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"What a Quickening It Was to My Soul": The Emergence of Women's Autonomy in the New York Religious Tract Society, 1812–1826

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Historians have portrayed the New York Religious Tract Society (1812–1826) as one of the many elite-led 19th-century institutions functioning to discipline lower-class people of New York to conform to the norms and power structures of existing American Society. In the decades following the American Revolution, men from the respectable class encountered a growing number of newcomers who were rebelling against those norms and the structures of conventional authority. The Christian mission association elites who ran the Society embraced religious tracts as an affordable method to reach and re-educate poor and unchurched New Yorkers. However, a close examination of the Society's operation reveals a more complex story. While the Society leadership used annual reports and other publications to mobilize a broad range of its members, those members, who included non-elite people, also took advantage of the printed media. Women members in particular found unprecedented opportunities. Not content with filling supportive roles in the Society, some women began to claim autonomous authority to take care of public matters. Reporting on their own tireless efforts, unique approaches, and creativity, these women compelled the male leadership to acknowledge their valuable contributions to the Society, and thereby gained partial access to the public sphere. No matter how elitist the Tract Society was in the beginning, its success depended on its members' support and consent. The documents of the Tract Society reveal that the women of the auxiliary associations skillfully persuaded the Tract Society's male leaders to admit and accept women's voices and demands.

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On January 30, 1812, wealthy citizens of New York City convened at a room of the Presbyterian church on Nassau Street. With “a desire of extending the knowledge of evangelical truth,” they established the New York Religious Tract Society (NYRTS).[1] The Tract Society hoped to reach the growing number of people who did not attend churches by distributing religious tracts and short pamphlets containing moral stories, particularly to the lower-class residents of the city and its vicinity. Fourteen years later, in 1826, cooperating with their counterpart in Boston, the NYRTS went on to launch a national organization named the American Tract Society (ATS) to lead one of the most flourishing social reform movements of the early 19th century United States.[2]

The backdrop of this campaign was New York in the turbulent Early Republic era. Independence from Britain in the late 18th century had not produced national unity. Creating and running a republic remained an experiment, even in the early 19th century.

While traditional social elites and church leaders in New York retained much of the power they possessed at the time of the American Revolution, various classes of people began challenging them after the revolution. A new breed of businessmen demanded to join the once closed-door “public sphere,” the societal forum in which participants engaged in deliberation that identified social problems and influenced political action, which had previously been reserved just for wealthy landlords and established clerics. Moreover, the concept of republicanism, wherein a small number of respectable men should be responsible in leading the society, was being challenged by the ideal of democracy which embraced the engagement and voices of multitudes of diverse people in society. Bachelors, propertyless men, women, evangelicals, and even free blacks and runaway slaves questioned the boundaries of citizenship, civic engagement, and access to the public sphere.[3]

The state of New York and New York City were both becoming increasingly diverse at the time, and their populations were rising rapidly. Since independence, the state population nearly tripled to about one million in 1810, with development of the inner part of the state proceeding at a fast pace. New York City also experienced a drastic increase in population, changing the formerly walkable city where people knew each other into a city of strangers. Elite New Yorkers believed they needed to address and resolve divisions arising within the newly diverse population and calm potential tensions between groups.[4]

For these traditional elite men, religious tracts appeared a promising way

to achieve their goals. After the dissolution of the church-state system in the early nineteenth century, Christian denominations were racing to reorganize their congregations. However, churches found themselves unable to reach many people given the rapid societal changes and increases in population. Believing that "thousands who live within our reach are in need of instruction, exhortation, and reproof," the Tract Society founders looked for new ways to reach those who might live in small towns without adequate religious resources.[5] Three years after the formation of the New York Bible Society in 1809 which published and distributed Bibles, tracts appeared to be a powerful means to teach Christianity to the growing number of low-income people who did not attend churches. Printing tracts was much cheaper and easier than Bibles.

Historians have depicted civil organizations such as the Tract Society as agents of social control. Just as the Bible was for the New York Bible Society and the Sabbath School was for the Sunday School movement, religious tracts were understood to be the tool the Tract Society used to "discipline" or train newly diverse populations and members of the lower class to conform to elite expectations of moral and social behavior, thereby integrating these groups of people into existing society.[6]

However, a new generation of scholars has recently questioned this thesis. The critical backdrop for this reassessment is the long post-Revolutionary period in the first half of the nineteenth century when these more diverse types of people began to enter and redefine the public sphere.[7] Although the Bible Society, Sunday School movement, and Tract Society were founded by elites from the city, these civil organizations now appear to have been places where much more contentious discourse and debate between elites and new participants occurred than scholars had previously understood or acknowledged.

Unlike closed associations like the freemasons, these new voluntary associations were open to anyone who could pay their affordable membership fees. Riding the wave of the Second Great Awakening, a large Protestant religious revival movement of the early nineteenth century, women, non-wealthy men, and young clerics found opportunities unavailable to them before the Revolution. They could now participate in the public sphere through membership in these organizations that elites had established to further the public good. Informed by periodically printed materials such as annual reports, individual citizens were able to familiarize themselves with what was going on in these organizations and in the broader causes of which they were engaged. Moreover, through reading such

publications and through their own activities, these people who were not elites conceived and implemented their own agendas pertaining to needs which had been previously unaddressed. Indeed, some people ventured into more radical movements for causes such as abolition, women's suffrage, and temperance that threatened the existing well-established power of elite men.[8]

To fully understand this process, one must dive deeper into the original source materials than historians have done before. Increased capacity for mass publication of printed matter in the early nineteenth century made it possible for civil associations to operate as public forums for unprecedentedly diverse groups of people. But those shared printed materials that broad numbers of people received did not necessarily dictate what kind of public forums these publications would become. Critical analysis of organizations' daily operations is needed to fully understand the nature of these communities.

For this examination, the New York Religious Tract Society offers a particularly intriguing set of documents. While many organizations of that age left plenty of records, the Tract Society was a unique association that documented the activities of various classes of tract workers in detail. Publishing letters and reports from branch organizations and their members, the NYRTS's annual reports recorded how the Tract Societies' activities unfolded.[9] These documents reveal internal tensions and maneuvering within the organization, as well as potential overstepping of authority on the part of some people of lower status involved in the tract campaign. In this paper, I devote particular attention to the voices and activities of women, who in early nineteenth-century America were supposed to have very limited access to the public sphere. These women took strategic advantage of opportunities that participating in the Tract Society afforded to them to become more visible and have an impact on matters of public concern.

Development of the Tract Society: Tracts to Discipline People

A campaign to distribute religious tracts might seem old-fashioned today. But that was far from being the case 200 years ago. The NYRTS was part of the larger wave of reform movements equipped with the early nineteenth century's cutting-edge technology.

What made the tract movement possible was highly advanced print technologies for the time, which helped tract workers compete with the burgeoning publishing industry in antebellum America. The Bible Society of Philadelphia was the first to invest in stereo-type printing, a new

technology that had emerged only a few years earlier in England. Using plates of type metal created out of plaster of paris molds, the technology enabled printing and reprinting of entire books without the need to preserve the original type or reset the type for each edition. This technology drastically reduced the cost of publication. With relatively affordable copies of the Bible, the Bible Society of Philadelphia played the leading role among many similar associations in the United States in distributing the Bible. Its success inspired other religious societies as well.

But Bible associations still struggled financially even with stereotypography, and some leaders recognized that printing religious tracts containing fewer pages than the Bible was a more affordable way to reach people. Hence, three years after the formation of the New York Bible Society in 1809, civil and ecclesiastical leaders in Manhattan gathered in 1812 to launch the Tract Society to distribute religious tracts to people in New York State.[10]

Such foresighted investment was not a coincidence. Those who led the Bible societies, the Sunday School movement, and the tract societies often came from the same wealthy, so-called "respectable" class of people. They continued to assume their respectability and entitlement to retaining their leading social role even after losing the exclusive power they wielded before the revolution. This first generation of the moral reform movement leaders came from the same elite class who actively promoted new financial institutions, such as banks and insurance companies, developed various infrastructure projects like the Erie Canal, and ventured into massive foreign and domestic trade. Savvy in business, they were keen on looking for novel technologies.[11]

For these wealthy men, who often were born prior to and grew up during the American Revolution, their interest in business did not contradict their devotion to what they considered the public good. They took it for granted as men of the so-called respectable class that they were responsible for caring for the broader community.[12] Even after the Jeffersonian Revolution pushed these elite Federalist men away from their political positions, they did not lose their sense of obligation to manage their communities. To fulfill what they considered to be their public responsibility, they began to gravitate toward civil associations as a means to influence society. The abandonment of the state-sponsored church system also motivated clerics to try to reorganize their congregations. Believing in the role of Christianity to unify and harmonize a society, they began to launch religious reform movements through Bible societies, Sunday schools, and tract associations to reach people.

The New York Religious Tract Society was established in 1812 as a part of this wave of mission campaigns. The founders of the Tract Society were men from prominent early-Republic New York City families and religious leaders of New York City. Reverends Philip Milledoler, Alexander McLeod, and John B. Romeyn were the active managers of the NYRTS. Businessmen Divie Bethune, John E. Caldwell, Henry Rutgers, and Zecharia Lewis were laymen who joined the cause. Leonard Bleecker was another leader who came from an elite family. They were respectable men of early Republic New York City who presumed themselves to be the leaders of the city.[13]

In their view, too many people in the growing Republic were religiously unprepared. According to the Tract Society, since the "country [was] large; the population far scattered; the means of religious instruction inadequate and uncertain," an unprecedented number of people were without churches or a moral compass. To address this daunting situation, the society believed its members and followers should use religious tracts to "be diligent in diffusing the light of the knowledge of the Lord" to the distant villages across the state.[14] Furthermore, within New York City, the "markets, hospitals, alms-house, prisons, and Sabbath Schools were in nearly the same condition; … many thousands of [the city's] inhabitants … from poverty or disinclination attend[ed] no place of public worship, [and] were wholly unsupplied." Accordingly, the NYRTS worked in Manhattan as well.[15]

The primary activities of the Tract Society were sales and distribution of tracts. "[C]ommunication of religious instruction through the medium of the press" appeared to be a helpful tool for integrating and disciplining non-pious, unchurched populations who lived alongside what the Society considered to be the decent constituents of the emerging Republic.[16]

Churches were not always available to newcomers in new communities. In such circumstances, written tracts had "peculiar advantages." Pointing out that "[w]ords spoken are transient, but a written discourse is a permanent possession," the tract society strongly promoted distributing religious tracts across New York State. The Society also handed out catechisms to try to ensure that it conveyed the right messages to readers.[17]

NYRTS leaders were well aware that they were competing with secular consumer culture. They decried "History and Romance, Philosophy and Poetry—every species of composition, whether grave or ludicrous … employed by the foes of religion" via the emerging publishing industry, and they tried to counter this literary trend by producing their own reading

materials. They expected ready access to religious tracts with curious stories would awaken people attracted to the literature of secular culture.[18]

Members of the Tract Society were confident that printed tracts would reveal Christian truth to all readers. Believing that the religious tracts they distributed were "thankfully received, and read with apparent attention," leaders and tract workers never tired of reporting their successes in the annual reports of the NYRTS.[19]

> In the interior of this State, where the people, although destitute of the stated preaching of the Gospel, have assembled on the sabbath to unite in prayer, and in hearing, a portion of Scripture or a printed discourse, some of our Tracts have been read, addressing a monitory voice to the impenitent and the thoughtless, and communicating to the pious both instruction and fort.[20]

The annual reports paid special attention to cases of successful conversion. No matter how "heedless and inattentive to the concerns of her soul" a non-believer had been, NYRTS members believed that tracts could compel her to discover God's messages.[21]

In the first years after its inception, the Tract Society began to rapidly accelerate its pace of distributing materials. In its first year, the Society distributed 12,000 tracts. By its fifth year, the 1816–1817 fiscal year, it sold 100,000 tracts in addition to giving 35,000 copies away.[22] The Tenth Annual Report proudly announced the distribution of 300,000 tracts in fiscal year 1821–1822.[23] The NYRTS then further expanded its scope by adding French and Spanish versions. The organization, filled with exuberance, joined the international movement, sharing tracts, information, and methods with its London counterpart.[24]

The founders of the NYRTS, its nationalized successor organization the American Tract Society, and the Manhattan-based branch, the New York City Tract Society (founded in 1827) considered their organizations to be formidable institutions of the early 19th century for converting the masses. They celebrated stories of people happily receiving tracts and expressing gratitude. In their view, those people were the poor who deserved to be saved. Leaders of these tract societies hoped that more and more people would follow their example, accept the tracts, and follow the teachings and moral codes they propounded. In this sense, as many historians have described, the tract movement was a means to discipline and unify non-pious people in the age of the Early Republic.

Ordinary Women Who Joined the Tract Society

However, a closer examination of the daily operations of the tract campaign reveals a much more complex picture. It was not only the respectable class of New York but also broader groups of men and women who joined the movement. The Tract Society had to be inclusive by its very nature as an organization dedicated to broad evangelism. Among other things, the tract campaign required a supporting cast of non-leader members to reach out to multitudes of different people.

The Tract Society needed subscribers, donors who bought tracts, and active members who were fired up for the cause. Every annual report of the NYRTS recorded evidence of subscriber enthusiasm. Members of the Society were eager to report that distributed tracts were "read with attention and interest," and the editor of annual reports welcomed that news as proof of the tract movement's success.[25]

The development of auxiliary organizations was even more critical for amplifying enthusiasm for religious tracts. Although the NYRTS had approximately 350 subscribers by its tenth year, nearly double the number it started with in its first year, that number was insufficient to fulfill the broader goals of the movement.[26] In order to increase tract circulation, the NYRTS needed local organizations across and beyond New York State. The 1817 Fifth Annual Report explicitly called for the creation of local branches:

> The Managers of "The New-York Religious Tract Society," deeply impressed with the importance of disseminating Divine Truth through the medium of small Religious Tracts, feel desirous that their Christian Brethren, in various parts of the country, should aid them in their useful labours.[27]

Every subsequent annual report included template bylaws for auxiliary organizations. Inclusion of these templates reveals how crucial these auxiliary branches were to the society.

Men and women in local communities favorably responded to the call. Auxiliary associations across New York State and beyond purchased tracts and aggressively distributed them to their neighbors. The NYRTS leaders always appreciated and admired that "these Auxiliaries [went] into operation without any effort on the part of this Board, and almost without the knowledge of any of its managers."[28] Beyond the control of the

headquarters, local bodies independently expanded the tract movement.

Ordinary men and women pursued the opportunity to launch branch organizations. For many of them, the Tract Society's activities presented an unprecedented chance to get involved in one of the most important and interesting public issues of the age. The annual membership fee of two dollars was affordable enough for broad classes of citizens to be able to join. And as members of the organization who read the society's literature, they shared public concerns with the so-called respectable class of people through correspondence with them, some of which was published in annual reports.

Some members even wrote content for the Society documents. Authoring local branch reports and describing episodes of giving out tracts was a way for men and women to actively participate in the Society.[29] Although they inhabited a different socio-economic sphere from their wealthy counterparts, these people who were not wealthy could raise their relative status and the perception of their moral character in the eyes of others by criticizing the non-pious population in cities.[30]

Women's organizations were especially energetic. Women welcomed the mission and willingly joined the movement with "sensations of delight and gratitude to Him who is the author and conductor of all good."[31] Women were often mentioned as capable workers in the field to convince both young men and women as well as their parents of the value of tracts and Christianity.[32] The NYRTS annual reports expressed gratitude for the female auxiliaries that were instrumental in distributing tracts, and praised the creation of female organizations in Brooklyn, New York; Providence, Rhode Island; Trenton, New Jersey; Camden, North Carolina, and elsewhere. The secretaries of these newly launched women's organizations became almost regular writers in the annual reports. Sending news of the successful development of the tract work, these women upheld the movement nationwide.[33]

As if being pushed by these female associations across the United States, the long-awaited Female Branch of New York Religious Tract Society was founded in Manhattan in 1822. While its officers were the wives and daughters of the male leaders of the NYRTS, the fact they had 600 subscribers suggests that the Female Branch had a broader reach than just members of the so-called respectable class. It attracted women from various classes in the city.[34]

Negotiations within the Annual Reports: Autonomy of Women Tract Workers

These men and women who participated in the NYRTS and came from a broad range of classes in American society, did not necessarily share fully common values. Ironically, the more they tried to develop the movement together, the more differences among themselves became apparent. I focus here on interactions and subtle negotiations taking place between elite men who ran the Tract Society from New York and women from diverse parts of the country who were active members and distributors of tracts. Importantly, some women as part of their work carrying out the organization's mission began to gain various types of autonomy in the tract campaigns.

Leaders of the NYRTS clearly welcomed the rise of female auxiliary associations and their female members. Male founders of the Society knew it was critical to reach out to people beyond the elite class and established churches. Broader classes of people and both men and women joining the movement would increase the influence of the Tract Society.

For the Society leadership, annual reports were indispensable media. While religious tracts offered model stories to be shared and accepted by the poor and other subscribers, annual reports helped the leaders set the Society's course. Widely circulated and read, these reports were the primary vehicles for leaders to inform members and supporters of the Society's principles, goals, achievements, and decisions made at the annual conferences. Sharing this information with subscribers was a way to mobilize and solidify the Tract Society's membership.

Understandably, Zecharia H. Lewis, secretary of the Society, enthusiastically listed the achievements of foreign tract societies and domestic auxiliary associations in these annual communications. Under his editorship, the yearly reports sought to convince members and possible subscribers of the worldwide success of the tract movement. Especially in earlier issues, Lewis emphasized the close relationship between NYRTS and the Tract Society in London and other international counterparts. When the yearly reports began to include lengthy appendix pages in the Third Annual Report, all reports except one letter from New York were from tract societies and their members in foreign nations.[35] Since the NYRTS was still in its formative period, Lewis attempted to impress his readers with the growth of the tract movement by including a list of international achievements.

Annual reports were not the only form of one-way media the Tract

Society employed to disseminate this type of information. The organization also published letters and reports written by its local members, indeed to a greater extent than other contemporary New York civil associations. Foreign and domestic reports in earlier annual reports provided models for writers to follow in subsequent years. And those printed reports solicited additional reports by auxiliary associations and their members, which further assured the success of the Tract Society. In fact, the annual reports became the forum for members to communicate with each other and leaders.

Recording the voices of auxiliary association members was an important strategy for the NYRTS leaders to integrate those supporters into the larger organization. News of another association's launch was tangible evidence of the Society's expansion. Stories of successful tract-giving demonstrated the effectiveness of the tract movement. Moreover, publishing their voices showed public approval of the work of these supporting members of the Tract Society.

In this context, repeated publication of women's voices in the annual reports signified that Lewis and the founding men of the Society approved of women's participation in the movement. Happy reports of the growing number of auxiliary associations every year encouraged readers to launch more associations. Frequent and particular mention of women's auxiliaries suggested that the men at the headquarters recognized the usefulness of women, who had more time, energy, and numbers of people to distribute tracts. Lewis never denounced women's active participation or reports from women. Through the media of annual reports, male leaders attempted to create a harmonious association of both men and women who were devoted to the cause.

For women, it was an invaluable opportunity. At a time when women did not otherwise have a secure pathway into the public sphere, the religious campaign of the Tract Society afforded them a possible gateway. A female organization's annual report, published in part in an NYRTS annual report, expressed and justified their commitment to the cause:

> In our passage through life to eternity, it should be our chief concern to fill up our days with usefulness, and to act in that manner which will best fit us for appearing with acceptance in the presence of God. To have performed acts of benevolence and piety, to have been instrumental in making our fellow creatures holier and happier, will give more real pleasure in life, and more solid satisfaction in death,

> than all that earthly grandeur, honour, and power can afford, and infinitely better fit us for eternity which lies before us.[36]

The report further stated that women participants gained their sense of "usefulness by joining the tract distribution." Given their conviction that the NYRTS and God needed capable hands to help and educate the non-pious poor, women joined the movement to do their part in "acts of benevolence and piety." Declaring that being "instrumental in making our fellow creatures holier and happier" gave women "real pleasure," the author from this female auxiliary club secured a channel to participate in the public sphere. And by citing this particular part of the report, Lewis also appeared to be communicating to readers his approval of how these women from this auxiliary society were fully cooperating with and furthering the goals of the larger Tract Society.

However, women's participation in the Tract Society did not mean that they were always conforming to the expectations and unspoken rules of the elite class. Documents of the NYRTS reveal hidden yet complex negotiations taking place among the Tract Society members. In short, women managed to create and maintain a certain degree of autonomy through the tract movement.

For example, in the 1816 *Fourth Annual Report*, editor Lewis shared a "very interesting letter, from an elderly and pious Lady in Hanover, New-Jersey" sent to a male friend of hers who was a member of the Society in New York City. The letter was valuable to Lewis because it illustrated local women's enthusiastic acceptance of the tract business. The letter reported not only that tracts were "circulated in that neighborhood, and read with great avidity and attention," but that the bundle of tracts "had proved the means of exciting [women] to the immediate establishment of an AUXILIARY TRACT SOCIETY in that village" (emphasis in the original). Lewis happily included the witness of this elderly lady, who promised to work for the Society, saying: "We are willing to be Agents, or Assistants, or any thing, if we can only aid in buying and distributing these little precious Messengers."[37]

A closer look at the letter reveals that not only Lewis but also "an elderly and pious Lady" commanded the discourse. After reading the Third Annual Report, and probably many similar publications in other campaigns, the woman must have known that her letter might get published by the Tract Society. Indeed, Lewis not only summarized her well-written letter in his report, he also published a lengthy excerpt at the beginning of the report's appendix, most of

which contained reports from foreign tract societies. By skillfully dramatizing her experience, the author succeeded in expressing herself and having her voice heard in the public sphere through the annual report.

In her letter, the woman did not present herself as a passive receiver of tracts from the Tract Society. While expressing gratitude for being given tracts and God's blessing, she claimed her readiness to do something:

> I know of no words to express my thanks to God, and to that Society, for sending to us these Reports and Tracts. Oh, sir, how shall I tell you the exercises of my heart, on reading the Report! It was indeed a message from God to my poor soul. I began to read it, and my tears began to flow, under a sense of the goodness of God, in what he is doing in his world, among miserable sinners. I found I could not keep my seat. I longed to be in a private room, where I could remain low in the dust, praising God for his goodness. Oh, what a quickening it was to my soul! [I]t was the means of my weeping, and praying, and praising, in my poor manner, for two days.[38]

In her lengthy praise of God, she carefully emphasized that she first retreated to her "private room" for two days. Yet, she did not forget to mention the "quickening" of her soul. Stimulated by the tracts the Society sent out to her neighbor pastor, she confessed that she was going to create something of her own.

Later in the same paragraph, she described how she immediately found like-minded women in her midst and started to lend and distribute tracts to people in neighboring communities as well. Declaring "Here is now a door open to do much with it, for every one seems desirous to get hold of Tracts to read," the author was no longer hesitant to act because she had a holy mission that she perceived everyone was eager to join.

Before Lewis introduced her to the report's many readers as a willing divine agent, the letter writer had already started her own work as an autonomous actor in the name of God. She took the initiative herself in her own New Jersey community by "immediately request[ing] [her] pastor to write articles for a Society." Having already recruited many new subscribers, she sent her letter to a member of the Tract Society in New York. In fact, in her letter she demanded that the Society entrust her with responsibility:

> I want you, sir, to go to the Society, or the Managers, and request them

> to trust me for one hundred Tracts, some or all sorts, as cheap as they can afford: and ask them to send me a few copies of their Report that I may lend them, as the one I had gone on to another congregation; and I believe that the Lord is with it, and that it will do wonders.

Send tracts to me, she demanded—not to a pastor in her community, but directly to her. She was confident that she was the person who would actually deliver them to her network of people. The letter was her declaration of initiative, in which she insisted upon support and approval from the headquarters.

It is unclear whether Lewis entirely embraced the woman's assertiveness in wholeheartedly seizing the initiative herself. Stressing her cooperative nature in his summary of the letter, Lewis did not necessarily communicate her passionate tone. Nonetheless, the woman's fervor and tangible achievements seemed to have convinced Lewis to include a lengthy excerpt of her letter at the beginning of the annual report appendix. Because Lewis was trying to weave together letters from a broad community of Society members, he appeared to feel compelled to publish a substantial portion of the elderly woman's letter in the important widely circulated annual report. In this way, the annual report was becoming a public arena for every member of the Tract Society.

Beyond the Tract Giving, Beyond the Middle-class

This type of letter offered yet another model for other ambitious women. Learning from and responding to the letter, people expressed their own creativity. Indeed, overstepping the control of male leaders' direction, many women in auxiliary associations quickly moved beyond tract distribution. The annual reports became the incubator for nurturing the autonomy of women tract workers.

The 1817 Fifth Annual Report included a column about a particular "Miss Kingman," who was secretary of the Female Tract Society in Providence, Rhode Island, congratulating her on her splendid effort in her neighborhood. Noteworthy to the Society headquarters was the volunteer work of Kingman and her colleagues in both tract distribution and inspiring creation of new affiliated groups. The column stated that in "addition to their ordinary labour of procuring and distributing Tracts, the pious and enterprising Managers of that Institution have contributed their influence to the establishment of Auxiliary Societies in several of the adjacent towns."[39]

The excerpts of Kingman's original letter contained in the annual report illustrate more. While the Society in New York City was satisfied with simply giving tracts and catechisms to people, Kingman and women in Providence did not believe such distribution work was enough. Preferring a more aggressive campaign, they ran four Sunday Schools by themselves, sent out teachers to distant parts of Rhode Island during the winter break, set up ad hoc schools, and taught children, all while managing the budget. In a quiet manner, Kingman offered NYRTS leaders a model they could learn from and follow. In fact, collaboration with Sunday schools came to be the norm for many tract societies.[40]

Moreover, middle-class women were not the only ones who took advantage of the tract movement. A "female servant" jumped at the chance to join the campaign and sent a letter to headquarters that was published in the Tenth Annual Report. The letter read in part:

> I know not in what way I can best apologize for this intrusion, as I am but a servant, and entirely unknown to you. But I trust you will not be displeased with the following short and simple statement of an attempt at doing good.[41]

Seemingly to apologize for her bold approach, the woman in fact appeared to be demanding in an understated way that the editor accept her letter. She likely knew that the Tract Society needed broader help. And her writing to the headquarters as other women had done provides strong evidence that she had learned how women in the higher socio-economic classes approached and used the Society to enlarge their spheres. Through the publication of her letter, she aimed to make use of the state-level organization's authority to empower herself and other women in domestic service as they attempted to organize their own versions of tract circulation and create their own auxiliary society in their village.[42]

For these servant women, participation in the tract distribution was a means to expand their sphere of life. While presenting themselves as humble women, they simultaneously claimed their membership in the public service of the tract campaign. They dared to found their own auxiliary association, the type of organization that had been available only to propertied men before American Revolution. Moreover, this woman also explained in her letter of "the greatest difficulty" mere servant women faced in finding a place to meet, and pressed for their right to gather for this public cause. Additionally in the letter, she proudly reported the women's

capability to manage their budget and collect donations, thereby presenting themselves as responsible Christians. Through joining the tract movement, these servant women secured a platform to prove and demonstrate their competence as public citizens.[43]

A very short extract of a letter from another woman in the next year's annual paper illustrates a complicated chain reaction that took place by means of this media. That woman described an incident in which her young domestic servant asked her to get tracts for distribution. According to this author, her servant read the published letter from the "female servant" in the previous year's annual paper and hoped to replicate what she had done.[44]

The actions of her domestic servant obviously caught the author's attention. But beyond that we cannot know for sure what was actually going on. It is important to analyze the content of the letter, the fact the author wrote it and submitted it to the society, and the NYRTS's publication of the letter from three different perspectives: that of the servant, the author, and the annual report editor.

As an initial matter, it is possible that something straightforward was taking place. The servant may simply have been pious and wished to contribute to the cause of the tract movement. But the servant may also have seen a path to raising her own status by taking the initiative to express her desire to participate actively in the tract campaign. She may have been tacitly challenging her subordinate position in the author's house and their community. Learning from the "female servant" in the *Tenth Annual Report*, this domestic servant may have been attempting to move beyond her inferior status as a servant through public and religious service.

With respect to the author, the excerpt tells us nothing explicit about her reaction as her employer to the servant's request, but the fact that the author wrote and submitted the letter to the headquarters appears to demonstrate clearly that she had agreed to help her domestic servant get tracts. The author indeed may have happily found a comrade among her domestic workers and wanted to report the inspirational story of humble piety to the headquarters, who could then also share it with others through the annual report.

But conversely, the author may have submitted the letter to the Society in a self-serving attempt either to show off her kindness to the Tract Society's large readership or even falsely represent herself as extraordinarily kind to the ambitious servant, implicitly declaring herself a better class of person than this brazen young servant who had almost forgotten her status. The author presumably knew the incident was unusual or noteworthy;

otherwise, she would not have reported it. Perhaps unconsciously the author felt obliged to share her experience with her fellow upper-class women who might face similar social challenges.

At the editor's office, Lewis might have been pleased to hear about the depth and breadth of the development of this movement of which he was a leader and the impact of the annual reports which he edited: one humble servant had inspired another to volunteer to distribute the organization's tracts. Perhaps, Lewis shared the excitement the author expressed and appreciated her apparent care for her employee.

Yet did Lewis not notice any of the subtle negotiations taking place regarding social status? It was well known at the time that women had very limited access to the public sphere. That is why in almost all of their letters and reports, women expended some effort to justify their actions. It is possible that as Lewis realized the value of reaching out to women, he was also forced to acknowledge here the validity of the servant women's claims to responsibility and authority.

In all likelihood, many of these elements were intertwined in many different operations and activities of the Tract Society and its membership. The annual reports were no longer functioning as a one-way media for men in the NYRTS leadership to communicate with others. They had become an arena for both men and women who were joining, working with, and participating in the Tract Society to engage in public discourse. And in subtle ways, these grassroots tract workers had begun to gain some autonomy in the movement. Especially for women, who had had limited access to the public sphere, service to the Tract Society was an entry way to broader arenas in which they could be visible. Because of the indispensable help these women provided the organization, leaders of the Society had no choice but to acknowledge the women's contributions.

As discussed above, New York leaders of the Tract Society in 1826 agreed with their Bostonian counterparts to forge the nationwide American Tract Society. Because it was a nationwide campaign, they decided to consolidate their budget and publication repertory. And indeed, the ATS successfully distributed tracts beyond New York and New England to the South and expanding Midwest.[45]

However, for grassroots tract workers, nationwide tract distribution was only one small part of the business. Local distribution, launching auxiliary organizations, and running Sunday Schools were the operations that truly excited them. Holding roles and positions in local associations was especially valuable for ordinary women members. These elements of

tract work were essential for new members, both to help the cause and to uplift themselves. Not surprisingly, members of the Female Branch of the New York Religious Tract Society insisted on keeping a New York-based organization and launched the New York City Tract Society in 1827.[46] Since its establishment, the NYCTS's Annual Report always included its Female Branch's annual paper. The annual conference was always packed with enthusiastic men—and women—committed to the campaign on the ground. No leaders could dismiss the vital force of these ordinary men and women to maintain the tract movement.

Conclusion

The NYRTS was one of many civil associations founded to help unify disparate communities both in New York State and in other fast-growing parts of the United States in the years following the American Revolution. The established church leaders and prominent citizens who launched the Society attempted to create social order by organizing massive distribution of tracts and reports. Utilizing cutting-edge technology of stereotypography, the Tract Society sold and distributed affordable religious tracts. In the absence of churches and clerics in the frontier communities, Society leaders believed stories published in tracts would be powerful tools to teach Christianity.

However, to successfully run the campaign, the Society had to open up their public forum to a much broader set of participants. They needed to include men and women, who were not part of the elites of society.

Women in particular, who previously had had no such access to the public sphere, did not squander this opportunity. Leveraging the authority of the Tract Society, women from a broad range of classes raised their voices and sought significant reforms of the existing society to help the unchurched poor. This paper's analysis of the NYRTS's annual reports demonstrates that these female workers were not satisfied with merely agreeing with and supporting the male leadership. Evidence suggests that women of auxiliary associations broke through to open up a particular space for themselves. The series of annual reports suggests that the men leading the NYRTS had no choice but to concede to these assertive women in order to develop the tract movement further. These women's diverse voices were indispensable parts of the NYRTS's effort to reunify New York, as well as rest of the United States, during the Early Republic period.

The NYRTS was a small organization in New York City, but it helped

inspire larger movements across the northern United States. As cooperation between auxiliary associations and neighboring Sunday schools suggests, mission societies also required the involvement of ordinary people. And in addition to the tract societies in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, and their many auxiliary bodies, Sunday schools and Bible associations were founded.

Structurally speaking, these mission organizations shared a common operating mechanism. No matter how elitist they were in the beginning, the success of their movements depended on the support and consent of the broader public. Moreover, during the early Republic, many ordinary men and women from various classes were ready to seize this opportunity to enter the public sphere in the new nation. The original source materials of the NYRTS suggest that those men and women often used the language and rhetoric of conformity to find their place in the movement for the public good. Appealing to the grace of God, they promised to do their part to help unify the fragmented American society.

But sometimes women gained autonomy and tacitly challenged the mainstream norm of male leadership. In the age of the Second Great Awakening, men and women from a broader social range pronounced their liberty and equality in front of God. Historians have narrated the peak of the reform movement in the 1830s and its breakdown, stagnation, and eventual decline after the 1840s. However, does such a narrative fully capture the internal dynamics of mission associations during the long post-Revolutionary period and the Second Great Awakening and their impact thereafter?

The mission societies had to open up their public forums to much broader sets of participants, that included both men and women who were not elites. The elite founders of these organizations had intended them to help settle divisions emerging in American society, but instead they ended up bringing more diverse voices into the public sphere. In American history, unity, division, and diversity were not always contradictory.

Note

[1] *The Second Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1814, 8.

[2] Paul Romita, *New York City Mission Society*, ed. Society New York City Mission (Portsmouth, NH: Arcadia, 2003); Kenneth D. Miller, *The People Are the City: 150 Years of Social and Religious Concern in New York City*, ed. Ethel Prince Miller (New York: Macmillan, 1962); New York City Mission Society, *New York City Mission Society* (New York: New York City Mission Society, 1918).

[3] Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008); Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); David Waldstreicher and Van Gosse, eds., *Revolutions and Reconstructions: Black Politics in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Christopher James Bonner, *Remaking the Republic: Black Politics and the Creation of American Citizenship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

[4] Robert Greenhalgh Albion, *The Rise of New York Port, 1815–1860*, Classics ed. (Boston; New York: Northeastern University Press; South Street Seaport Museum, 1984 [1939]); Sidney Irving Pomerantz, *New York, an American City, 1783–1803: A Study of Urban Life*, vol. no. 442 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938); Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[5] *The First Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1813, 4.

[6] Clifford S. Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keepers; Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800–1865* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1960); Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978); Raymond A. Mohl, *Poverty in New York, 1783–1825* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[7] John L. Brooke, "Consent, Civil Society, and Public Sphere," in *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*, ed. Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher eds (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); John L. Brooke, *Columbia Rising: Civil Life on the Upper Hudson from the Revolution to the Age of Jackson* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Jack P. Greene, "Colonial History and National History: Reflections on a Continuing Problem," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2007).

[8] Johann N. Neem, *Creating a Nation of Joiners: Democracy and Civil Society in Early National Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008); Albrecht Koschnik, "*Let a Common Interest Bind Us Together*"*: Associations, Partisanship, and Culture in Philadelphia, 1775–1840*, *Jeffersonian America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007); Peter J. Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Michael P. Young, *Bearing Witness against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[9] Except for printed documents such as the annual reports and some tracts, most of the Tract Society's archival records are now non-accessible. A valuable exception is a brief transcript of the minutes of the New York City Tract Society, the inheriting body, now stored at the Community Service Society records at the Rare Book Manuscript Library of Columbia University.

[10] Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America*, 45–56; John William Tebbel. *The Expansion of an Industry, 1865–1919*. Vol. v. 2, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States* (New York: R.R. Bowker Co, 1975).

[11] Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America*, chap. 1.

[12] Barbara M. Tucker and Kenneth H. Tucker, "The Limits of Homo Economicus: An Appraisal of Early American Entrepreneurship," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 2 (2004).

[13] *The First Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1813. Griffin, *Their Brothers' Keepers; Moral Stewardship in the United States, 1800–1865*; M. J. Heale, "From City Fathers to Social Critics: Humanitarianism and Government in New York, 1790–1860,"

The Journal of American History 63, no. 1 (1976); M. J. Heale, "Humanitarianism in the Early Republic: The Moral Reformers of New York, 1776–1825," *Journal of American Studies* 2, no. 2 (1968).

[14] *The Second Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1814, 3.

[15] *The First Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1813, 10

[16] Ibid, 3.

[17] Ibid, 3; *The Third Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1815, 3. When people were able to buy tracts, tract workers preferred to sell the tracts.

[18] *The First Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1813, 4.

[19] *The Fifth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1816, 12.

[20] *The Third Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1815, 6.

[21] Ibid, 6–7.

[22] *The Fifth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1816, 4–5.

[23] *The Tenth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*. 1822, 4.

[24] The Religious Tract Society in London was founded in 1799. Religious Tract Society. *Annual Report of the Religious Tract Society ... With Interesting Extracts of Correspondence, British and Foreign and a List of Subscribers and Benefactors*. London: Published for the Society, 1799.

[25] *The Fifth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1816, 14.

[26] *The Tenth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*. 1822, 27–29.

[27] *The Fifth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1816, 29.

[28] *The Tenth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*. 1822, 10.

[29] Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America*; Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America*.

[30] Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920*; Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1986); Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City*, *Reforming Men & Women* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[31] "Extract from the First Report of Managers of the Female Tract Society of Camden, (N. C.)" *Eighth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*. New York, 1820, 43.

[32] "Letter from the Secretary of the Providence Sunday School and Tract Society," *The Tenth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*. New York, 1822, 32.

[33] Female Religious Tract Society in Brooklyn distributed 14,000 tracts. *The Fifth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1816, 13

[34] *The Tenth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*. New York, 1822, 10–11, 30–34.

[35] *The Third Annual Report of The New York Religious Tract Society*, 1814, 13–40.

[36] "Extract from the Third Annual Report of the Trenton Female Tract Society," *The Eighth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1820, 40.

[37] *The Fourth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1815, 11–12

[38] Ibid, 26.

[39] *The Fifth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1816, 13–15. Another annual paper was amazed at the dynamic development that occurred "almost without the knowledge of any of its managers." *The Tenth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1822, 10.

[40] "Extract of a letter from Miss Kingman, Secretary of the Female Tract Society of Providence, Rhode Island, dated April 15, 1816," *The Fifth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1816, 31–32; "The following additional information is just received from the Secretary of that Society, January 25, 1817," Ibid, 32. Also see *The Sixth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1818, 36–39.

[41] *The Tenth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1822, 58.
[42] Ibid, 58–61.
[43] Ibid.
[44] *The Eleventh Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society*, 1823, 45–46.
[45] Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America*, ch. 4.
[46] *The Thirteenth Annual Report of the New York Religious Tract Society and the First Annual Report of the Female Branch*. New York, 1825, 24