The year 1980 marked the centennial of the death of one of Pennsylvania's great nineteenth century reformers, Lucretia Mott, Philadelphia Quaker and participant in the movements of abolitionism, temperance, protection of Indians and immigrants, pacifism, and anti-sectarianism. Hailed as the "Black Man's Goddess" and "the greatest American woman" it is in her role as "the guiding light" of the fledging woman's movement, however, that she is principally remembered.

As with other defenders of women's rights, the origins of Mott's feminism are usually explained through the widely accepted notion prevalent since the publication of the History of Woman Suffrage in 1881 that the commitment to feminism arose from frustrations engendered in work for abolition. The argument goes that as women worked to win freedom for the black race they discovered barriers to their own freedom. Hence the exclusion of female delegates from the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840 in London is cited as a pivotal experience in the calling of the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 and the subsequent development of the women's rights movement.

Obviously there were connections between abolitionism and the incipient women's rights movement. Female abolitionists were to a large extent the dominant leaders of the early movement. And it is clear that it was in the cause of the slave that they learned speaking and organizational skills and gained visibility. It is also clear that as female abolitionists attacked the pernicious system of slavery they discovered barriers to their own participation in public life.

*Support for this research was provided in part by both the American Association of University Women and the American Philosophical Society.
While this standard analysis is not incorrect, it offers only a partial explanation of the origins of the women's rights movement. Such negative experience undoubtedly catalyzed some female abolitionists, but it was the positive sense of personal self-worth rooted in religious experience which served for many of them as the basis for their feminism.

The case of Lucretia Mott is instructive on this point. While she was deeply involved in abolitionism, it was her religious experience as a member of the Society of Friends which explicitly served as the grounding for her feminism. Her positive definition of what it was to be a female as well as her attack on priestcraft and dogmatic religion which she considered the greatest obstacles to female emancipation, were tied to that religious experience.

During all her eighty-seven years of life, Mott was intimately associated with the Society of Friends. She was raised by Quaker parents on Nantucket and only left that tightly knit Quaker world for Boston when she was twelve. At thirteen she was sent to Nine Partners, a Quaker boarding school in New York. Her experiences there were seminal for her future development. Nine Partners was a co-educational school which offered an almost equal education to male and female students. She did well there, and was asked to stay on as an assistant teacher after completing the regular course of study. However, she chafed at the fact that female instructors at Nine Partners were not paid equally with males. It was at that school that she experienced first hand the inequities endured by women and there that she vowed to “claim for my sex all that an impartial Creator had bestowed. . . .”

During the years at Nine Partners she came to know James Mott, a New York Friend whom she subsequently married. Theirs was a long and tender relationship between two Quakers committed to the reform of American society. Mott's early married life was dominated by her involvement in family life. She bore six children by the time she was thirty-five years old. Early in those domestic years she turned toward a re-evaluation of her religion and when she was twenty-eight began to serve as an official minister in the Society of Friends, a position she retained for the rest of her life.

The Quakerism that Mott confronted as a young minister in the early decades of the nineteenth century was very different from that
Lucretia Mott. (Courtesy Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College.)
of the first Quakers of the mid-seventeenth century. Early Friends were a feared and persecuted band of prophetic believers who promulgated the notion of the indwelling of the Light or Spirit in each person, or as George Fox, founder of the Society called it, "that of God in every one." They affirmed the spiritual equality of all persons, rejected a "hirely ministry" for a lay ministry, and maintained that the source of religious authority was not external, in the clergy, church or scripture, but internal, resulting from the indwelling of the Spirit in each person. Revelation, consequently, was not complete and objective, but ongoing and personal. Scripture, while considered by early Friends to be divinely inspired, was open to reinterpretation under the guidance of the Spirit.

By the early nineteenth century the Society in America had become a staid community in which a quietistic spiritually dominated. Many of the early Quaker notions began to be contested by traveling English Friends who preached a new evangelicalism which they hoped would rejuvenate the largely spiritually moribound community. These Friends stressed the importance of external authority in the person of the elders, the authority of scripture as the principal source of the divine will, and the need for doctrinal orthodoxy and conformity. These ideas found positive reception particularly among the more urban, wealthy members of the Society, the group which came to be called the Orthodox branch. Friends who rejected this evangelical emphasis, the Hicksites, were generally more rural, less affluent and less educated than the Orthodox. The Hicksites were a diverse group which attracted quietists, those who rejected evangelical doctrines, and those more liberal Friends who as a means of expressing their concern over the slave question supported Elias Hicks and his boycott of all slave-made goods and products.

The division among these Quaker factions came in 1827–28 during the Great Separation when the Society split into Orthodox and Hicksite communities. This was a painful and bitter experience which fractured the once tightly-unified Quaker world and engendered animosity among Friends for years.²

At the time of the Great Separation, both Orthodox and Hicksites vied for Lucretia Mott's support. She reluctantly followed her husband's lead and joined the latter, believing that the ideals of

primitive Quakerism were best expressed in that branch, especially
the belief in the indwelling of the Inner Light in each person.\(^3\) This
choice was to have important consequences both for Mott's under-
standing of the role and function of religion and her self-understand-
ing as one obedient to the Spirit. However, the pain of this separation
was keenly remembered by her and later in her life when other
divisions occurred in the Quaker fold, she refused to lend her support
lest she contribute to the further splintering of the Society.

The Hicksite impact on Mott is most clearly obvious in her attack
against existing authority, be that religious or secular. She main-
tained that it was truth which gave authority and truth which
legitimized the prophetic role she assumed. Standing outside the
bounds of orthodox Christianity, she claimed a religious authority
of church and state alike.

Mott's acceptance of Hicksite notions also led her to reaffirm the
importance of righteous living and minimize doctrinal orthodoxy.
She continued this emphasis throughout her life and steadfastly
resisted the tendency toward orthodoxy that she subsequently found
among Hicksites as well. "It is lamentable," she wrote in 1841,

\begin{quote}
that the simple and benign religion of Jesus should be so en-
cumbered with the creeds and dogmas of sects. Its primitive
beauty obscured by these gloomy appendages of man—the
investigations of the honest enigmas checked by the cry of
heresy—infidelity. I don't have speculative openness, rather I
long to see obedience to manifest duty leading to practical
righteousness, as the Christian standard . . . the fruit of faith.\(^4\)
\end{quote}

Mott's support in later years for the Anti-Sabbatarian Convention
and the Free Religious Association were manifestations of her hos-
tility toward sectarianism. Her alternative emphasis on righteous
living as the true mark of the religious person led her to active
involvement in reform activities.

In the broadest sense the Quaker tradition was also important in
forming Mott's understanding of what it was to be female. From
its inception the Society of Friends had always recognized the
spiritual equality of women with men as a corollary of the belief in

\(^3\) Notes by Lucretia Mott on her life given to Sarah J. Hale.
\(^4\) Garrison Family Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College. Lucretia Mott
to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 23 March 1841.
the indwelling of the Light in each person. This notion provided the basis for the acceptance of women ministers among Quakers. The non-sacramental Quaker ministry always included numerous females who preached, travelled and gave their lives for the spread of the faith. The religious ideals of the Society oriented all female members to hard work, plain-living and a life of service and provided them with the unique opportunity for prolonged periods of silence in which they could be in direct communion with God. Although recognized as the spiritual equals of men, women were not accorded equality in areas of church governance. For example, women did not have equal power with men to disown and make discipline. They were, however, guaranteed certain opportunities for service. Since George Fox believed that women had special abilities to deal with the problems of the widowed and orphaned, he insisted that they be organized in a structure parallel, but distinct from, that of men. In their business meetings Quaker women had unique opportunities not available to women outside the Society to speak, to raise money, to create and manage their own activities.

Raised in this tradition, Mott accepted her spiritual equality with men. She also had the opportunity as a minister to preach, travel, organize and agitate, all with the blessing of the Society. While Quakers obviously did not claim secular equality for women, the opportunities it offered its female members and the dignity it accorded them, could nurture such a claim. In the mind of Mott, the long-standing belief in female spiritual equality was transformed into a full blown claim for their secular equality as well.

Although the parameters of Mott’s world view were extended by her embrace of Garrisonian radicalism and her openness to Unitarianism and transcendentalism, it was her religious experience


6. The Motts first met William Lloyd Garrison in 1830. They supported him in his belief in the need for the immediate emancipation of all Negroes. With him they concurred that social change would be achieved not through force or the ballot but through intellectual and moral agitation.

In 1818 Lucretia Mott began reading the works of William Ellery Channing, the
as a Friend which was most important in forming her reformist attitudes and providing the grounding for her feminism.

Her relationship with the Society of Friends was not always an easy one, however. There were attempts made to disown her and she was often frustrated by the intolerance and sectarianism she found within the Quaker community. Nonetheless, she remained a member, believing that she could do more good from within the Society than from without it.\(^7\)

Throughout her long life Mott participated in a variety of reform movements. Her commitment to these reform activities was intimately linked to a coherent philosophy which she articulated in her sermons and speeches delivered over the course of almost forty years. Generally, her audience was abolitionists, women’s rights supporters, peace advocates or religious persons, be they Friends, Unitarians, or supporters of antisectarianism. To all of them she propounded the same ideas. No matter who the audience or what the occasion, she managed to introduce her critique of society and her analysis of what must be done.

The overarching theme in all of Mott’s discourse was the religious. For her human reality was essentially moral. It was her self-appointed task to move her hearers to accept the belief that the goal of human life was to live in righteousness and truth. Such a life was only possible when the individual was freed from customs, superstition and intolerance, from the physical shackles of the chain, from impoverishment and legal and social discrimination. Mott’s quest for religious self-perfection led her first to abolitionism. “I have felt bound to plead their (slaves) cause in season and out of season,” she wrote:

> to endeavor to put my soul in their souls stead—and to give all my power and aid in every right effort for their immediate emancipation. This duty was impressed upon me at the time I consecrated myself to that Gospel which anoints ‘to preach deliverance to the captive, to set at liberty them that are bruised’...\(^8\)

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8. Notes by Lucretia Mott on her life given to Sarah J. Hale.
Ultimately the liberation of all oppressed became Mott’s self-chosen mission. She attempted to awaken not only “the captives” to their own God-given powers, but to attack institutions which continued their enslavement. This she considered a holy work.\(^9\)

In Mott’s eyes the contemporary state of religion was deplorable. It was characterized by sectarianism and dogmatism, emphasized priestcraft, theology, ritual and ceremony, and condoned injustice and inequality. It was for Mott the antithesis of the practical religion of righteousness. Mott was particularly opposed to the churches’ insistence on the depravity of human nature.\(^10\) On this and other dogmas she called for free thinking and skepticism.\(^11\) This anti-dogmatism made Mott seem deviant to orthodox believers but she revelled in their condemnation and proclaimed that she was a believer after “the way called heresy.”\(^12\) By this she meant that the kingdom of God was within, that the human person was a sacred temple,\(^13\) that the natural was divine.\(^14\) While she acknowledged that the indwelling of God in each was an explicitly Quaker insight, she claimed that it was not narrowly sectarian but the universal teaching of the divine spirit.\(^15\)

Mott urged her hearers to follow “true Christianity” and the “word of God in the soul” and to reject the “priestcraft and superstition” which shackled and bound them. The latter, she believed, were particularly responsible for the continued subjugation of women.

It is not Christianity, but priestcraft that has subjected woman as we find her. . . . Blame is often attached to the position in which woman is found. I blame her not so much as I pity her. So circumscribed have been her limits, that she does not realize

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9. For example in “Remarks of Mrs. Lucretia Mott” in *Free Religion: Report of Addresses at a Meeting held in Boston, May 30, 1867* (Boston: Adams and Co., 1867), p. 12, Mott indicated that the Anti-Slavery Society through its advancement of right and justice was a religious organization.

10. References to the rejection of the notion of human depravity are contained in many of Mott’s sermons and speeches. For example see Lucretia Mott, *Sermon to the Medical Students* (Phila.: W. B. Zeiber, 1849), p. 6.


12. Sermon to the Medical Students, p. 6.

13. Ibid.


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the misery of her condition. Such dupes are men to custom, that
even servitude, the worst of ills comes to be thought a good, till
down from sire to son it is kept and guarded as a sacred thing.
Woman's existence is maintained by sufferance. The veneration
of man has been misdirected, the pulpit has been prostituted,
the Bible has been ill-used.  

Mott was keenly aware of the harmful consequences of a fallacious
interpretation of Scripture. "Instead of taking the truths of the Bible
in corroboration of the right," she said:

the practise has been, to turn over its pages to find example and
authority for the wrong, for the existing abuses of society. . . .
We have been so long pinning our faith on other peoples' sleeves
that we ought to begin examining these things daily, ourselves,
to see whether they are so: and we should find on comparing
text with text, that a very different construction might be put
upon them.  

Mott's belief in the necessity to crush the influence of these powers
is evident in the resolution she appended to the Declaration of Sentiments
issued at the Seneca Falls Convention: "that the speedy success
of our cause depends on the zealous and untiring efforts of both men
and women for the overthrow of the pulpit and for the securing to
woman an equal participation with men in the various trades, pro-
fessions and commerce."  

Of all Mott's activities it was her work to elevate the condition of
women which most clearly illustrates the application of her eclectic
religious philosophy. Unlike Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other
younger feminists, Mott's principal concern was not with specific
measures like the franchise. Although she consistently argued for
equal rights and supported a myriad of reform attempts, her central
concern was always with woman's self-definition and the limits of the
female sphere. As Mott saw it, the condition of woman was enervat-
ing and paralyzing. Everywhere she was degraded and any claim

16. "Speech by Mrs. Mott," Proceedings of the National Woman's Rights Convention,
October, 1853, Cleveland, Ohio (Cleveland: Gray Beardsley, Spear and Co., 1854),
p. 60.
17. Ibid., pp. 60-61.
for her equality seemed ludicrous and empirically indefensible. As early as 1841 Mott addressed the problem of the condition of women when she said:

I long for the time when my sisters will rise, and occupy the sphere to which they are called by their high nature and destiny. What a change would then appear in the character of woman! We should no longer find her the mere plaything of man, and a frivolous appendage of society.

Mott rejected the notion of female superiority and grounded her ideas in a firm egalitarianism. "I believe," she said:

the tendency of truth on this subject is to equalize the sexes; and that, when truth directs us, there will be no longer assumed authority on one side, or admitted inferiority on the other; but that as we advance in the cultivation of all our powers, . . . we shall see that our independence is equal, our dependence mutual, and our obligations reciprocal.

For Mott, woman's degradation was attributable to the fact that she was defined not by herself but by society. What must be done, Mott argued, was that woman should disregard custom and religious tradition and attempt to define herself according to her God-given powers. Woman . . . needs to be taught to judge her herself.

She will find when she does so, that Scripture has been perverted, and that the customs of society are not always founded in truth and justice. Nor will her veneration for the good, the true, and the divine be lessened when she learns to respect the divinity of her own nature . . . .

In order to establish the fact that the condition of women was neither natural nor divinely ordained, Mott frequently offered Biblical and contemporary examples of strong, heroic women. She freely reinterpreted quotations from St. Paul, which were used to justify

20. Garrison Family Papers; Lucretia Mott to Elizabeth, 16 March 1855, Mott Papers; Lucretia Mott to Women's Convention to be held in Salem, Ohio, 13 April 1850.
22. Ibid.
the subordination of women,\textsuperscript{24} and argued that as God's creation men and women were equal. Female inequality was one of the wages of sin. The reestablishment of the natural, original, and divinely ordained equality of the sexes must therefore be a work approved by God.

Mott's philosophy provided an important alternative argument to the natural rights theory advanced by many mid-century feminists. The Seneca Falls' Declaration of Sentiments which represents much of that thinking was undergirded by secularistic, rationalistic arguments. Like the Declaration of Independence on which it was modeled, it reflected Enlightenment premises. The premises of older feminists like the Grimké sisters and Mott were of a different sort. Religious experience and arguments were central to their defense of women's rights. Mott claimed that woman's God-given powers were the basis for her equality and that she had been naturally and divinely ordained as the moral equal of man. Her claim was rooted not in an acceptance of a Deistic First Mover but in the experience of the indwelling of the Spirit in one's self. Mott worked from a different first premise than most mid-century feminists and her pragmatic emphasis was different as well. She saw the greatest need was not for suffrage or for any external rights for women but for the creation of a new self-image for women as moral, responsible beings; it was toward the realization of this goal that Mott directed her principal energies. She saw that the greatest obstacle to overcoming both a degraded image of woman and the removal of limitations on her rights was priestcraft. More than any other feminist she singled out the evils perpetrated against women by a religion of dogmatism and sectarianism. The power of her attack rested on the fact that, on the basis of religious authority, she rejected as fraudulent the premise that woman was divinely ordained as man's subordinate. Ultimately, Mott questioned the authority of such religion and rejected its conclusions as spurious.

Lucretia Mott has been remembered as a tireless worker in the cause of numerous reforms, and one who lent the credibility of her person and the power of her presence to unpopular causes. Yet she made a further contribution as well. She was the architect of a coherent philosophy which not only served as the basis for her critique of institutions but the vision for the restructuring of society. At the heart of that philosophy was a religious experience which not only

\textsuperscript{24} For example see \textit{Proceedings of the National Woman's Rights Convention, Cleveland}, p. 61.
drove her to proclaim her message but provided her with the personal authority by which to do so. It was that religious experience which provided the grounding for her reformist activities, particularly her efforts to advance the cause of the female sex.