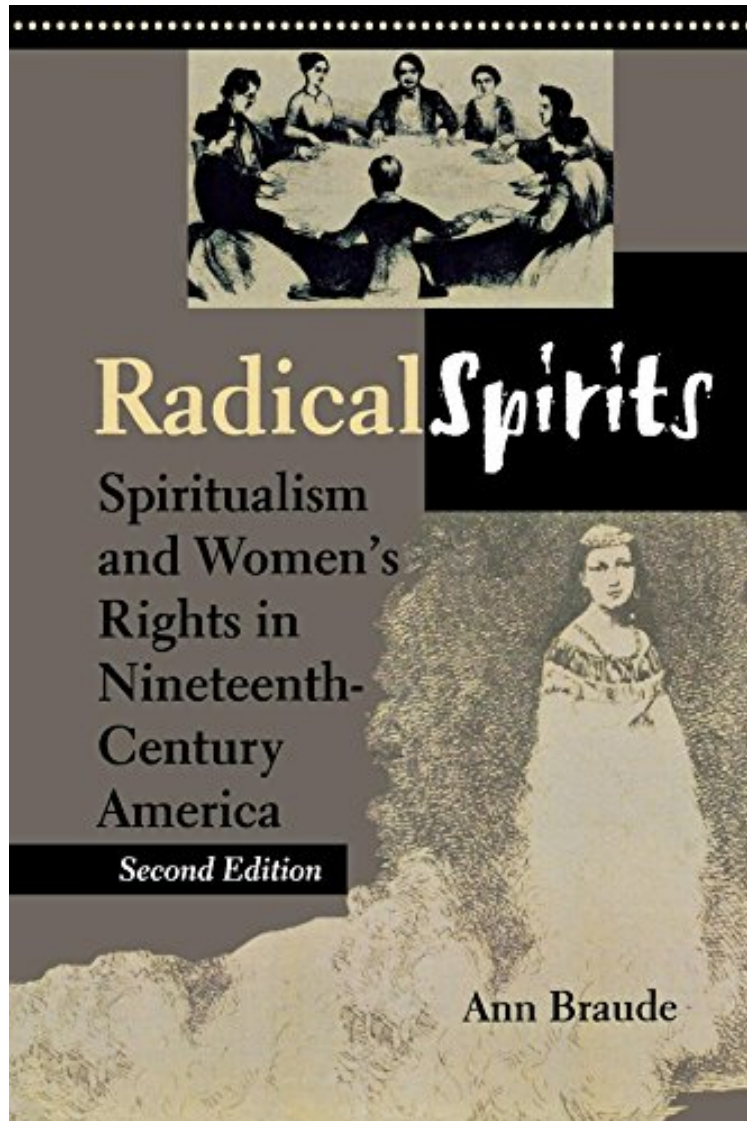


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## Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America, Second Edition

*Ann Braude*

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**Ann Braude : Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America, Second Edition** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America, Second Edition:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. **Feminism's mystical foremothers** By T. Peter **Feminisms Mystical Foremothers** Spiritualism is usually remembered now as a bizarrely quaint and disreputable Victorian cultural byway, a sadly amusing blend of credulity and charlatanry. Few now recall that it once attracted some of its times leading intellectuals, or that it was closely allied with that days progressive social movements. Harvard historian Ann Braude, director of the Women's Studies in Religion Program and Senior Lecturer on American Religious History at Harvard Divinity School, has tried to correct this historical amnesia. Her first book, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-century America* (1989, 2001), explored the engagement of Spiritualism with the women's rights movement, as well as with abolitionism, labor unionism, socialism, temperance, and alternative medicine. She particularly stressed the affinity of Spiritualism with both women and Black liberation, and the radical individualism of both the Spiritualists and the early feminists. In "Radical Spirits," Ann Braude argued that the involvement of women in Spiritualism provided them with a religious alternative to male-dominated mainstream religions, and also gave them a social and political voice. e.g., opportunities for leadership and public speaking. Many feminist historians have considered religion an enemy of women's emancipation, while historians of religion have seen signs of feminism in women's religious activities, a scholarly impasse Braude addressed in her introduction to the second (2001) edition. The current political prominence of the "Religious Right" makes it easy to assume that the churches have "always" preached "family values" and "woman's proper place. Moreover, many organized progressives (including organized feminists) have a "secular bias," assuming that a true liberal (or feminist) must be an agnostic/atheist secular humanist, a spiritual and cultural grandchild of the 18th century Enlightenment. In her "Introduction to the Second Edition" to *Radical Spirits*, Braude noted a certain squeamishness about religious faith on the part of some scholars (many feminists among them) that has obscured important aspects of women's cultures." The "rejection of religious belief and practice as analytic categories" by such scholars and feminists seemed to "presuppose an opposition between faith and reason and to privilege the side of the binary historically associated with masculinity." By "ignoring or downplaying the role of religious motivations, experiences, and meaning-systems," historians "downplayed arenas of American culture in which women might be more important than in--say--politics, business, or international affairs." Braude hoped that "by demonstrating the religious motivations of historical actors who would appeal to contemporary readers," like campaigners for Black and women's rights, she might "convince my colleagues to take religion more seriously." Thus, by introducing the upstate New York Fox family rappings in the 1840's "from the point of view of dedicated Quaker abolitionists," she hoped to "encourage readers to question their own easy dismissal of Spiritualists." Her "goal" was "not that readers should take spirit communications more seriously," but "rather that they should take those who spoke to spirits more seriously." Whether "as a result of *Radical Spirits* or not," Spiritualism has been taken more seriously as a theological, intellectual, and social movement in subsequent scholarly treatments" since 1989-1990. Braude noted that while "the discussion of an overlap between Spiritualism and the women's rights movement was greeted with interest by religious and cultural historians in the 1990's after the original publication of *Radical Spirits*, it was received more coolly by political historians and historians of the women's rights tradition," perhaps because of the "secular bias" of "organized progressivism." When this "overlap" was mentioned, Braude was "frequently asked for the names of women's rights activists who became adherents" of Spiritualism. Upon "learning that the Spiritualists were not among the handful of well-known suffrage leaders" like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, and Lucretia Mott, many dismissed the overlap as insignificant." They were "disappointed" to learn that Spiritualists "in the vanguard of women's rights" included Lucy Stone's sister-in-law Anna Blackwell, Susan B. Anthony's cousin Sarah Anthony Burtis, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's neighbors Mary Ann and Thomas McClintock, and Lucretia Mott's dinner guests, "not the famous leaders themselves." These friends and relatives of the famous, "because of their unconventional religious views," played "only a small role in histories of the women's rights movement," which have focused on the two giants" Stanton and Anthony, and on the notorious Victoria Woodhull." This "tone-deafness to religion" marred Ken Burns' "otherwise excellent" 1999 documentary *Not for Ourselves Alone*, where Frances Willard, who "led the largest nineteenth-century organization to support woman suffrage," was "described as an enemy of freedom who hoped to use the vote to enforce Christian morality," for her temperance activism and leadership of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Barbara Goldsmith's *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1998), "worse than ignoring religion, held up the involvement of suffragists with Spiritualism as a source of shock and sensationalism," a trivialization "*Radical Spirits* hoped to prevent" The "inclusion of religion within the historical assessment of feminism in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries," she felt, was "important for several reasons." It could "help dispel the idea that religion and feminism are opposing forces in American culture," an "assumption" that "undergirds many positions articulated both within conservative religious circles and within progressive feminism." Thus, "Some contemporary feminists assume that religious women suffer from false consciousness and that their allegiance to patriarchal religious organizations makes them incapable of authentic work on behalf of women." However, "religious hierarchies often discourage or prohibit women's public leadership and assume that those who work to improve women's status lack authentic faith." Both "assumptions," Braude felt, reflected misconceptions about the relationship between religion and feminism." Both, she noted, "make recurrent references to 'secular feminism,'

most often exemplified by the National Organization of Women (NOW)." "Even the history of NOW itself," however, complicated "the characterization of feminism as an exclusively secular movement." A photograph of NOW's founders suggested feminism's religious side, showing a nun in full habit and Pauli Murray, the first Black woman ordained as an Episcopal priest, alongside Betty Friedan. Besides "including religious women among its founders," NOW in its early years "included religion as an arena of feminist activism," sponsoring an Ecumenical Task Force on Women and Religion among its early activities. *Ms.* magazine likewise, from its beginning, reported on feminist activity within religious groups. Its December 1974 issue featured the first ordination of women as Episcopal priests and an excerpt from Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father*, while the July issue included the response of three religious Jews to the question, "Is It Kosher to Be a Feminist?" Including religion in discussions of feminism's history was "also necessary to provide an accurate assessment of the movement's impact." Just as the exclusion of Spiritualists left only a few prominent public figures identified with 19th century suffragism, the "exclusion of religious women from the 'second wave'" of post-1960 feminists made it appear a relatively narrow and homogeneous group." Attention to "Catholic, Evangelical, Mormon, Jewish, and Muslim feminists suggested "the movement's deep and broad reach into every region and sector of American life" beyond a small minority of "cultural elite" college-educated urban agnostics. While "many feminists chose their religious communities as their sphere of feminist activism," Braude noted, others "became convinced that their faith traditions could not be cleansed of sexism, and left them behind." However, "even among this group, religion was often a focus of feminist activity." The feminist spirituality movement thus emerged as "an alternative for those who hoped to abandon patriarchal traditions without abandoning religious experience," who might cease to identify as Catholics, Jews, Baptists, or Presbyterians without embracing agnostic or atheistic secular humanism. "Feminist witchcraft, goddess worship, and a variety of New Age spiritualities" thus "incorporated feminism and spread it into new arenas" as did Braude's protagonists a century earlier. "As in Spiritualism, many of these groups eventually found kinship with male co-religionists in neopaganism." Throughout "Radical Spirits," Braude emphasized the "individualism" of the Spiritualists and of the 19th century feminists who often embraced Spiritualism. "Because Spiritualism asserted that divine truth was directly accessible to individual human beings through spirit communication," it provided a religious alternative that supported the individualist social and political views of antebellum radicals." Spiritualists in turn "adopted a radical social program based on the same individualist principles that supported its unconventional religious practice." If "untrammelled by repressive social or religious strictures," they believed, "individuals could serve as vehicles of truth because each embodied the laws of nature in his or her being." While "other radicals struggled to reconcile their commitment to individualism with their belief in the sovereignty of God," Spiritualists "found in their faith direct divine sanction for advancing social change." Braude's "individualism" was not the "rugged individualism" of the 19th century Social Darwinist disciples of Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner and of our own day's Ayn Randians and conservative Republicans. It was an "Expressive Individualism" stressing nonconformist personal beliefs and life-styles rather than a "Possessive Individualism" based on property rights and ruthless economic competition. Above all, Braude emphasized, by allowing women to serve as mediums, ministers, and lecturers, Spiritualism enabled women to act as leaders and public speakers, roles largely denied them in mainstream churches and in business, politics, and the professions. However, Spiritualism also appealed to other concerns of special importance to women. It particularly appealed to anxious and sorrowing mothers in an age of high childhood mortality and a widespread Calvinist religion stressing sin, hell, and damnation themes. She noted three immediate factors jointly provoking popular interest in Spiritualism, particularly among women: the desire for empirical evidence of the immortality of the soul; the rejection of Calvinism or evangelicalism in favor of a more liberal theology; and the desire to overcome bereavement through communication with departed loved ones. Spiritualism was eagerly embraced by people appalled by Calvinist and evangelical hellfire and damnation theology, by Calvinist doctrines of predestination and infant damnation, or the Catholic belief that the unbaptized would spend eternity in Limbo. On these lines, however, Braude did not address the interesting question of the role Spiritualism might play in today's culture wars if it were still a popular, publicly visible movement as it was in the 19th century? Might it become a popular religion for 21st century Americans seeking the consolations of religious faith without the up-tight moral rules and sexual politics of fundamentalist Protestantism and conservative Catholicism, by allowing them both their gay marriage or right to choose and their hope for life after death and reunion with departed loved ones? Braude avoided such what if? speculation. Spiritualists seeking women's emancipation, Braude noted, stressed women's health and medical as well as social and political concerns, championing dress reform to free women from cumbersome clothing, alternative medicine, and also temperance. They all condemned the baleful influence of tobacco and alcohol. While they objected to the intolerance and sectarianism of the evangelical temperance movement, they unanimously supported its goal. However, some Spiritualists who initially participated in the temperance movement later abandoned it for its religiously bigoted spirit, regretting its adoption by the Protestant churches with their conservative middle-class values and religious moral absolutism. While Braude stressed Spiritualism's affinity with movements like temperance, dress reform, and alternative medicine seeking a healthier, more natural life-style, she did not mention its close parallels with European movements of the time similarly pursuing a healthy life in harmony with nature, such as the late 19th and early 20th century German

Lebensreform (life reform) movement, which championed vegetarianism, alternative medicine, dress reform, abstinence from tobacco and alcohol, and sometimes even nudism. While ante-bellum Spiritualism, feminism, and temperance all reflected radical individualism, Braude saw all three becoming more conservative after the Civil War. Post-Civil War Spiritualists become less involved with social and political reforms, while the women's suffrage and temperance movements became more respectable, abandoning their radical individualism as they were increasingly adopted by evangelical Protestants. Post-Civil War suffragism toned down or abandoned its early identification with marriage or divorce reform and free love, and both the women's suffrage and the temperance movements distanced themselves from Spiritualism. Spiritualism, Braude noted, was not the only unorthodox religious movement appealing to 19th century American women. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's Theosophy and Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science were both headed by a woman, both espoused ideas pioneered by the Spiritualists, and appealed largely to people either already involved in Spiritualism or sympathetic to it. However, they both had a sectarian, dogmatic cast foreign to Spiritualism's free-wheeling individualism, and they both emphasized the authority of one woman (Mme. Blavatsky, Mrs. Eddy) rather than seeking to empower women in general. Both the Theosophists and the Christian Scientists increasingly distanced themselves from Spiritualism and from Spiritualist beliefs and practices, especially mediumship and séances. Christian Science also stressed its connection with Protestant Christianity, in contrast to Spiritualism's free-wheeling non-sectarianism and Theosophy's emphasis on Hindu and Buddhist concepts. In stressing 19th century Spiritualism's affinity with feminism, abolitionism, and other progressive reform movements, Braude's *Radical Spirits* is also a valuable counterweight to books linking occultism to reactionary politics, like George L. Mosse's *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (1964), Peter Pulzer's *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (1964), and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke's *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (1985, 1992) and *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism, and the Politics of Identity* (2002). Mosse, Pulzer, and Goodrick-Clarke explored the role of occult, esoteric, and para-scientific beliefs and cults in the rise of Fascism, Nazism, and extreme nationalist and racist ideologies and movements, as part of what we may call the "Counter-Enlightenment," a cluster of elitist, anti-liberal, and anti-democratic movements and ideologies that arose in Europe in the 19th century alongside the more orthodox forms of traditional conservatism. Both the socially and politically progressive Spiritualism described by Braude and the "Counter-Enlightenment" occultism studied by Goodrick-Clarke, Mosse, and Pulzer, along with the technophilic but anti-democratic reactionary modernism explored by Jeffrey Herf in *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (1984), suggest a much more complex "map" of European (and American) intellectual and cultural history than the usual binary narrative of a science-inspired secular-humanist Enlightenment tradition of progressive, egalitarian social and political reforms versus a conservative defense of inherited social hierarchies inspired by a "Throne and Altar" or "obey the powers that be, for they are ordained of God" reading of Christian orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup> of 4 people found the following review helpful. Excellent

By Anonymous I really loved this book, beginning with the very first sentence in the "Acknowledgments." Braude has written a fascinating and balanced blend of social, gender, and religious history. She examines the social radicalism on Women's Rights as it intersected with the religious radicalism of the Spiritualist movement and the relationship of both movements to the construction of gender in America. Furthermore, Braude successfully treats Spiritualism as a legitimate religion, with the compassion and unbiased attention of a true historian, allowing her subjects' the validation of their own experience, without the critical censure of the future. Braude dates and located the inception of both movements to Upstate New York in 1848. She makes a compelling argument for the attraction of Women's Rights to Spiritualists, based in the liberation of women's conventionally domestic spirituality into the public sphere, as it contrasted with the legally limited role of women in American society. Braude finds that spiritualists were particularly concerned with women's physical and moral rights to her own body.<sup>4</sup> of 4 people found the following review helpful. Interesting!

By A. Smith Very interesting and informative book. While I had a basic understanding of both the women's rights movement and Spiritualism, this book brought them together and demonstrated their interconnectedness in ways I had not realized. I was reading this book for fun and occasionally it became a bit dry, but never did I want to put it down! It's organized similarly to a biography or autobiography with background information and stories, but it is certainly not a story book! I would recommend it to anyone with an interest in either Spiritualism or the Suffrage movement, but not to those looking for a fiction novel.

... Ann Braude still speaks powerfully to unique issues of women's creativity-spiritual as well as political-in a superb account of the controversial nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement." Jon Butler *Radical Spirits* is a vitally important book... [that] has... influenced a generation of young scholars." Marie Griffith

In *Radical Spirits*, Ann Braude contends that the early women's rights movement and Spiritualism went hand in hand. Her book makes a convincing argument for the importance of religion in the study of American women's history. In this new edition, Braude discusses the impact of the book on the scholarship of the last decade and assesses the place of religion in interpretations of women's history in general and the women's rights movement in particular. A review of current scholarship and suggestions for further reading make it even more useful for contemporary teachers and students.

From Publishers Weekly According to Braude, many 19th-century women allayed fears of death through spiritualist beliefs; the comfort that spiritualism brought increased their confidence, allowing them to support women's rights and advance an array of causes from the abolition of slavery to women's suffrage and marriage reform. no pw review Copyright 1991 Cahners Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal Braude explores America's spiritualist movement in the context of 19th-century social, denominational, and political history. Spiritualism claimed, through contact with the dead, to be a scientific investigation into the immortality of the soul. The movement was associated with free speech and the abolition of slavery. Because it maintained that divine truth was accessible to any individual, female or male, and thus was accessible outside the male hierarchies of family, church, and politics, it became associated with feminism as well; many early women leaders in all three movements were also spiritualists. A fascinating, well-researched, and scholarly work on a peripheral aspect of the rise of the American feminist movement.- Mary Margaret Benson, Linfield Coll. Lib., McMinnville, Ore. Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc. "It would be hard to imagine a book that more insightfully combined gender, social, and religious history together more perfectly than *Radical Spirits*. Braude still speaks powerfully to unique issues of women's creativity - spiritual as well as political - in a superb account of the controversial nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement. Braude's vivid prose and analytical clarity make an inherently fascinating story all the more compelling - a 'must read' for nineteenth-century U.S. historians whose recent scholarship only highlights the unique, blazing daring of *Radical Spirits*." Jon Butler, Yale University "Radical Spirits is a vitally important book. It is an original interpretation of Spiritualism that does far more than recount the narrow history of a single movement. In effect, the work recasts the history of women's rights in such a way as to show the dynamic impact of religion upon American culture, as it enabled women to become aware of their own voices in a culture that still sought to silence them... The book has ... influenced a generation of young scholars emerging into the profession ... no less than more senior social historians and scholars of religion." --Marie Griffith, Associate Director of the Center for the Study of Religion, Princeton University " ... [*Radical Spirits*] is a wonderful teaching book: it raises crucial questions about gender and race in relation to American religious creativity and asks students to think in new ways about religion and about women's history. My experience has been that students love reading and discussing it." --Robert Orsi, author of *Thank You, St. Jude* "Braude has discovered a crucial link between the early feminists and the spiritualists who so captured the American imagination during the middle of the [nineteenth] century." --Los Angeles Times "An insightful book and a delightful read." --Journal of American History "Continually rewarding." --New York Times Book