

Rational Mothers and Infidel Gentlemen: Gender and American Atheism, 1865–1915, by Evelyn A. Kirkley. *Women and Gender in North American Religions*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000. xviii, 198 pp. Bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Ross Evans Paulson is professor of history emeritus at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois. His research interests include American intellectual history and women's history. His latest book is *Liberty, Equality and Justice: Civil Rights, Women's Rights, and the Regulation of Business, 1865–1932* (1997).

This work is really two studies and a personal coda. First, it is an intellectual history of the Freethought movement from 1865 to 1915. Second, it is an analysis of Freethought in terms of gender theory and models. The personal coda shows the parallel between Freethought's wrestling with the gender issue and the author's own experiences.

The intellectual history is based on a close reading of Freethought publications, books, and oratory, and an analysis of biographical material. In the context of the spiritual crisis of the Gilded Age, Kirkley notes, "Although they retained the name 'Freethinkers,' they also called themselves 'Liberals,' differentiating themselves from the previous generation" (9). Whereas they shared the "liberal" label with some Protestants, they distinguished themselves by insisting on a gospel of reason. "Freethought included theists, agnostics, and atheists, depending on their conviction of the rationalism of each position" (10). Some of the leaders and exponents included Matilda Joslyn Gage, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Emma Goldman, Mark Twain, Clarence Darrow, and Robert G. Ingersoll. Kirkley's data indicates that 20 percent of Freethinkers were women and shared the middle-class aspirations and social norms of the postwar era (20, 22).

Although the Freethought movement was born in the East, it flourished in the Midwest and West. "By 1900 Chicago was a hub of Freethought activity, with several societies and periodicals," and 11 percent of the members of the Freethought Federation in 1893 were from Iowa, the second-highest state total (23). The typical profile of a Freethinker was "an Anglo-American, middle-class married male professional who lived in a small town in the mid-west, with a Christian background and limited formal education" (27).

There is much useful historical information in this analysis, but Kirkley's predominant concern is the problem of gender. She divides the Freethinkers into three main groups: (1) those who believe that rationalism supported the predominant cultural model of separate spheres; (2) Free Lovers, who rejected the separate, natural spheres argument; and (3) "spheres synthesizers," who tried to reconcile culture and rationalism. "Spheres preservers and synthesizers believed

that monogamous marriage was the most rational sexual lifestyle, necessary to establish stable homes. . . . Free Lovers, on the other hand, sought to abolish both censorship of sexually honest information and separate spheres" (101). Kirkley creates a matrix to explain differences within the movement: "biological determinists and spheres preservers, viewed women and men as essentially different from one another," while "historical constructionists, Free Lovers, and spheres synthesizers, perceived women and men as essentially similar and entitled to identical rights and responsibilities" (114). A special case was woman suffrage. How the various factions handled the suffrage issue is a fascinating study. For prosuffrage Freethinkers, "their understanding of gender predisposed them to favor woman suffrage, while political expediency dictated the opposite" (128).

By way of criticism, first, the book is ill served by its title. The evidence surveyed is wider than the categories implied by the title. For example, Freethinkers varied in their views on religion from atheism to agnosticism to rational religion. Second, some important figures are not included. Victoria Claflin Woodhull, who fixed the negative public image of the Free Lover, is not mentioned. Third, the historical, analytical concepts of reason/rational/rationalism are assumed or inferred rather than defined and explored. Did rational mean evolutionary evidence, common sense, Lockean logic, or legal rhetoric? But these are relatively minor matters. The book is a significant contribution to the intellectual history of the Gilded Age, to women's history, to gender analysis, and to the history of Iowa and the Midwest.

Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America, by Ronald R. Kline. Revisiting Rural America Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xii, 372 pp. Illustrations, tables, appendix, notes, index. \$41.95 cloth.

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Unquestionably, technology has the power to change, accelerate, and even redefine important components of everyday life. Innovations such as the telephone, automobile, and radio certainly did this and more in rural America. The real question, however, is not whether technologies are influential, but whether it is these impersonal forces or the actions of their human operators that chiefly *determine* the social structures that result from change. Stated more bluntly, do technologies accomplish old tasks in new ways, or do they obliterate the old

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