Religion and the New England Mill Girl: A New Perspective on an Old Theme

JAMA LAZEROW

IN April 1829, mill girls from three textile factories in Taunton, Massachusetts, abandoned their looms to protest a reduction in wages.[1] Bedecked in their colorful working attire—black silk dresses, red shawls, and green calashes—the women paraded about the town common before a shocked if somewhat amused gathering of local menfolk. Their leader was a young weaver named Salome Lincoln. Just twenty-two years old, she had spent eight years working in the Taunton mills. Marching the procession into a local public hall, Lincoln took the podium, instructed one of her lieutenants to stand guard at the door, and opened the meeting with a prayer "to the Great Arbitrator for Justice." It was an apt beginning, for her talk that spring morning was something of a sermon, as she lectured her sisters "on the subject of their wrongs" in contributing to their own predicament. On that morning, Salome Lincoln sounded more like a censorious minister than the leader of a factory "turn-out."

For this particular mill girl, however, the two endeavors were not so disparate as they might at first appear. In an age

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[1] Details of this strike may be found in Carolyn B. Owen, "Vignettes, No. 66," Taunton Historical Society, Taunton, Mass.; *Columbia Reporter and Old Colony Journal* (Taunton), 6 May 1829; see also, Almond H. Davis, *The Female Preacher, or Memoir of Salome Lincoln, Afterwards the Wife of Elder Junias S. Mowry* (Providence, R.I., 1843). Though we would today call these operatives "women," I often refer to them here as "mill girls" because that is how they referred to themselves.

when women rarely spoke in public, and were usually vilified when they did, the Taunton strike was not the first time Salome Lincoln had addressed a gathering of her townspeople. And it was probably not the first time her sister weavers had heard her speak. For Salome Lincoln was a lay preacher in the Freewill Baptist church, a denomination whose theology held out the possibility of salvation for all and whose clergy would play a role, disproportionate to their numbers, in subsequent labor protest in New England. Although Lincoln had no official church credentials, she had been exhorting from the pulpit of the local Freewill Baptist meetinghouse three or four times a week since 1827. In private, she was "naturally reserved and retiring in her manner," her biographer wrote, but "in the pulpit, she was bold and attracting." In 1829, she turned that boldness to the cause of workers' rights.

There is little in the historical literature on women, religion, or labor that makes much sense of Salome Lincoln. We know that women constituted the majority of many church congregations in America from at least the mid-seventeenth century, and we know that by the early nineteenth century their interests and concerns increasingly dominated American religion.[2] This "feminization" of Protestantism helped define "woman's sphere" in the young republic, while it simultaneously fostered women's conspicuous involvement in a broad range of reform movements, from temperance to abolitionism to women's rights.[3] But most of what we know about this subject concerns middle- and upper-class women. We know precious little about working women in antebellum

[2] There are numerous disputes among scholars concerning the timing and precise nature of this process, but the basic trend is not in dispute.

[3] See, for example, Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Blanche Glassman Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist-Abolitionists in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978); Barbara Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelicalism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981); Nancy Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822–1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

religious and reform activity, and even less about those involved in labor protest.[4]

If Protestantism played a crucial role in women's lives in the early nineteenth century, and inspired their social activism, we might fruitfully ask how religion influenced the mill girls of antebellum New England. For it was these young women who composed much of the early factory workforce in America. As textile operatives in industrial communities like Taunton, and more renowned places like Lowell, Massachusetts, and Manchester, New Hampshire, they helped make New England the hub of American industry before the Civil War. Most important, these women were often in the forefront of antebellum labor protest. Indeed, for a time during the 1840s, they were the vanguard of a region-wide labor reform movement. How did religion color *their* lives and activities?

To answer this basic, if complex, question, we begin by examining the religious beliefs and practices of mill girls generally, turning then to the impact of that piety on mill girl labor protest. For the former, we have an ample documentary record in such literary magazines as the *Lowell Offering*, written by and for female textile operatives in the early 1840s, and in such radical newspapers as the *Voice of Industry*, the mouthpiece of labor reform in New England during the same decade. For religion's role in labor protest, we can learn a great deal from radical mill women like those of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association (LFLRA), whose activities were regularly reported in the labor press.

The *Lowell Offering* is perhaps the richest source of mill girl writings we have, and virtually every page reveals an intense spirituality. This will come as no surprise to most historians, given the historical consensus that the defenders of the factory system promoted the magazine to sell the image of the virtuous mill girl. And, to be sure, the *Offering* did enjoy the support and encouragement of local clergymen,

[4] Although Nancy Cott mentions Salome Lincoln, she is concerned primarily with "middle-class" women. *Bonds of Womanhood*, see esp. pp. 9–13, 56–57.

church leaders, politicians, and mill agents. Indeed, erstwhile contributors like LFLRA president and *Voice* editor Sarah Bagley claimed that the *Offering* refused articles critical of the factory system and that, in general, the corporations used the publication as propaganda to gain public support, attract a steady supply of labor, and quiet discontent.

But the use of the *Offering* as mill propaganda does not perforce render it a spurious source of mill girl sentiment. In fact, it is not at all clear that the magazine was as conservative as it has been portrayed by contemporaries or historians nor that these particular mill girls were at all unusual in their piety. First, the *Offering* seems to have arisen, at least in part, from the initiatives of the mill girls themselves and *then* to have been appropriated by others. Moreover, a close reading of the articles and editorials reveals a far more complex picture of the authors than that presented in most accounts. While they did not join in collective protest against what the protesters called the "factory system," their writings evinced an incisive understanding of their own oppression, both as women and as workers. But most important, their evident faith in Christianity united them with their protesting sisters who wrote in autonomous labor reform publications, such as the *Voice of Industry*, which manifested a similarly intense piety.[5]

If the *Offering* and the *Voice* provide a window onto the religious world of the mill girls, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association offers a glimpse of that religion in action, in the service of labor protest. Part of the working-class agi-

[5] For the traditional view among historians, see Norman Ware, *The Industrial Worker, 1840–1860: The Reaction of American Industrial Society to the Advance of the Industrial Revolution* (1924; reprint ed., Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), pp. 83, 85–95. For this view among contemporaries, see "Citizen of Lowell," *Corporations and Operatives* (Lowell, 1843). A more nuanced account can be found in "M" (Lucy Larcom), "Improvement Circle," *Offering*, 2d ser., no. 5 (January 1845) and Benita Eisler, ed., *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women (1840–1845)* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1977), pp. 33–40. For a sympathetic view by labor reformers outside Lowell, see (Cincinnati) *People's Paper*, 13 December 1843. The substantial disagreement among contemporaries and historians on both the history and meaning of the *Lowell Offering* suggests the need for a fresh and in-depth study of this important early example of female working-class expression.

tation that swept through New England's industrial communities during the mid-1840s, the association marked the first permanent labor organization among mill girls in the nation's history. Under the leadership of the charismatic Sarah Bagley and the indefatigable Huldah Stone, the LFLRA played a key role in the regional labor bodies of these years, the New England Workingmen's Association (NEWA) and its successor, the New England Labor Reform League (NELRL). The Lowell women helped establish Female Labor Reform Associations elsewhere, provided many of the correspondents for the movement's labor press, and spearheaded the major campaign of the day, the petition drive for the ten-hour workday. Numbering some five hundred members by the end of 1845, the LFLRA established a "Female Department" in the *Voice* (which they later helped edit), issued a series of widely circulated *Factory Tracts*, set up a committee to expose pro-corporation propaganda, started an industrial reform lyceum, and organized fairs, social gatherings, and improvement circles to spread their gospel and to raise money for a variety of labor causes.

What, precisely, did these labor reformers stand for? The focus of the association's protest was the factory, but they did not reject the factory per se. Rather, these women declaimed against the "unutterable woe" that capitalist industry had wrought among wage-earners. Thus, they dedicated themselves to "the improvement of the condition of the laboring masses." But the association, acutely aware of the *general* negative effects of the industrial revolution, advocated something still more fundamental than this. Like the broader movement of which it formed an integral part, the LFLRA favored not just shorter hours, higher wages, and better working conditions but various schemes for radical social change, such as utopian socialism, land reform, and producer and consumer cooperatives. Indeed, the LFLRA proposed nothing less than an entire transformation of society: the abolition of "slavery and oppression, mental, physical and religious."

Unlike the writers of the *Offering*, the women of the LFLRA openly and directly protested the conditions of life in Lowell and joined in collective action radically to transform them. But, like their sisters at the *Offering*, the labor reformers evinced a pervasive and powerful strain of piety and Christian mission. In this, the mill girls were one. When they wrote or spoke in public, activists and non-activists alike remembered the past, interpreted the present, and envisioned the future in the prevailing vocabulary of their day: the language of religion.[6]

To understand these women, and the religious world they inhabited, we must reconstruct the social context of their confrontation with the factory. They had left family and friends in their countryside homes for a strange new world of company-sponsored boardinghouses and textile machinery. What they left behind—"the green hills and fertile vales . . . where the pure air of heaven, gave life and animation to the whole being," in Huldah Stone's recollection—became at once a touchstone and a refuge for them: a standard by which they judged their present circumstances and a sanctuary to which they retreated, literally as well as figuratively, when these circumstances seemed too harsh to bear.[7] In doing so, they reconstructed their past as a kind of "Golden Age," a world that never was but one that ought to be. They thus created a model that offered legitimacy for dissent against present conditions and provided alternative visions of the future.

At the very core of this largely romanticized perception of "home" was the religious sentiment that permeated rural

[6] See Francis Early, "A Reappraisal of the New-England Labour-Reform Movement of the 1840s: The Lowell Female Labor Reform Association and the New England Workingmen's Association," *Histoire Sociale-Social History* 13 (May 1980): 33–54. Quotations are from Sarah Bagley's editorial, *Voice of Industry* (Fitchburg, Lowell, and Boston, Mass.), 15 May 1846; LFLRA Report to NEWA, *Voice*, 23 January 1846.

[7] *Voice*, 25 September 1846.

New England during the early nineteenth century. In the *Offering*, for example, one writer described her "Last Evening at Home," recalling her feelings as she prepared to leave "this sacred, this enchanted spot, and go to a land of strangers."[8] A writer in *Factory Tracts*, which claimed to publish articles too radical for the *Offering*, echoed the same theme, picturing the prospective factory girl leaving "the home of her childhood; that home around which clusters [*sic*] so many beautiful and holy associations."[9] For these young women, most of them in their late teens or early twenties, going to work in the mills was a wrenching experience; their re-creation of a peaceful, harmonious, and, most of all, pious home provided an essential frame of reference in coping with that experience.

If holiness was the lifeblood of the mill girl's home, Scripture was its heart, the source of her intellectual, moral, and spiritual energies. Lucy Larcom, a Lowell operative and contributor to the *Offering*, claimed to have learned to read by reciting from the New Testament. She also had fond memories of worshiping with her brothers and sisters as their father read to them from the family Bible. She could not touch that book, she wrote later, without feelings of "profound reverence."[10] Larcom's radical contemporary, Huldah Stone, recorded that same veneration on a trip to her childhood home in 1846. There she found the old family Bible, which her mother had turned to for "counsel, wisdom and strength," still occupying its proper place on the common room table.[11]

As it was in their childhood, so it was in their new lives as mill workers. When the *Factory Girls' Album and Oper-*

[8] Aramantha, "The Last Evening at Home," *Offering*, 2d ser., no. 4 (1844):78.

[9] Amelia, "Some of the Beauties of Our Factory System—Otherwise, Lowell Slavery," *Factory Tracts*, No. 1 (October 1845). Philip S. Foner has reprinted all that survives of this publication (the first issue and extracts of the second, which appeared in the *Voice*) in his *The Factory Girls* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp. 130–41.

[10] Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood* (1889; reprint ed., Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973), pp. 44, 150.

[11] *Voice*, 8 May 1846.

atives' Advocate appeared in February 1846, the lead article was entitled "The Bible." "It is a thing always to be had," the author wrote, "always within call, and ever at hand, and very portable."[12] The statement was more a comment on contemporary practice than advice to the unregenerate. Company regulations prohibited reading in the mills, but Lucy Larcom recalled that some of her sister operatives believed that Scripture was exempt from that ban. Indeed, Lucy herself tore pages from her Bible and carried them with her to work. She was not alone. It was common, she claimed, for a mill operative to "have a page or two of the Bible beside her there, committing verses to memory while her hands went on with their mechanical occupation." The overseer would confiscate these materials whenever he found them, and it is testimony to the ubiquity of the practice that Larcom reported that her overseer's desk was full of Bibles.[13] As we shall see, this assiduous reading of Scripture yielded effective ammunition for those operatives who protested against the system of factory labor in which they found themselves.

While the Bible was the fulcrum of the mill girls' faith, it was not the only important element of their religious heritage. The church and its subsidiary institutions figured prominently, if somewhat problematically, in their lives. "The Meeting House, as in most country villages, is conspicuous, as the greatest ornament," wrote one operative of her New Hampshire home.[14] To be sure, not all mill girls shared those memories, usually because they grew up on farms too far from the meetinghouse to make regular attendance possible. But the absence of organized worship in childhood seems to have made many that much more eager for it as adults. Sarah Bagley, the most prominent female labor leader of the 1840s,

[12] *Factory Girls' Album* (Exeter, N.H.), 4 February 1846. The *Factory Girls' Album*, unlike the *Offering*, was an open advocate for the rights of female operatives. Though edited by a man (Charles Dearborn), most of the articles were written by the mill girls themselves. It is likely that this anonymous piece was penned by one of them, as Dearborn generally signed his articles and editorials.

[13] Larcom, *New England Girlhood*, pp. 180–81; Larcom, "Among Lowell Mill-Girls," *Atlantic Monthly* (November 1881), reprinted in Foner, *Factory Girls*, p. 23.

[14] E. E. T., "Childhood's Home," *Offering* 1 (1841):69.

even insisted that one advantage of being a mill worker in Lowell was "the pleasure of being associated with the institutions of religion." "Most of us, when at home, live in the country," she pointed out, "and therefore cannot enjoy these privileges to the same extent; and many of us, not at all."[15] What all these women had in common was an acute awareness of the church's crucial role in Christian life.

To some extent, the operatives' participation in the church life of these mill towns was assured because, in many communities, workers were required "to be constant in attendance upon public worship." Although the editor of the *Offering* insisted that the regulation was not always "strictly enforced," it was generally a technical condition of both employment in the mill and residence in the company boardinghouse.[16] The mill owners no doubt conceived the rule as part of their broader design: to create (and control) a morally upright community of factory operatives as an alternative to the infamous English manufacturing system, thus countering popular fears and prejudices, and insuring a steady supply of labor. But, as Hannah Josephson observed many years ago in her classic study of the mill girls, strict rules governing morality and Sabbath observance reflected "the standards of behavior of young women all over New England at this time." Thus, textile recruiting agents traveling in the countryside would carry a copy of their company's regulations to assure parents that their daughter's virtue would be protected in the factory town. The textile corporations were not inaugurating anything new, Josephson pointed out; rather, they were bowing to the mores of the era.[17]

Still, the interests of parent and daughter seem at times to have diverged in this particular, for some operatives

[15] S. G. B. (Sarah G. Bagley), "Pleasures of Factory Life," *Offering* 1 (1840):26.

[16] See Samuel Adams Drake, *History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts*, 2 vols. (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1880), 2:102, for a typical "regulation paper."

[17] Hannah Josephson, *Golden Threads: New England Mill Girls and Magnates* (1924; reprint ed., New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), p. 71.

denounced the "regulation paper" they were forced to sign. "Lo! here is the beginning of the mischief," declared a writer in *Factory Tracts*.[18] At issue was the very "independence" the mill owners celebrated in their "Yankee" mill girls. "Time and labor only are bought by the employers," another *Tract* writer insisted, "and the Operative has no right to be dictated as it regards the duties he owes to himself or those of his friends."[19] Similarly, *The Factory Girl* of New Market, New Hampshire, offered this definition of "contemptible": "for an overseer to ask a girl what her religious sentiments are, when she applies to him for employment."[20] These women may have adhered to prevailing standards of piety and morality, but they protested their employers' right to compel them to do so.

It is difficult to assess the significance of the churchgoing regulation, either in promoting or in discouraging attendance.[21] In Lowell, showcase of the pious Yankee mill girl, evidence suggests that female operatives took a deep interest in organized religion. Certainly, the twenty-three churches built there between 1825 and 1850 attest to the zeal of the local inhabitants, the majority of whom were mill women. Moreover, numerous observers remarked on the workers' strong attachment to organized devotion. "Religion has thriven in this place," noted two English Congregationalists on a tour of American churches in 1835.[22] Lucy Larcom, a churchgoing mill girl herself, remembered that "the church was really the home-centre to many, perhaps to most of us."

[18] Amelia, "Beauties of Our Factory System."

[19] "Extracts from Factory Tracts No. 2," reprinted in *Voice*, 14 November 1845. Though this comment referred to the requirement that mill girls reside in a boardinghouse, it aptly summed up the resentment some of them felt over company regulations in general.

[20] *The Factory Girl* (New Market, N.H.), 15 January 1843.

[21] No detailed empirical work has been done in this area. Preliminary work by the author, linking ten-hour petitioners in Lowell with available church membership rolls, reveals the presence of female labor reformers in a range of local churches.

[22] James Matheson and Andrew Reed, *A Narrative of the Visit to the American Churches, by the Deputation From the Congregational Union of England and Wales* (London: Jackson and Walford, 1835), p. 414.

As to the question of compulsion, she declared flatly, "nearly all the girls attended public worship from choice."[23] And though Sarah Bagley pointed out that regular church attendance was a requirement for mill employment, she also boasted that "many [mill girls] were engaged as teachers in the Sunday Schools" of Lowell, not because they were compelled to but because they were of high "moral and intellectual character."[24]

Whether by choice or by compulsion, it appears that, as "Susan" concluded upon her arrival in the city, "Lowell is a church-going place." And yet, this mill girl perceived a more complex reality in her new home. "It seems as though every one went to meeting, and the streets are so full on Sundays," she reported, "*but it is not so.*" Indeed, there were some operatives, though often devout, who found it difficult "to be constant in attendance upon public worship," regulation or no.[25]

Many of these women, pious but alienated from local church life, demanded a radical change in the conditions of life, in the mill and in the mill community. At the top of their list of complaints about the churchgoing regulation was the long workday, the premier working-class complaint of the age. "Can it be reasonably supposed," Sarah Bagley asked, "that those who are called to their task every morning at half past five, and kept until seven at night, will have sufficient energy to be constant in their attendance at church on the Sabbath?"[26] Some objected as well to paying pew rent for a gospel that they believed should be dispensed "without money and without price."[27] Others warned that the pious hypocrisy of churchgoing employers, "who compel their help to labor on the Sabbath day or lose their situations," would

[23] Larcom, *New England Girlhood*, p. 209.

[24] *Voice*, 12 June 1846; Massachusetts General Court, *House Documents*, No. 50 (1845), reprinted in Foner, *Factory Girls*, p. 239.

[25] "Letters from Susan," *Offering*, 2d ser., no. 4 (1844):148.

[26] *Voice*, 12 June 1846. See also, *Voice*, 23 January 1846.

[27] *Offering*, 2d ser., no. 2 (1842):120. See also, letter of "An Operative," *Voice*, 22 January 1847; Bagley's letter, *Voice*, 8 September 1846.

render the Sabbath "a pastime, or a day in which the weary operatives may attend to their own private business." Moreover, these employers enjoyed the same dominant position in the meetinghouse that they held in the workplace. "Is it strange," Bagley wanted to know, "that the operatives should stay away from the churches where they see the men filling the 'chief seats,' who are taking every means to grind them into the very dust?" Ministers constituted still another obstacle: "their sanction of the system . . . disqualifies (the operatives) to attend church and cultivate the spirit of the gospel."[28]

But the most common complaint had a particularly *female* cast. Mill girls, some argued, were further discouraged by the necessity and difficulties of emulating contemporary fashions. "Our Agents and the aristocratic class to which they belong," Bagley observed, "have ordained fashions in dress and equipage, which the operative is unable to follow, and they must at any rate *ape them*, or they will be wanting in self-respect." As for those who went to meeting in their "plain country dress" because they could find neither the time nor the money to keep their "wardrobe in church-going order," Bagley said, they "are almost stared out of countenance."[29]

For most mill girls, these criticisms did not reflect an "infidel," or anti-Christian, position. Bagley, extremely influential as editor of the *Voice of Industry* and president of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, addressed the subject only "with painful emotions" and "regret." "We would thank God most devoutly," she announced, "if there could be found a house of worship in Lowell, where the Gospel, as preached by ancient disciples, could be heard by every operative."[30] In the absence of such a church, many simply rejected the prevailing institutions of organized reli-

[28] "An Operative," Introduction, *Factory Tracts*, No. 1; *Voice*, 6 May 1846.

[29] *Voice*, 12 June 1846. See also, letter of "Octavia," *Factory Girl*, 1 March 1843; "Abby's Year in Lowell," *Offering* 1 (1841).

[30] *Voice*, 6 May, 23 January 1846. See also, *Voice*, 12 June 1846. Bagley became a member of the First Universalist Church of Lowell in 1840. Extant church records do not indicate when she left. Records in possession of Laura Husted, Lowell.

gion while they remained pious Christians. Thus, one Lowell mill girl admitted that resting rather than attending church on the Sabbath was "trifling with holy time," but she wondered if those who worshiped alone were not "as near to the kingdom of God" as those who "worship where the useless show of vanity characterizes more the appearance of a playhouse, than of immortal beings congregating for the important purpose of enquiring what they should do to be saved." Sacrifice to God, she insisted, involved "not a change of garments but a change of hearts."[31]

As "Christians without a church," workers like this mill girl drew from a powerful tradition in European and American Protestantism that emphasized faith over forms and ceremonies. In antebellum America, one manifestation of this tradition was "come-outerism," usually associated with abolitionists who, having renounced their churches for countenancing slavery, sometimes established their own anti-slavery congregations.[32] But there were "come-outers" among labor activists as well. Some urged the mill girl "to go out upon the hills, where she might worship in the great temple of the universe, without a priest, as proxy, to stand between her and her Maker."[33] Others, combining religious devotion with the rights of labor, formed alternative churches. In the fall of 1845, for example, a Lowell newspaper reported that "*fashion*" had rendered church attendance "so expensive" that many operatives now held Sabbath meetings at the Mechanics' Reading Room where they read from Scripture, sang hymns, and discussed "topics affecting the rights and interests of the laborer."[34]

[31] *Voice*, 12 June 1846.

[32] See esp. Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

[33] *Voice*, 2 April 1847. See also Laura S. Brigham, ed., "An Independent Voice: A Mill Girl from Vermont Speaks Her Mind," *Vermont History* 61 (Summer 1973):142–46.

[34] *Vox Populi* (Lowell), reprinted in *Young America* (New York), 18 October 1845. See also the LFLRA report to the National Industrial Congress (October 1845), describing Sabbath meetings to "discuss the great principles which pertain to human rights and human duties" (*Voice*, 7 November 1845).

But it would be wrong to infer that the discontented had abandoned the established churches altogether. Indeed, there is evidence, though fragmentary, of labor protest welling up from within mill town churches themselves. During the 1836 "turn-out" in Lowell, a local Methodist minister dispensed certificates of dismissal, in essence membership transfers, to some sixty or seventy female strikers in his church who chose to leave town rather than return to work.[35] In numerous communities, both Calvinistic and Freewill Baptists provided important support for female labor protest, suggesting that these churches maintained a following among the ranks of radical mill women. When factory girls in Amesbury, Massachusetts, "turned out" in 1836 over an increased work load, they met in the local Baptist vestry to choose officers and pass resolutions.[36] A decade later, in Lowell, a touring correspondent for the New York *Working-Men's Advocate* reported speaking before a large and receptive audience "of factory girls and working men" at the local Freewill Baptist meetinghouse.[37] And, although the Lowell clergy of the 1840s were generally recognized by contemporaries as opponents of the labor movement, the pastor of the Worthen Street Baptist Church did support the mill girls' demand for the ten-hour workday.[38] Meanwhile, Lowell's first Freewill Baptist preacher, Hiram Stevens, surfaced in 1847 as the president of the Dover, New Hampshire, Female Labor Reform Association. When Stevens opened the association's "social pic nic" with a prayer in the spring of that year, it is likely that more than a few of those in attendance were members of his congregation.[39]

Still, for many, perhaps for most, the labor movement itself was their only church. For antebellum labor reform, particularly in the 1840s, often evinced the evangelical style of its

[35] *Zion's Herald* (Boston), 5, 12 October 1836.

[36] Edith Abbott, *Women in Industry: A Study in American Economic History* (1910; reprint ed., New York: Arno and the New York Times, 1969), p. 131n.

[37] *Working-Men's Advocate* (New York), 2 November 1844.

[38] *Voice*, 9 October 1846.

[39] *Voice*, 16 April 1847.

age.[40] One poet in the Lowell FLRA exhorted her sisters to "chide the sinful, turn the erring," while another cajoled the uninitiated, "Come! join ye this worthy band / And drive oppression from the land."[41] A Lowell factory girl reminded her compatriots in the Manchester FLRA that they would probably meet many "faithless and indifferent ones," who must be shown "the error of their ways."[42] Meanwhile, the Manchester Association vowed not to suffer factory evils "without our testimony against them."[43] And, at "social gatherings" and "fairs" in Lowell, Manchester, and elsewhere, female operatives joined with male workers in "nigh fancying ourselves in a 'better land' where sin and oppression were unknown."[44]

Some thought this endeavor was a particularly *female* province, identifying labor reform with those other benevolent enterprises in which women were so prominent during these years. In a letter to the *Voice of Industry* denouncing prevailing views of the proper "sphere of woman's influence," "Olivia" insisted that there was no "good work or benevolent enterprise" outside "woman's sphere." "Shall she not be a ministering angel at the hovel of intemperance and wretchedness," she asked; "shall not her kind words and tears of sympathy recall the wanderer, and make glad the hearts made desolate by sin?"[45] Here, indeed, was one answer to the problem of church participation in the mill community: labor reform as Christian benevolence.

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It should come as no surprise that mill girls in antebellum New England often spoke of labor reform in terms of Chris-

[40] On the evangelical style of the labor movement in general during these years, see my "A Good Time Coming: Religion and the Emergence of Labor Activism in Antebellum New England" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1983).

[41] *Voice*, 8 May, 20 February 1846.

[42] *Voice*, 17 April 1846.

[43] *Voice*, 12 February 1847.

[44] *Voice*, reprinted in *Young America*, 28 February 1846.

[45] *Voice*, 5 December 1845.

tian benevolence. As female Americans, they had been taught that their sex had a special responsibility to protect the moral virtue of the republic; as Christian Americans, they had been taught that they had a special responsibility to save themselves and humanity.[46] Like their sisters in a host of antebellum movements, from moral reform to women's rights, radical mill women had absorbed these lessons and applied them to the cause of secular reform. They had been stirred to action, they said, by religious obligation. In its report to the New England Workingmen's Association in April 1846, the Lowell FLRA talked of a "spirit abroad in the world" that would not be stilled until justice, right, and brotherhood were established throughout the land. "Let no one disregard the holy, benevolent promptings of this heaven-derived spirit in the soul," the association cautioned, "but rather heed its kind warnings, and obey faithfully its imperative commands!"[47] The labor reform movement for which the Lowell women spoke—its style, its critique, and its social vision—provides ample evidence that this spirit had indeed taken root among certain workers. The particular cast of that movement derived at least in part from the fact that these workers were often women.

Like evangelists, radical mill women of the 1840s exhorted their constituency to do battle "in the name of God" on behalf of a "righteous" and "holy" cause.[48] True to their heritage, they made good use of the Bible. In the women's

[46] See esp. Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980) and Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1980).

[47] *Voice*, 10 April 1846. See also, LFLRA report in *Voice*, 23 January 1846.

[48] My decision to focus on the 1840s forces me to sidestep a critical question raised by a number of recent studies: did the revivals of the 1837 depression infuse evangelical piety into the working class (and thus the working-class movement), fundamentally altering its character? All the evidence is not in on this subject, but in towns as diverse as Fitchburg and Fall River, Massachusetts, significant numbers of labor reformers during the 1840s had been members of local churches for a *decade or more*. See my "A Good Time Coming," chap. 2. On the impact of the depression revivals, see esp. Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

column of the *Voice of Industry,* "Juliana" roused her sisters with messianic imagery drawn from the Old Testament.

> Let the thought that we are engaged in a *good* work nerve us on to duty. The battle is not to the strong, nor the race to the swift—but to the righteousness of the cause. In the strength of Elijah's God, the God of Right, let us march boldly on to the conquest. Let us take no rest until the shout shall rend the earth and heavens—"Goliath is fallen!"[49]

Similarly, Manchester FLRA leader Mehitable Eastman encouraged a group of operatives in her city to persevere if their first efforts at reform should fail. "Let us remember," she told them at a labor rally, "that the children of Israel did not arrive at the promised land, save through a journey of forty years in the wilderness."[50]

But nowhere was the mill girls' exhortatory use of Scripture more colorful and dramatic than in their poetry. Typical of this genre was "Amelia's" "The Summons," which appeared in the Lowell FLRA's *Factory Tracts.* In the last two stanzas, this poet-operative inspired her sisters with promises drawn from Isaiah and the Gospels.

> Yea, be thou strong—there yet remains
> A promise sure to thee,
> That God will break the oppressor's chains,
> And set the prisoner free.
>
> That righteousness and truth shall reign,
> Through all the peopled earth,
> And heaven repeat the exulting strain,
> Which hailed creation's birth.

Now here surely was a summons no faithful Christian could resist.[51]

God's presence loomed large in this rhetoric. Ending nearly all of their letters, announcements, and speeches with

[49] *Voice,* 12 June 1846.

[50] *Voice,* 4 September 1846.

[51] *Factory Tracts,* No. 1.

appeals for divine favor, the mill girls sometimes referred to the deity as the "Omnipotent power" or the "All-seeing eye."[52] In this circumvention of earthly authority, they no doubt found an antidote to their sense of powerlessness, not only as workers but as *female* workers. Certainly, some of them did not hesitate to invoke Old Testament images of a vengeful Lord. "The Warning Cry," a poem that appeared in the *Voice of Industry*, was directed at the movement's enemies.

> Tremble, tremble! well ye may,
> Godless tyrants of the day,
> Trampling on your fellow-clay!
> Trampling human hearts to dust!
>
> Vengeance is the Lord's! beware!
> He will list the poor man's prayer,
> Raise the crushed, and chase despair!
> Tyrants, woe! THE LORD IS JUST![53]

To be sure, radical mill girls also appealed to a "beneficent God," the "God of Infinite Love" and the "kind father," and to this extent they reflected the general "feminization" of Protestantism during the early nineteenth century.[54] But such images were evoked when the mill girls spoke of their blessings or when they appealed for support from the larger community. When they faced their enemies, they usually solicited the aid of a "God of Right and Justice" rather than a God of mercy and forgiveness.[55]

[52] See, for examples, notice of NELRL meeting, *Voice*, 26 February 1847; letter of "J.R.," *Voice*, 9 October 1846; letter of "Mary Ann," *Voice*, 28 May 1846; Bagley's speech at NEWA convention, *Voice*, 11 September 1845; Stone's letter to Manchester operatives, *Voice*, 26 December 1845; *Literary Wreath and Factory Girls' Album* (Exeter, N.H.), 10 July 1845, reprinted in Foner, *Factory Girls*, pp. 217–18.

[53] *Voice*, 5 December 1845. See also, Bagley's editorial, *Voice*, 15 May 1846; Mehitable Eastman's report to the NELRL, in *Voice*, 12 February 1847.

[54] Stone's letter to Manchester operatives, *Voice*, 26 December 1845; Bagley's speech to NEWA, *Voice*, 9 November 1845; letter of "Juliana," *Voice*, 7 May 1849.

[55] This is, of course, a difficult point to prove, but it is worth pursuing the possibility that labor activists used a different vocabulary, perhaps rooted in different biblical traditions, depending upon the circumstances. It does appear that religious mill women could speak both the language of anger and of love, depending upon their audience. In her first column as editor of the *Voice*, for example, Sarah Bagley

Whatever the character of their appeals to God, Christianity was the mill girls' point of departure, providing them a *raison d'être*. When the LFLRA endorsed a proposal for what amounted to a general strike for the ten-hour workday in 1846, for example, it did so with the caveat that it should be considered merely "one step, towards the great end to be attained": "Christianity in its original simplicity, and pristine beauty."[56] Their religion also provided these operatives with powerful ammunition against their employers and other opponents. In her "Advice to Mill Owners," in which she advocated allowing operatives to leave work for "an hour or two, or a day even," a factory girl in Exeter, New Hampshire, chose to address her employers as churchgoing Christians. "The man who is unkind to his female help," she announced, "cannot be a christian, if he is a church member, a deacon, or even the carrier round of the contribution box."[57]

Scripture, too, proved a powerful weapon in the hands of these radicals. Huldah Stone, who saw herself as a kind of evangelist for the *Voice of Industry*, found biblical analogy particularly useful when she encountered opposition from employers. After a professedly sympathetic machine shop boss in Lawrence, Massachusetts, had refused to purchase a subscription from her because "'females are out of their *place* while soliciting names to a working man's paper,'" Stone wrote a long letter to the *Voice*, reminding both him and her sisters of the role one woman had played in biblical times. It deserves to be quoted in full.

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echoed a note of militancy uncharacteristic of that paper's editorials, either before or after her tenure. Speaking to her constituency and announcing herself to her enemies, Bagley chastised a textile agent who had threatened to discharge a member of the LFLRA. "We will make the name of him who dares the act, stink with every wind, from all points of the compass," she warned (*Voice*, 15 May 1845). When she addressed the NEWA convention as president of the LFLRA the following fall, however, she insisted that her cause was one in which every philanthropist should take an interest, reminding her audience to "be true to the sympathies and emotions of piety which a God of Infinite Love has implanted in every human soul" (*Voice*, 9 November 1845).

[56] *Voice*, 23 January 1846.

[57] *Factory Girls' Album*, 14 February 1846. See also, Stone, "Improvement of Time," in *Voice*, 7 August 1845; Ada, "The Universal Brotherhood," *Voice*, 6 February 1846.

Only think of it, girls, how very unfeminine and "out of place" it would have been in this gentleman's eyes, had he lived in Christ's day, for Mary to have gone alone to the sepulcre where none but *Jesus* slept. No *ladies* there? Why in all probability he would not have received the news of the glorious resurrection from her lips had it been what his soul was panting to hear; for, O shameful to relate, a *female* had dared to presume to know for herself somewhat of that blessed "truth" which was to elevate and make good and happy the race, and had even stepped out of *her place* (the *back kitchen* I suppose he meant) so far, as to go out and ascertain whether Christ was indeed risen, and to proclaim the glorious news to her friends and her kindred![58]

Stone, true to her namesake, the Old Testament prophetess Huldah, was by all accounts one woman who did not remain in the "place" set aside for those of her sex.

Just as they used their religion effectively to criticize their enemies, these operatives drew upon the Bible and Christianity to assert their dignity and worth both as women and as workers. In "A Dream" (subtitled, "I had a dream which was not *all* a dream"), a Manchester factory girl described her vision of the Judgment Day. Sinners having been arrayed in groups "like criminals," the agents and owners of the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company stood before their Maker. As on earth, the agents spoke for their employers.

Judge. What were you doing on Sunday, the-day-of-1844?
Agent. Attending church.
Judge. But I am informed that you were blasting rocks.
Agent. Oh, ah, ye-yes-I, we employed some common people to do that for us, *I* attended church *myself.*
Judge. You must go below.

Then, a factory girl from one of the Amoskeag mills appeared.

Judge. What were you doing on Sunday the-day-of-1844?

[58] *Voice*, 13 July 1847. Like working men, the mill girls also used Christ as a model for emulation. See letter from Lowell, *Voice*, 11 September 1845; Bagley, *Voice*, 6 February 1846; letter of "Weaver," *Democrat* (Manchester, N.H.), 13 January 1847.

Girl. I attended church in the morning and in the afternoon I rambled off into the woods.
Judge. How came you to ramble in the woods on Sunday?
Girl. I had no time on weekdays.

After eliciting information on her working hours and the time remaining "for relaxation, religious and moral instruction, reading, social visiting and intercourse with your family," the judge decided this factory girl's fate.

Judge. You may go to Heaven.
Girl. What seat shall I take?
Judge. Any of the upper seats that you like.

Echoing Christ's prediction in Matthew that "the last will be first, and first last," this vision served to remind the mill girls that their day would come.[59]

As the foregoing attests, some mill girls had their own vision of woman's proper station in society. They based that vision on their interpretation of a fiercely debated concept in antebellum America, God's "design." In a typical recourse to this rationale, notices for LFLRA meetings invited all females "who would wish to place women in that elevated station intellectually and morally which a bountiful Creator designed her to occupy in the scale of being."[60] This "design" —the basis of labor's argument for the ten-hour workday in antebellum America—necessitated that workers have the freedom to perfect themselves (physically, intellectually, morally, and spiritually) through the cultivation of their God-given faculties, and thereby "honor the great Creator."[61] Here the mill girls advanced a class demand, on behalf of *female* workers, for the right to decide how much of their time would be their own and how much they would sell to their employer.

As women, though, these operatives also had special concerns. It is well known that the mill girl's morality was a chief

[59] *Democrat*, 5 September 1845, reprinted in Foner, *Factory Girls*, pp. 81–82; Matt. 20:16. See also, Bagley's editorial, *Voice*, 8 May 1846.

[60] *Voice*, 9 January 1846; 18 September 1845.

[61] See, for examples, *Voice*, 18 August, 18 September 1845; 26 November 1847.

interest of the *Lowell Offering*, as well as of the mill owners, the clergy, and the broader community; but it was also a major preoccupation of female labor reformers.[62] The new industrial communities, the LFLRA reported, contained thousands of "young, unsuspecting females, who are thrown upon the charities of a cold, unfriendly world, in helpless childhood, and compelled to earn their daily bread somewhere or perish in the streets!"[63] The depths to which a mill girl might sink were frightening, indeed. In her opening column as editor of the *Voice*, Sarah Bagley reminded her sisters of what awaited them should they fail to maintain their vigilance. While she and the defenders of the factory system agreed that, as she put it, "the standard of virtue in Lowell, is far above that of any other city of its size in the Union," she was hardly sanguine about the moral climate of "life among the spindles." Temptation abounded, Bagley believed, and Satan was its merchant.

> Never, never, in the name of heaven, permit Lowell to boast her 'nymphs of the pave. At the dance, upon the street, at the social gathering, in church, or by your own fireside shrink as from the abyss of infamy, from the steady gaze or stealthy touch of the *fiend* in human form, who for a paltry job would rob you of bliss in your life, and destroy a lone girl's happiness, away from friends and home.

If Bagley's language here echoed pro-corporation exhortations on proper female behavior, the meaning was far different. While, as Christians, Bagley and her opponents shared an overriding concern with sin, they diverged sharply on its origins. For the mill owners and their allies, sin in Lowell was a product of individual moral failing alone. For

[62] The sinfulness that seemed to attend commercial and industrial capitalism concerned male labor reformers as well. Indeed, William F. Young, the founder of the *Voice*, referred to Lowell as a "wilderness of sin" (see *Voice*, 6 March 1846). Still, female activists seem to have been particularly troubled by this issue, because it was so often associated with the degradation of women. On Young, see my "Religion and Labor Reform in Antebellum America: The World of William Field Young," *American Quarterly* 38 (Summer 1986): 265–86.

[63] *Voice*, 19 February 1847.

Bagley, the problem was "the division of labor consequent upon the introduction of machinery."[64] On this issue, she and the defenders of the Lowell system were diametrically opposed.

Still, the labor reformers' preoccupation with sin reflected a view of woman's "place" that was not entirely at odds with the ideology of domesticity promoted by contemporary moralists.[65] Though these mill women advocated equal standing with men, in marriage as well as in society, they generally accepted the prevalent belief that men and women were fundamentally different.[66] In their view, no less than in that of their contemporaries, women had a unique moral obligation that could be fulfilled only through marriage and motherhood. Thus, at the top of "Juliana's" list of the "Evils of Factory Life" was the destruction of "all love of order and practice in domestic affairs." Female operatives would one day be wives and mothers, she reminded her sisters. But without time to cultivate the mind and form good habits, they would be "deficient in everything pertaining to those holy, *sacred* names!" They would be unprepared for their ordained responsibility to their families, "to instruct them in the great duties of life." If " 'the mother educates the man,' " "Juliana" asked, what could be expected from young women "incarcerated within the walls of a factory, while as yet mere children . . . surrounded on all sides with the vain ostentation of fashion, vanity and light frivolity—beset with temptations without and the carnal propensities of nature within?"[67] The attack on the factory system here was radical, but the view of women was conventional indeed.

[64] *Voice*, 15 May 1846.

[65] On the "canon" of domesticity during this period, see Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*.

[66] On marriage, see letters in *Lynn Pioneer*, reprinted in *Voice*, 14 August 1847; *Factory Girls' Album*, 28 February, 14 March 1846, 15 February 1847. On support for women's rights, see Foner, *Factory Girls*, p. 294.

[67] *Factory Tracts*, No. 1. See also, Clariette, "The Ten Hour System," *Factory Girls' Album*, 11 April 1846.

Clearly, much remains to be explored about the role of religion in the lives of the New England mill girls. In particular, we need to know more about their actual participation in local churches, since organized worship constituted a central part of their employers' design for a model industrial community. Were labor reformers more or less likely to be church members than their more quiescent peers? At the time of their political involvement, were they likely to be congregants of long standing or converts of a recent revival? To what denominations did they belong? Did their denominational preferences reflect theological issues or local peculiarities? What role did sympathetic (or hostile) clergymen play? Most important, how did the nature and scope of the mill girls' church involvement change over time?

Our knowledge may be limited, but we know enough to begin rethinking much of what we have assumed about religion's role in mill towns like Lowell. For the dissenters among the mill girls attacked the factory system in the name of its alleged bulwark—Christianity. There is, of course, something of a paradox here: those who protested labor conditions, indeed those who organized and led a movement radically to transform those conditions, spoke as traditionalists, calling for a return to the principles and values of a (however fancified) gentler age.[68] In seeking to stem the tide of innovations they perceived as antithetical to the life they had known in the New England countryside, they were conservatives. Moreover, their views about women's role in society, though often belied by their activities, could be traditional as well. Still, in seeking to root out the sin and vice they believed attended capitalist industrialization, they were radicals. Their vision of a Christian commonwealth where mill

[68] For interesting perspectives on this phenomenon in different historical settings during the same years, see Craig Jackson Calhoun, "The Radicalism of Tradition: Community Strength or Venerable Disguise and Borrowed Language?" *American Journal of Sociology* 88 (March 1983):886–914; William H. Sewell, Jr., "Artisans, Factory Workers, and the Formation of the French Working Class, 1789–1848," in Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg, eds., *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 45–70.

girls would take the front seats while the textile owners and their agents were sent "below" marked them as dissidents indeed.

Jama Lazerow, *Assistant Professor of History at the University of Puget Sound, is the author of the forthcoming* Religion and the Working Class in Pre-Civil War America.