During the nineteenth century, there was an explosion of feminism all over Europe. The changes that took place affected the roles that women played in politics, the workforce, the home, religion and education, as well as the views of sexuality and gender equality. Many of the changes were gradual, but with perseverance and the stimuli of other factors such as war, poor living conditions, industrialization, consumerism, and religious convictions helped to shape an undeniable change. The basic challenges existed in the matter of private versus public spheres. Recognizing and ascertaining the role women were supposed to have was a difficult task. The focus of this study will be a brief examination of the role that European women played in using religion during the 1800s, to bring about change. This use of religion for stimulated change took on a number of different forms as well as faces of opposition for each unique area of gender inequality. Given a number of general and specific examples, arguments in favor of women in the public sphere will be contrasted and viewed along with those in opposition to women gaining access to opportunities outside the home.

A common justification for women to remain in the private sphere, held by most in society, was expressed in these words by Catharine Booth, "The first and most common objection urged against the public exercises of women, is that they are unnatural and unfeminine." The majority of those in society saw women’s participation in the public sphere
as unladylike and “unnatural,” but Booth went on to argue against that conclusion, citing that women are naturally equipped to be in serve in the public sphere, specifically in the ministering of the Holy Scriptures:

“By nature [woman] seems fitted to grace either [sphere]. God has given to woman a graceful form and attitude, winning manners, persuasive speech, and, above all, a finely toned emotional nature, all of which appear to us eminent natural qualifications for public speaking. We admit that want of mental culture, the trammels of custom, the force of prejudice, and one-sided interpretations of Scripture, have hitherto almost excluded her from this sphere; but, before such a sphere is pronounced to be unnatural, it must be proved either that woman has not the ability to teach or to preach, or that the possession and exercise of this ability un-naturalizes her in other respects; that so soon as she presumes to step on the platform or into the pulpit, she loses the delicacy and grace of the female character.”

In this excerpt, Booth recognized the abilities that women have that enable them to participate in the public sphere; and later in this same work the question was asked about why God would empower a being with such abilities if he never intended they be used. She commented further that a woman should not be restricted to the kitchen and the spinning wheel any more than a man should be restricted to the field or the workshop.

Referring to a passage in 1 Corinthians that charges women to be silent in the church, Booth made note that scriptures such as these were directed at the “‘edification, exhortation, and comfort of believers;’ and the result anticipated was the conviction of unbelievers and unlearned persons.” She connected this purpose to the likeness of the female apostles who were “described as a leading feature of the gospel dispensation.” In her opinion, the Bible had a clear purpose for the limitations placed upon women in certain situations, but as a whole, women were needed as much as men in the dispensation of the Scriptures. And, in so doing, they did not assume authority over the Church. “Women who speak in assemblies for worship, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, assume thereby no personal authority over others; they simply deliver the messages of the gospel, which imply obedience, subjection, and responsibility, rather than authority and power.”
A converse argument in favor of prohibiting women from the public sphere could be seen in the Napoleonic Code,\(^a\) which “defined the space women would occupy in the new regime as marital, maternal, and domestic, —all public matters would be determined by men.”\(^5\) All of these provisions basically meant that women could not act freely or independently unto themselves. This widespread restriction encompassing economic, social and political roles of women within the public sphere certainly affected the ability of women to participate in religious activities outside of the home. Yet, even those responsibilities that fell within the home were under the authority of the husband to delegate to his wife.

“What religious authority was exercised inside the family circle by both parents appeared to be minimal: the mother told the Bible stories and taught the children to say their prayers, and both the mother and the father passed on to them moral standards of behavior that reflected the conscientious, work-oriented values of the middle-class.”\(^6\) The women more often assumed the primary role for the religious education of the children as the man was usually occupied with fieldwork or fulfilling a skilled trade within a shop. Once the children were old enough to assume more responsible roles, the father spent more time training them in these areas; however, the children no doubt observed the work ethics of both parents from the onset of their learning.

During the mid-nineteenth century, decline in religious commitment was taking place. There was the gradual dissipation of the “Victorian Sabbath,” which had consisted of many prohibited practices on Sundays. The reason for attending worship services was merely social rather than pious. Although the religious indoctrination of the family began to dissolve, there

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\(^a\) The Napoleonic Code was a civil law code established by Napoleon in 1804 in France that restricted the rights of women. The code soon spread to other regions of Europe and the New World as a source of order and set the standard for the treatment of women on a more widespread basis. The Concordat, an agreement in 1801, that reunited the Catholic Church with France gave the Pope more authority and control than previously, but it is significant that the Papacy did not fight the establishment of the Napoleonic Codes, which sought to limit the rights of women, and thus restrict their place in society as well as the Church.
was still an important emphasis placed upon attending church for the purpose of hearing the
sermons and being made aware of local and world issues to be discussed therein. The average
middle-class married woman experienced a decreasing religious role in her home\(^b\) as well as
piety in her personal life.\(^7\)

Women did take on the primary role of “philanthropic endeavors;” however, these were
often only at the approval of their husbands. These endeavors were both secular and religious in
nature, but women’s involvement was more a matter of simply doing what was “positively
fashionable” in society rather than due to piety alone.\(^8\) Near the end of the nineteenth century in
England, participating in charity was seen as a part of domestic responsibilities for married
women as they continued in their fulltime duties as housewives.\(^9\) Although women participated
in these organizations, no documentation exists that would indicate that they found their stay-at-
home life overly restricting and in need of outside stimulation.\(^10\) These women most likely had
enough things to do in the home, and therefore looked for things to enjoy that were pleasurable
and relaxing to them, rather than seeking to fill any spare time with more responsibilities that
existed outside of the home.

Some women used their upper-class influence to influence the education system, and
indirectly, spread their religious doctrines. For example, in 1848 in London, Queen’s College
and Bedford College were established to train women in the field of teaching, a position within
the public sphere that consisted of significant influence upon children and other women, yet held
very low social clout. Queen’s College was founded by Christian socialists and Bedford College
by a Unitarian named Elizabeth Reid; however, most clergymen were avid supporters of the

\(^b\) Draznin states that no documentation confirms this finding; however, publications and magazines from this time
period gradually became more secular, thus unofficially giving this inference. The majority of magazines refused to
accept religious content, according to Branca’s *Silent Sisterhood*. Although the publications indicated
secularization, since there was no direct documentation, there is a possibility that more traditional religious roles did
exist and were highly important in the home during this time period.
traditional ideal of middle-class womanhood.\textsuperscript{11} By the 1830s, they were dissatisfied with the low level of education that was given to women, but neither they nor the lay public knew how to best reform the system in order to cultivate women into better housewives and mothers. One thing was certain; neither laity or clergymen generally supported higher education for women, citing that biblical authority and conventional wisdom did not allow such to occur. Even though they could not stop the development of higher education for women, the impact of their opposition was certainly felt.\textsuperscript{12}

In a sense, educational reformers redefined the Victorian concept of femininity, but they did not wholly reject it. Many students like Emily Davies (1830-1921), wanted equal education with men but were trapped between the ideas of femininity and the standards of the established male academic system that had influenced her thinking for so long. The education reform was primarily led by England, for example, as the 1870 Education Act provided formal education for working-class children, both boys and girls, in Wales. The main institutions attended by working-class girls before 1870 included dame schools, Sunday schools, the Church of England’s National Schools (from 1811) and the Dissenters’ British (and foreign) Schools (from 1808). One can see the clear influence religion had on girls’ education in the latter three.\textsuperscript{13}

The education girls received at these religiously based institutions was primarily the technique of sewing. Towards the second half of the nineteenth century, various other domestic skills such as cooking and laundry work were permitted to be taught. Authors of the later nineteenth century generally find concern in that schools felt a need to teach middle-class standards of morality and behavior to the working-class girls without giving them intellectual ideas above their social class. Education in Wales focused primarily on the traditional role of women and the household, whereas education in Scotland took on a different face.\textsuperscript{14}
The Scottish system of education differed in both social and religious respects, which had an influence on female education. Whereas the Church of England feared educating the poor, because of the possibility of disrupting the social class structure, Scotland’s Protestant Reformation had stressed the need for universal education, regardless of class or sex. By the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the majority of Scots were literate. The parish school in Scotland taught a broad range of social subjects, thus developing a common culture for the whole nation. This system was contrasted with the English system that was less democratic, non merit-based in advancement, and contained a narrowly focused curriculum that was saturated with social and sexual segregation. Even though in Scotland, the poor children could not always attend schooling, as a whole, the nation had finally established a complete system of education for its population.

Women’s role in the religious and moral standards went beyond simply teaching their children, or gaining rights to education as it became a matter of living out the convictions they themselves had, but only in a manner acceptable to society. Many feminists fought the double standard that existed regarding the rights of sexual activity for men and women. Purity was expected of women as both a societal standard and personal piety, but men, on the other hand, were allowed sexual exploitation. Josephine Butler, while addressing graduates of Cambridge in 1879 spoke out harshly against the double standard, thus joining what came to be called the Social Purity movement. Several organizations promoting moral purity formed; although these organizations were not officially organized as religious groups, their moral stability was grounded in religious convictions and spiritual undertones.

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15 Evidence of the universal education system’s success in Scotland as opposed to England’s segregated system was that 18.1% more “new” husbands and 18.6% more “new” wives signed their names on marriage contracts in Scotland than in England.

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Most of the groups who were involved in this movement sought to end prostitution; while some did so without giving up hope on reforming prostituted women others simply disregarded female prostitutes’ worth altogether. One of the most influential female figures in the movement to stop prostitution was Jane Ellice Hopkins, who worked ardently to develop resources for men to gain self-control regarding sexuality. She saw prostitutes as victims of sexual abuse by men within the society. This view of prostitution, as developed by the Social Purity movement, differed greatly from the traditional Christian view of the sinful lifestyle. Feminism saw prostitution as a sacrifice of women for men and they sought to fight the assumption that prostitution was necessary because of men’s biological urges. Feminists argued that this urge that men refused to control was social rather than a biological phenomenon. Feminist Lucinda Chandler stated at an international conference in 1888, “Women as well as men must eliminate from marriage the features of prostitution, for when prostitution ceases inside of marriage it will disappear outside.” Such outspoken moral arguments eventually led to the fight to end sexual abuse of children.17

Feminism ventured an amazing path through the nineteenth century as women began to take bold stands to preserve and ensure the rights that many felt belonged to them. Catharine Booth led a strong push for women in the public sphere of ministry, citing that they had natural abilities to serve in this capacity. Such arguments would transcend beyond the religious sector of society and into the workplace, the education system, and eventually in the political atmosphere. Her arguments were contrasted with the patriarchal dominance of the Napoleonic Code, which restricted women in nearly every avenue of life outside of the home; limiting the free will of women even in the home. Women were responsible for educating the children and building

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17 Interestingly enough, Hopkins viewed male and female relationships in a sense of chivalry as she commented, “the man is the head of the woman and therefore the servant of the woman.”
their religious convictions, but even this responsibility was subject to the authority of her husband.

Women struggled to gain access to higher education, and found limited resources when the opportunities for education even presented themselves. Education for women consisted primarily of domestic skills while other subjects were reserved only for men. The lack of opportunities gave women an inferior connotation and prevented them from enabling social mobility, participating in political activity, and gaining protection against sexual assault.

The issue of feminism in the nineteenth century was in essence, an assault on the barrier that stood segregating the private and public spheres of daily life. While many opposed the dissolution of the great divide, traditional order was bound to crack and eventually crumble—allowing women to finally achieve some sense of equality, though limited at best. Overcoming an age-old system of patriarchal authority, feminism established a much fairer standard of moral purity even if the measuring stick was not quite as fair as they might have desired.

By studying some of personal accounts and documentation on the occurrences and beliefs concerning women in the nineteenth century, it is impossible to deny that women used their religious convictions of those of society as a whole, to stimulate the crumbling of a long-established, gender-based divide. This brief study has not aimed at being exhaustive, but merely has attempted to cover a broad overview of how women’s religious convictions and involvement during the nineteenth century in the anticipation of discovering how this affected their lives in both the public and private spheres in the effort of exacting change.

1 Catherine Booth, *Female Ministry: Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel* (London: Morgan and Chase, 1859) p.4
2 Ibid, 4
3 Ibid, 4
4 Ibid, 5
6 McLeod, “White Collar Activities and the Role of Religion,” 76
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