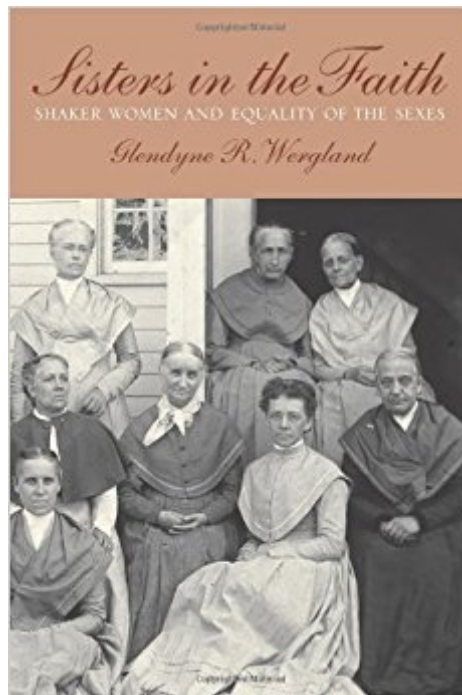




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# Sisters In The Faith: Shaker Women And Equality Of The Sexes



## Synopsis

In 1788, following the death of charismatic founder Mother Ann Lee, the celibate religious group known as the Shakers set out to institutionalize equality of the sexes in their theology, government, and daily practice. In this book, Glendyne Wergland evaluates how well they succeeded in that mission by examining the experiences of women within Shaker communities over more than a century. Drawing on an extensive archive of primary documents, Wergland discusses topics ranging from girlhood, health, and dress to why women joined the Shakers and how they were viewed by those outside their community. She analyzes the division of labor between men and women, showing that there was considerable cooperation and reciprocity in carrying out most tasks—from food production to laundering to gathering firewood—even as gendered conflicts remained. In her conclusion, Wergland draws together all of these threads to show that Shaker communities achieved a remarkable degree of gender equality at a time when women elsewhere still suffered under the legal and social strictures of the traditional patriarchal order. In so doing, she argues, the experience of Shaker women served as a model for promoting women's rights in American political culture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Provides much-needed depth to the many studies of Shakers, and Shaker women in particular, that have painted gender roles with a broad brush. It will be impossible for readers to leave Wergland's book and make oversimplified statements about gender roles among the Shakers." —[Etta M.](#)

Madden, author of *Bodies of Life: Shaker Literature and Literacies*"This work offers a major contribution to Shaker history and to the study of women's struggle for equality. . . . Wergland's perceptive analysis of Shaker egalitarianism is a helpful approach to the ongoing feminist conversation regarding gender equality. Recommended." *Choice*"A superb addition to religious history and women's studies shelves, highly recommended." *Midwest Book Review*"[Wergland]'s work should generate fruitful debate in the academic community." *American Historical Review*"Sisters in Faith is an insightful look at the inner workings of Shaker community." *History: Reviews of New Books*"A great strength of *Sisters in the Faith* is the author's close reading of a rich array of primary sources, most of them unpublished, to tease out the subtleties of gender relations in Shaker communities. . . . the book really shines when it plunges into the intricacies of every day Shaker life. It guides readers deep into the lived world of Believers: we can feel the uncomfortable pinch of the cap on one's head, the frustrations of a kitchen sister with a brother who cadged snacks when he should have been outdoors working, and the exuberance of girls at play on a maple sugaring outing. Ultimately, Wergland makes a strong case for the many ways, both subtle and direct, that Shaker women exercised authority in their communities." *Church History*"Neophytes like me will find fascinating the window into Shaker life that Dr. Wergland, an independent scholar, provides, especially through extensive use of first-hand accounts by both Shakers and those who interacted with them. This includes countless journals of Shaker women and girls, whose life and role within the Shaker movement provide the obvious and wonderfully informative focus of the book." *Archives*"The result of her studies is a splendid book affirming the existence of Shaker gender equality. . . . Together with her other works on the Shakers, with *Sisters in the Faith*, Wergland has demonstrated once more that she holds a firm place at the forefront of modern Shaker scholarship." *Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*

In 1788, following the death of charismatic founder Mother Ann Lee, the celibate religious group known as the Shakers set out to institutionalize equality of the sexes in their theology, government, and daily practice. In this book, Glendyne Wergland evaluates how well they succeeded in that mission by examining the experiences of women within Shaker communities over more than a century. Drawing on an extensive archive of primary documents, Wergland discusses topics ranging from girl-hood, health, and dress to why women joined the Shakers and how they were viewed by those outside their community. She analyzes the division of labor between men and women, showing that there was considerable cooperation and reciprocity in carrying out most tasks-from

food production to laundering to gathering firewood-even as gendered conflicts remained. In her conclusion, Wergland draws together all of these threads to show that Shaker communities achieved a remarkable degree of gender equality at a time when women elsewhere still suffered under the legal and social strictures of the traditional patriarchal order. In so doing, she argues, the experience of Shaker women served as a model for promoting women's rights in American political culture.

As a novelist researching Shaker life, I have read a lot of books about the Shakers. This one really stands out. Well-written and solidly researched, "Sisters in the Faith" contains a remarkable level of detail about a fascinating sub-culture. From her previous writings, Glendyne Wergland is familiar enough with Shaker life that she knows how to put the daily rituals, rites and routines of the Shaker sisterhood into a broader context. The picture she paints is quite extraordinary. From decoding bonnet etiquette to illuminating the surprisingly mean relationships between some Shaker sisters during the mysterious "Era of Manifestations," "Sisters in the Faith" offers us an unparalleled view of life in a Shaker settlement. This book has a lot to offer both the serious scholar and the lay person seeking to learn more about one of America's most interesting religious groups.

Glendyne Wergland is an authority on Eastern Shakers. I have read a number of her books and papers and find them all to be well researched and written. This particular book, as the sub-title indicates, is an effort to explain the issue of gender equality within the Shaker sect. It is an interesting story of women earning positions of leadership beyond what one might expect from the general social theories of America in the Nineteenth Century. It provides a description of women who were certainly capable of leadership helped greatly by a dearth of strong male leadership. This situation was to grow over time. A good book.

Good information about the Shakers. The author is passionate about this topic. She has researched and studied the Shakers extensively. Had the opportunity to hear her speak about them at a seminar.

The unique culture and ideals of the Shakers have long fascinated me, to the extent that all my adult life I have collected what books I can find on the now-extinct sect. I must admit that I can at times take an interest amounting to titillation, but in the more mundane and less spiritual aspects of their life the Shakers could be still fascinating. In "Sisters in the Faith: Shaker Women and Equality of the

Sexes', Glendyne Wergland aims to look inside the enclosed life of Shaker Sisters to actually have a look at whether the ideals of sexual equality, devised long before the pressures of working-class life made them so much as known to the mainstream, were actually effective. Whilst I have long been aware that in fact Shaker ideals of sexual equality were not the same as those of modern radical feminists - at least inasmuch as they did not believe men and women interchangeable - I have still had faith that Shakerism could offer women much more than was possible in wider American society during the sect's prime. Wergland's research, if not original, is extremely clear and 'Sisters in the Faith: Shaker Women and Equality of the Sexes' does give a very clear, detailed and logical account of Shaker life as it was and why women of various ages joined the Shakers and what their experiences were there. It is more precise than the writings of Å Å various Shaker journals Å Å but does not become too dry or technical for the beginner. The accounts of how the "world"'s people viewed the Shakers in their prime is, if anything, more impressive as one can see so clearly and directly from the book how the "world"'s people saw the eccentric worship on the Sabbath and the plain - often viewed repulsive - appearance of Shaker Sisters. The language is strong and clear but does not stir unnecessary feelings about Shakerism and its adherents. There is not a single startling thing within 'Sisters in the Faith: Shaker Women and Equality of the Sexes', nor anything that people with even slight knowledge of life during that time would have trouble believing, but for the many people who have never heard of Shakerism this will be an asset as the book may not put people off as the more spiritual Shaker books like Å Å 'The Shakers: Two Centuries of Spiritual Reflection' Å Å or Å Å 'Mother's First-Born Daughters' Å Å or the brilliant Å Å 'Heavenly Visions: Shaker Gift Drawings And Gift Songs' Å Å could easily do. Whilst by no means the most original Shaker book, as an introduction to this fascinating sect 'Sisters in the Faith: Shaker Women and Equality of the Sexes' does a great deal to demystify the Shakers and how they lived.

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