied it to their lives’ work. Dudley noted that “Before Sarah was ten she had been initiated into the realms and uses of books. By the time she was sixteen she had rebelled against the narrowness of education for women and somewhat scandalized her father by wishing to become a lawyer. She kept up her industry in study to the end of her life. At sixty-two she learned French in order to teach in a girl’s school and subsequently translated and abridged de Lamartine’s *Joan of Arc*.” The story of Joan of Arc would surely have resonated with Sarah as she recalled Angelina and her experiences as abolitionist and feminist leaders in the 1830s.¹¹

Sarah and later Angelina would leave the Episcopal Church of their parents, turning first to Presbyterianism and then to Quakerism in a search for meaning and purpose. Eventually, both would also leave South Carolina and settle permanently in the North, joining the Fourth and Arch Street Meeting of Quakers in Philadelphia. Although the Quakers opposed slavery, the Orthodox branch to which the sisters belonged also opposed political action. Orthodox Quakers were less supportive of women than the Hicksite Quakers, frustrating Sarah’s intention to be recognized as a minister. And the Fourth and Arch Street Meeting shared the racism of the larger society, delegating free persons of color to a separate bench at the back of the hall.

⁸ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters*, 23, 24.

⁹ Katharine DuPre Lumpkin, *The Emancipation of Angelina Grimké* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 4.

¹⁰ Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters*, 38; Angelina Grimké, Speech in Pennsylvania Hall, 16 May 1838, in Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters*, Appendix, 375.

¹¹ F. Dudley Jones, “The Grimké Sisters,” *The Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* (1933): 14; Alphonse de Lamartine, *Joan of Arc. A Biography*, translated from the French by Sarah M. Grimke (Boston: Adams & Co., 1867).

Dissatisfied with the Society's lack of social activism, the sisters turned their interest to abolitionist literature and activities. In spring 1835 Angelina joined the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society and in September 1835 penned the letter to William Lloyd Garrison that would bring her to the attention of pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces alike. Without asking her permission, Garrison published the letter in his abolitionist journal *The Liberator*. Angelina identified herself as coming from "a land of slavery, where rests the darkness of Egypt, and where is found the sin of Sodom" and declared that the abolition of slavery was "*a cause worth dying for.*"¹²

At first Sarah was horrified at Angelina's public outing and humiliated by the criticism of their fellow Quakers. But within months Sarah "concluded that her participation in the antislavery movement was the will of God." She left the Philadelphia Quakers and traveled with Angelina to the home of abolitionist friends Abraham and Abby Cox in New York. Here the sisters participated in the founding of a national Female Anti-Slavery Society and agreed to become the first women agents for the American Anti-Slavery Society. After attending the Agents' Convention of the American Anti-Slavery Society (they were the only two women present) in December 1836, they set off for New York City to give parlor talks on abolition. Their lectures were so popular that the venue for their talks soon shifted from parlors to church session rooms to church sanctuaries to public lecture halls. By the end of January 1837 men began to attend the gatherings.¹³ As William Francis Guess remarked in his history of South Carolina, "patrician Angelina [and Sarah]...had committed not one but two unforgivable sins: [they] had befouled the parent nest by attacking the peculiar institution, and...had befouled the name of Carolina womanhood by screeching [their] libels in public."¹⁴

Nor were Southern men the only ones shocked by this flouting of gender conventions. The Northern reformer Catharine Beecher criticized the sisters' sponsorship of antislavery petitions. "Petitions to Congress," she informed them, fell "entirely without the sphere of female duty. Men are the proper persons to make appeals to the rulers whom they appoint."¹⁵ But the harshest criticism came from the Northern churches. In July 1837 the Reverend Nehemiah Adams of Boston wrote a "Pastoral Letter of the General Association of Massachusetts to the Congregational Churches under their Care" attacking the presence of women generally in the abolitionist movement and that of the Grimké in particular. The letter deplored "the mistaken conduct of those who encourage females to bear an obtrusive and ostentatious part in measures of reform, and countenance any of that sex who so far forget themselves as to itinerate in the character of public lecturers and teachers." Women's power, the letter reminded congregants, was "in her dependence, flowing from the consciousness of that weakness which God has given

¹² Quoted in Pamela R. Durso, *The Power of Woman: The Life and Writings of Sarah Moore Grimké* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 86.

¹³ Durso, *The Power of Women*, 89 – 96; quote on page 89.

¹⁴ William Francis Guess, *South Carolina: Annals of Pride and Protest* (New York: Harper, 1960), 192.

¹⁵ Quoted in Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2000), 53.

her for her protection....”¹⁶ In the view of Adams and many of his fellow clergy, the Grimkés were not behaving like Southern ladies or Christian women!

What made these two sisters break so radically with the traditions of the patriarchal slaveholding society from whence they sprang and from the conventions of the Quakers whose faith they adopted? Were they, as Gerald Johnson labeled them, part of “The Lunatic Fringe” (He writes “it is flatly impossible that these women should have existed”) or was there some aspect of their upbringing that logically explains their radicalism?¹⁷ An examination of the arguments they employed against the oppression of women and the enslaved suggests that the source of their rebellion was, ironically, the very education that they derided. Religion—whether it was church going or Bible reading—was an integral part of every lady’s upbringing. By instructing women in religion, educators hoped that “properly educated republican women would stay in the home and...shape the characters of their sons and husbands in the direction of benevolence, self-restraint, and responsible independence.”¹⁸ This view of education in the service of republican motherhood was a view propagated by the sisters’ brother Thomas, whom Sarah quoted extensively in her *Letters*. Thomas wrote that “Women ought...to approach to the best education now given to men, (I except mathematics and the classics)” for as mothers and sisters they could “revolutionize a country in moral and religious taste, in manners and in social virtues and intellectual cultivation.”¹⁹

In an examination of “The Origins and Interpretation of American Feminist Thought,” Elizabeth Ann Bartlett contended that “The basis for [Sarah] Grimké’s concept of human rights remain[ed] fundamentally scriptural.” Bartlett credited Quakerism for Sarah’s “first introduction to the more general Puritan idea that each person must read and interpret the Bible for himself or herself and take responsibility for his or her own soul.”²⁰ As Sarah later told her friend Jane Smith, “I would not give up my abolition feelings for anything I know. They are intertwined with my Christianity.”²¹

Both Sarah and Angelina took the “accepted woman’s role of guardian of society’s moral standards” and applied it outside the home.²² Biblical quotations and personal experiences were the sisters’ main ammunition in their fight for abolition and women’s rights. Sarah began her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*—her response to the Pastoral Letter—with the declared intention to expose the “perverted interpretations of Holy Writ,” arguing that “the welfare of the

¹⁶ “Pastoral Letter: The General Association of Massachusetts to the Churches Under Their Care,” 12 July 1837, in *The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké: Selected Writings 1835 – 1839*, edited by Larry Ceplair (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989), 211.

¹⁷ Gerald Johnson, *The Lunatic Fringe* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1957), 34.

¹⁸ Linda Kerber, “Daughters of Columbia: Educating Women for the Republic, 1787 – 1805,” *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought*, edited by Jean E. Friedman and William G. Shade (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1982), 150.

¹⁹ Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, 50, 62.

²⁰ Elizabeth Ann Bartlett, *Liberty, Equality, Sorority: The Origins and Interpretation of American Feminist Thought: Frances Wright, Sarah Grimké, and Margaret Fuller* (New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1994), 66, 62.

²¹ Quoted in Durso, *The Power of Woman*, 97.

²² Jill Conway, “Perspectives on the History of Women’s Education in the United States,” *History of Education Quarterly* (Spring 1974): 7.

world will be materially advanced by every new discovery we make of the designs of Jehovah in the creation of women.” Angelina entitled her first abolitionist essay *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* and argued that Christian philosophy obliged women to educate themselves and their slaves: “It is the **duty** of all...to improve their own mental facilities, because we are commanded to love God with all our minds, as well as with all our hearts, and we commit a great sin, if we **forbid or prevent** that cultivation of the mind in others, which would enable them to perform this duty.”²³

How could the very religious teachings used to justify women’s and African Americans’ inferiority be employed to argue for their equality? Katharine DuPre Lumpkin, the author of a study of Angelina Grimké published in 1974, offers a clue in her own autobiography, *The Making of a Southerner*. Lumpkin explained how she, a child of the plantation tradition, came to oppose white supremacy in the second decade of the twentieth century. Religious teaching, she discovered, could be “turned around” so that “its high authority” could “justify the very acts which our Southern teaching had told us were unjustifiable. Under religion’s felt demand I could first profane the sacred tabernacle of our racial beliefs and go on profaning it in subsequent years....” It was a college professor who encouraged Lumpkin to draw her own conclusions from the evidence; an abolitionist agent, Theodore Weld, who inspired the Grimké sisters. After hearing Weld speak for four days on “The Biblical Argument against Slavery,” Angelina and Sarah found Biblical support for their own anti-slavery sentiments and subsequently for their feminist beliefs as well.²⁴ Their advocacy of the rights of women and the enslaved was a logical consequence of their faith.

Judith Nies in *Seven Women: Portraits from the American Radical Tradition* described Sarah Grimké’s comparison of the plight of women and enslaved blacks as quite understandable given the Southern environment in which she was raised. Quoting the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal—“The similarities of the women’s and the Negroes’ problems are not accidental. They were...originally determined in a paternalistic order of society”—Nies concluded that “It is not accidental that it was a Southern woman, born in the heart of the Southern aristocratic ideal, who first traced the pattern of racial and sexual prejudices in America.”²⁵ Their education and experiences enabled the Grimkés to use Biblical language to rebel against the patriarchal assumptions of contemporary society. Their ladylike mantle of piety and probity protected them—most of the time—from the violence of opponents. As fellow South Carolinian Mary Chesnut once commented about a classmate, her manners were so perfect that “men would [forgive]...her cleverness.”²⁶

That conformity and rebellion could be two sides of the same coin has been noted by historians of slavery. In *Roll, Jordan, Roll* Eugene Genovese suggested that the apparent

²³ Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, 3; Angelina Grimké, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (New York: Arno Press, 1969; reprint of 1836 edition), 18.

²⁴ Katharine DuPre Lumpkin, *The Making of a Southerner* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1946), 238; Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters*, 151.

²⁵ Judith Nies, *Seven Women: Portraits from the American Radical Tradition* (New York, 1978), 30.

²⁶ Elisabeth Showalter Muhlenfeld, *Mary Bokin Chesnut: The Writer and Her Work* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1978), 548.

accommodation by slaves to paternalistic values may have been a subtle form of resistance to the system that exploited them. “Accommodation itself,” Genovese wrote, “breathed a critical spirit and disguised subversive actions and often embraced its apparent opposite—resistance.” Genovese found this particularly evident in the development of a black version of Christianity. “It rendered unto Caesar that which was Caesar’s, but it also narrowed down considerably that which was in fact Caesar’s.”²⁷ This, of course, is exactly what the Grimké’s did when they used their religious education to attack the foundations of paternalism. They accepted the premise of Biblical authority, but used it to draw very different conclusions about the rights of women and the enslaved.

Historian Gerda Lerner, in an essay on *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké*, argued that Sarah “managed to construct social theory on the basis of comparing two kinds of systems of oppression. She never made the mistake of equating the white woman’s position with that of the slave, and she always emphasized the greater suffering, exploitation and oppression of the black woman. But her description of the process by which the deprivation of women is reinforced by prejudice and justified by observing the very results of that deprivation applies with equal force to the victims of racism.”²⁸

Although white women faced nowhere near the abysmal conditions of enslaved women, the legal status of married, free women—white as well as black—was not all that different from that of slaves. Under Common Law, a “feme covert” or married woman was not a legal person. She could not own property, testify in court, make a will, nor control any money she might earn or inherit. Children belonged to the father, and in case of separation (divorce was illegal in South Carolina) the mother had no right to them. Plantation mistress Mary Chesnut compared the exploitation of white women to that of slaves: “I saw today a sale of Negroes—Mulatto women in *silk* dresses.... South Carolina slave holder as I am my very soul sickened—it is too dreadful. I tried to reason—this is not worse than the willing sale most women make of themselves in marriage—nor can the consequences be worse. The Bible authorizes marriage & slavery—poor women! poor slaves!”²⁹

Mary Boykin Chesnut was neither a feminist nor an abolitionist, however. As horrified as she was at the miscegenation that resulted from white men’s liaisons with enslaved women, she regarded slavery as a necessary evil and black women as temptresses who seduced white men away from their families. The Grimké’s, on the other hand, were willing to put the blame where it belonged—on the elite white men who held the power on the plantation. When they discovered in 1868 that their brother Henry had sired three sons with Nancy Weston, one of his enslaved women, they welcomed the boys into their family and helped sponsor their education. The

²⁷ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 597, 659.

²⁸ Gerda Lerner, *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 24.

²⁹ C. Vann Woodward and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, *The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 21.

oldest, Archibald Henry Grimké, would later say that his aunts made him “a liberal in religion, a radical in the woman suffrage movement, in politics and on the race question.”³⁰

In the 1830s, however, many abolitionists opposed the Grimkés’ feminist stance, believing that their calls for gender equality endangered the anti-slavery cause. Even Theodore Weld, one of the sisters’ strongest supporters and soon to become Angelina’s husband, advised them to avoid women’s rights and focus on racial slavery. Angelina countered, “And can you not see that women *could* do, & *would* do a hundred times more for the slave if she were not fettered?...If we surrender the right to *speak* to the public this year, we must surrender the right to petition next year & the right to write the year after &c. What *then* can woman do for the slave, when she herself is under the feet of man & shamed into *silence*?” Weld must have felt chastised when he read her justification for refusing to separate racial and gender issues. “I fully believe that so far from keeping different moral reformations entirely distinct, that no such attempt can ever be successful. They are bound together in a circle, like the sciences; they blend with each other, like the colors of the rain bow; they are the parts only of our glorious whole, & that whole is Christianity, pure *practical* Christianity.”³¹

The sisters not only opposed racial slavery, but they also condemned racism. They joined their friends in the “negro pew” at the Fourth and Arch Street Meeting House. The sisters argued that assumptions of racial inferiority kept blacks from achieving their full potential as human beings. Even before she left Charleston for the North, Angelina had written in her diary, “How long, O Lord, wilt thou suffer the foot of the oppressor to stand on the neck of the slave!”³² Significantly, Sarah would use the same analogy in her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*: “...I ask no favors for my sex,” she wrote. “All I ask of our brethren is, that they will take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God designed us to occupy.”³³ Sarah concluded that the conventions of chivalry that claimed to give special treatment to women, protecting them from the harsh realities of the world of politics and business, were in reality the cause of their oppression.

The Grimké sisters’ outspoken criticism of sexism and racism offended sensibilities in the North as well as the South, and not just among conservatives. Many opponents of slavery (including most Orthodox Quakers and their brother Thomas) favored emancipating slaves and sending them to back to Africa. These members of the American Colonization Society felt that the transportation of freed blacks to Africa would avoid problems of racial conflict in the United States. As Angelina and Sarah explained to their brother, this ignored the fact that most blacks had been in North America as long as, if not longer, than most whites and that they were Americans, not Africans. The sisters’ critique of colonization schemes exposed the racism of many abolitionists.

³⁰ Quoted in Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters*, 365.

³¹ “Letter to Theodore Dwight Weld and John Greenleaf Whittier,” Document 28, Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Women’s Rights Emerges with the Antislavery Movement 1830 – 1870: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000), 131, 132, 133.

³² Quoted in Mark Perry, *Lift Up Thy Voice: The Grimké Family’s Journey from Slaveholders to Civil Rights Leaders* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 2001), 83.

³³ Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, 10.

The abolitionism and feminism of Sarah and Angelina Grimké evolved naturally from their religious belief in the equality of humankind, an equality they dated from the Creation. But it was their exposure to the exploitation of the slave system that enabled them, in the words of Gerda Lerner, to make “the intellectual leap of reasoning from the power/oppression model of slavery to the power/oppression of women.”³⁴ For the sisters, race, gender, and class were intricately intertwined. Although later reformers would add secular explanations based on natural rights to their arguments for equal rights, the Grimkés’ consistently credited their feminism and abolitionism to **their** understanding of Scripture. Whether this stemmed from their Protestant heritage or their exposure to Quaker doctrines or even to the Perfectionist ideas that emerged during the Second Great Awakening, the sisters stressed the importance of the individual interpretation of the Bible. They emphasized some aspects of St. Paul, for instance, over others. They often cited his comment in *Galatians*, that for the baptized, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”³⁵ [An interesting aside: William Lloyd Garrison had earlier used this same verse in his 1832 book, *Thoughts on African Colonization*, to argue for racial equality.] Like St. Paul, the Grimkés felt called to spread the Word to the unconverted, and they certainly shared his missionary zeal. Like St. Paul, they corresponded regularly with their fellow believers, encouraging them to keep the faith. Like St. Paul, they used metaphors of bondage to emphasize that God was the only Master of one’s fate. Just as the Apostle Paul wrote in *Philippians* 1:13: “So that my bonds in Christ are manifest,” Angelina Grimké frequently ended her letters to Weld, “Farewell in the bonds of the Gospel and the slave,” while Sarah wrote “Thine in the bonds of fellowship for the oppressed.” Later, Sarah would adapt this closing for her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* to “Thine in the bonds of womanhood.”³⁶

But the analogies to St. Paul stopped with his gender proscriptions. The sisters dismissed St. Paul’s comments about women keeping silence in the churches and deferring to their husbands, seeing these as errors introduced by “male translators and interpreters of the Bible...[who] propagated the mistaken concept of subordination...because it reflected their particular cultures...”³⁷ For the Grimkés, the oppression of one human being by another, whether it be of Christians in the ancient world or of blacks and women in the modern one, was morally wrong and clearly in opposition to the divine concept of the equality of all souls.

Blessed Among Women

Their religious convictions also explain the Grimkés’ success as abolitionist and feminist leaders. It is instructive to compare the sisters’ leadership traits with those associated with contemporary women leaders. Caliper, a global management consultant firm based in Princeton, NJ, undertook

³⁴ Lerner, *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké*, 24.

³⁵ *Galatians* 3:28, *The Holy Bible*, King James’ Version.

³⁶ Sarah and Angelina Grimké to Weld, New York, 5/18/37, *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké 1822 – 1844*, edited by Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, Vol. I (New York and London: D. Appleton-Century, Company, Inc., 1934), 388 – 389.

³⁷ Durso, *The Power of Woman*, 132.

a study in 2005 that focused on “The Qualities That Distinguish Women Leaders.” Although the researchers based their conclusions on interviews with 21st-century businesswomen in the U.S. and the U.K., their findings mesh with the qualities historians argue distinguished women leaders in the abolitionist and feminist movements of the 19th-century as well. What are these qualities? The Caliper study found that 1) “Women leaders are more persuasive than their male counterparts”; 2) “Women leaders feel the sting of rejection, learn from adversity and carry on with an ‘I’ll show you’ attitude”; 3) “Women leaders have an inclusive, team-building leadership style of problem solving and decision making”; 4) “Women leaders are more likely to ignore rules and take risks.”³⁸

The Grimké sisters were without a doubt persuasive speakers and writers. Rhetoricians who have analyzed the sisters’ writings have lauded their appeals to religious sensibilities and their use of religious formats. Charles Wilbanks, in an essay in *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times*, argued that Angelina Grimké’s rhetoric “succeeded in transforming the national debate about slavery. It forced slave owners to consider their own souls and their own eternal survival.” As a result, Wilbanks asserted, Angelina was “perhaps the most effective” abolitionist of the 19th century.³⁹ Similarly, Jami Carlacio labeled Sarah Grimké’s “An Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States” an “overlooked exemplar of women’s antebellum rhetoric,” maintaining that the letter format “permits her to boldly express ideas to an audience of powerful men...an act virtually unthinkable for a (southern) woman!” Carlacio particularly admired the way Sarah “undermines the discursive power of [the clergy] by appropriating its rhetoric in the service of [her abolitionist cause].”⁴⁰ The sisters were renowned for their persuasive conversational as well as their literary skills. In December 1852 fellow abolitionist Sallie Holley wrote her friend Caroline Putnam about her visit to the Grimké-Weld household. Holley was disparaging about the sisters’ appearance—“Both the ladies wear the ‘American costume’”—but described their conversation in glowing terms—“Such forlornities! But then their talk! Oh, it is angels’ food.”⁴¹

The sisters experienced considerable disappointment in their quest to do God’s work. Sarah’s attempt to be recognized as a Quaker preacher was repeatedly rebuffed by the men of the Fourth and Arch Street Meeting House. The Quaker authorities were horrified first by Angelina’s letter to Garrison and then by the sisters’ decision to lecture publicly on abolition. Eventually the society disowned both—Angelina for marrying outside the faith and Sarah for attending the wedding. Yet these rejections only made the sisters more determined to carry on. In her study of *The Religious World of Antislavery Women*, Anna Speicher described the “relationship between

³⁸ CALIPER, White Paper, “The Qualities That Distinguish Women Leaders,” <http://www.caliper.com.au/womenstudy/WomenLeaderWhitePaper.pdf>, accessed 7 June 2011; <http://www.caliper.com.au/womenstudy/>, accessed 7 June 2011.

³⁹ Charles Wilbanks, “Angelina Grimké: Abolition and Redemption in a Crusade against Slavery,” in *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times – Volume 1*, edited by Marjorie Julian Spruill, Valinda W. Littlefield, and Joan Marie Johnson (Athens and London: The U of GA Press, 2009), 168 – 183; quotations from 181.

⁴⁰ Jami Carlacio, “‘Ye Knew Your Duty, but Ye Did It Not’” The Epistolary Rhetoric of Sarah Grimké” *Rhetoric Review* 21, No. 3 (2002): 247-263; quotations on 248, 249. [Http://www.jstor.org/stable/3093010](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3093010)

⁴¹ Sallie Holley to Caroline Putnam, 19 Dec. 1852, quoted in Anna M. Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women: Spirituality in the Lives of Five Abolitionist Lecturers* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 47 – 48.

their faith and their activism” as “a mutually supportive and enhancing one: their religious convictions propelled them into abolitionism and the public arena; their activism contributed to the refinement and expansion of their theologies.” As with many of the early Christian martyrs, persecution only served to strengthen their faith. “As their religious convictions matured,” Speicher contended, “they tended to adopt stronger and sometimes more radical political positions: the result being increasing confidence, creativity, and radicalization in both their thought and actions.”⁴²

Another quality that made the sisters successful leaders was their collaborative skills. They were key figures at the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women in 1837 and 1838, sponsoring or co-sponsoring many of the gatherings’ resolutions and serving as officers of the convention. They corresponded regularly with other women activists in the U.S. and in the U.K. They frequently visited with colleagues in other parts of the Northeast. Even after they retired from public speaking, they continued to mentor “younger activists such as Abby Kelly, Henry Blackwell, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Elizabeth Smith Miller, and later, Sallie Holley. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, they imparted their values and convictions to the younger generation in the schools they operated....”⁴³

What is perhaps most striking about the Grimké’s leadership was their willingness to move beyond the societal and religious constraints of their times. They challenged the justifications for slavery employed by Southern politicians and clergy (and most of their own family). They challenged their fellow abolitionists on their unwillingness to allow women full participation in the work of the anti-slavery societies. They challenged the racism inherent in the existence of a “colored bench” at the Fourth and Arch Street Meeting House. As the African American abolitionist Sarah Mapp Douglass wrote in a letter to William Bassett,

Did all the members of Friends society feel for us, as the sisters Grimké do, how soon, how very soon would the fetters be stricken from the captive and cruel prejudice be driven from the bosoms of the professed followers of Christ. We were lying wounded and bleeding, trampled to the very dust by the heel of our brethren and our sisters, when Sarah and Angelina Grimké passed by; they saw our low estate and their hearts melted within them; with the tenderness of ministering angels they lifted us from the dust and poured the oil of consolation, the balm of sympathy into our lacerated bosoms; they identified themselves with us, took our wrongs upon them, and made our oppression and woe theirs. Is it any marvel then that we call them blessed among women? We value them not because they belong to the great and the mighty of our land, but because they love Christ and our afflicted brethren. Most cordially do we approve every step they have taken since they left us, believing that the unerring spirit of truth is their leader [and] friend.⁴⁴

⁴² Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women*, 88.

⁴³ Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women*, 129.

⁴⁴ Sarah M. Douglass to William Bassett, December 1837, from Weld-Grimké Collection, Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h99t.html> ; accessed, 8 June 2011.

As Douglass relates, the Grimké sisters were the only members of the Meeting publicly willing to oppose racial segregation. It was not enough for them to profess their Christian beliefs; their faith required them to challenge injustice wherever and whenever they found it. Similarly, they were not afraid to defy custom and speak to mixed audiences of men and women or, in the case of the Massachusetts legislature, to a gathering of prominent men. As Anna Speicher observed about Sarah Grimké, “In spite of her avowed humility, she could never quite bring herself to surrender completely to the judgment and authority of the Quaker hierarchy....”⁴⁵

Their willingness to flout laws and conventions continued into their advanced years. In her sixties, Sarah adopted the “bloomer” outfit to protest against the restrictive and uncomfortable garments worn by fashionable women of the times.⁴⁶ Both sisters became active in the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association, serving as vice-presidents of the organization. Catherine Birney, in her 1885 co-biography of the Grimké sisters, describes the sisters’ participation in the 1870 protest for woman suffrage organized by the Massachusetts group:

The 7th of March, the day of the election, a terrific snowstorm prevailed, but did not prevent the women from assembling in the hotel near the place of voting.... There was a great crowd inside the hall, eager to see the joke of women voting, and many were ready to jeer and hiss. But when, through the door, the women filed, led by Sarah Grimké and Angelina Weld, the laugh was checked, the intended jeer unuttered, and deafening applause was given instead. The crowd fell back respectfully, nearly every man removing his hat and remaining uncovered while the women passed freely down the hall, deposited their votes, and departed.⁴⁷

In 1870, Sarah was 78 and Angelina, 65. They knew it was illegal for women to vote, but they believed the prohibition was wrong. Neither the threat of disapproving crowds nor the possibility of arrest lessened their determination to promote the suffrage cause.

Conclusion

Their strong faith enabled Sarah and Angelina Grimké to challenge deeply held notions of race and gender. When opponents justified the contemporary racial and gender hierarchy with references to Scripture, the sisters replied with Biblical verses undermining their arguments. When chivalry was employed to warrant the submission of women and blacks to white men, the sisters cited Christ’s teachings on the equality of all souls before the Maker. They used the format of sermons and the rhetoric of preachers to appeal to the hearts and minds of their contemporaries. As they themselves frequently commented, their abolitionism and feminism

⁴⁵ Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women*, 16.

⁴⁶ See Durso, *The Power of Woman*, for details on “The Latter Years and Contributions of Sarah Grimké,” 177 – 193.

⁴⁷ Catherine H. Birney, *The Grimké Sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimké: The First American Women Advocates of Abolition and Woman’s Rights*, first published 1885, The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Grimké Sisters, by Catherine H. Birney; Release Date: April 15, 2004 [EBook #12044]; <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12044/12044-h/12044-h.htm>; accessed 8 June 2011.

were religiously inspired, and it was this sense of divine mission that gave them the courage to criticize the patriarchal assumptions of antebellum American society. Although they mercifully did not suffer the fate of Joan of Arc, their stories share many similarities. Like Joan, the sisters heard God's voice in their call to action. Like Joan, they assumed leadership roles previously reserved to elite men. Like Joan, they overcame formidable obstacles that more powerful individuals had considered impregnable. Like Joan, their enthusiasm and commitment to the cause inspired others. And, like Joan, they changed the course of history.⁴⁸

Catherine Birney ended her co-biography of the Grimké sisters with a tribute by Florence Nightingale spoken at the funeral of a friend. It is a fitting accolade to these two American abolitionist and feminist leaders. "This is not an *in memoriam*, it is a war-cry such as [they] would have bid me write,—a cry for others to fill [their] place, to fill up the ranks, and fight the good fight against sin and vice and misery and wretchedness as [they] did,—the call to arms such as [they were] ever ready to obey."⁴⁹

Reference List

- Bartlett, Elizabeth Ann. *Liberty, Equality, Sorority: The Origins and Interpretation of American Feminist Thought: Frances Wright, Sarah Grimké, and Margaret Fuller*. New York: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1994.
- Birney, Catherine H. *The Grimké Sisters: Sarah and Angelina Grimké: The First American Women Advocates of Abolition and Women's Rights*. Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1885.
- Birney, Catherine H. *The Grimké Sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimké: The First American Women Advocates of Abolition and Woman's Rights*, first published 1885. The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Grimké Sisters, by Catherine H. Birney; Release Date: April 15, 2004 [EBook #12044]; <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12044/12044-h/12044-h.htm>; accessed 8 June 2011.
- CALIPER. White Paper, "The Qualities That Distinguish Women Leaders," <http://www.caliper.com.au/womenstudy/WomenLeaderWhitePaper.pdf> , accessed 7 June 2011; <http://www.caliper.com.au/womenstudy/> , accessed 7 June 2011.
- Carlacio, Jami. "'Ye Knew Your Duty, but Ye Did It Not'" The Epistolary Rhetoric of Sarah Grimké." *Rhetoric Review* 21, No. 3 (2002): 247-263; [Http://www.jstor.org/stable/3093010](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3093010)
- Conway, Jill. "Perspectives on the History of Women's Education in the United States." *History of Education Quarterly* 14, No. 1(Spring 1974): 1 - 12.
- Durso, Pamela R. *The Power of Woman: The Life and Writings of Sarah Moore Grimké*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003.
- Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
- Genovese, Eugene. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974.
- Ginzberg, Lori D. *Women in Antebellum Reform*. Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2000.
- Grimké, Angelina. *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*. New York: Arno Press, 1969; reprint of 1836 edition.
- Grimké, Sarah. *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women*. Boston: I.Knapp, 1838.
- Guess, William Francis. *South Carolina: Annals of Pride and Protest*. New York: Harper, 1960.

⁴⁸ Indeed, Sarah herself suggested this comparison while working on her translation of de Lamartine's biography of Joan. She commented, "[I]t seems to infuse into my soul a mite of that divinity which filled hers. Joan of Arc stands pre-eminent in my mind above all other morals save the Christ." Quoted in Birney, *The Grimké Sisters*, 190.

⁴⁹ Birney, EBook of The Grimké Sisters; <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12044/12044-h/12044-h.htm>; accessed 8 June 2011.

- Johnson, Gerald. *The Lunatic Fringe*. Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1957.
- Jones, F. Dudley. "The Grimké Sisters." *The Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association* 1(1933).
- Kerber, Linda. "Daughters of Columbia: Educating Women for the Republic, 1787—1805," *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought*. Edited by Jean E. Friedman and William G. Shade. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1982.
- Lamartine, Alphonse de. *Joan of Arc. A Biography*. Translated from the French by Sarah M. Grimke. Boston: Adams & Co., 1867.
- Lerner, Gerda. *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Lerner, Gerda. *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Rebels Against Slavery*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967.
- Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké 1822—1844*. Edited by Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, Vol. I. New York and London: D. Appleton-Century, Company, Inc., 1934.
- Lumpkin, Katharine DuPre. *The Emancipation of Angelina Grimké*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974.
- Lumpkin, Katharine DuPre. *The Making of a Southerner*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1946.
- Muhlenfeld, Elisabeth Showalter. *Mary Bokin Chesnut: The Writer and Her Work*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1978.
- Nies, Judith. *Seven Women: Portraits from the American Radical Tradition*. New York, 1978.
- Perry, Mark. *Lift Up Thy Voice: The Grimké Family's Journey from Slaveholders to Civil Rights Leaders*. New York and London: Penguin Books, 2001.
- The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimké: Selected Writings 1835—1839*. Edited by Larry Ceplair. New York, Columbia University Press, 1989.
- Rogers, James A. *Richard Furman: Life and Legacy*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001. Sarah M. Douglass to William Bassett, December 1837, from Weld-Grimké Collection, Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h99t.html> ; accessed, 8 June 2011.
- Sklar, Kathryn Kish. *Women's Rights Emerges with the Antislavery Movement 1830—1870: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000.
- Speicher, Anna M. *The Religious World of Antislavery Women: Spirituality in the Lives of Five Abolitionist Lecturers*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000.
- Wilbanks, Charles. "Angelina Grimké: Abolition and Redemption in a Crusade against Slavery," in *South Carolina Women: Their Lives and Times—Volume 1*. Edited by Marjorie Julian Spruill, Valinda W. Littlefield, and Joan Marie Johnson. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2009.
- Woodward, C. Vann and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld. *The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2011.