Conclusion
Women’s Religious Agency Today

In this book I have emphasized the importance of leaving behind secularized reading practices and adopting what I have termed secular reading. When we approach nineteenth-century women authors, secular reading requires that we devote careful attention to the particular religious conditions in which these writers found themselves and consider how they negotiated their agency and their authorship with respect to those conditions. Secular reading requires attention to religion because secularism as a cultural discourse sets the terms by which religion can be practiced and even apprehended and thus shapes how religious affiliations, acts, and expressions are received and remediated in the public sphere. American secularity is protean, however; the line between acceptable public and private expressions of religion has shifted over time, as has the role of religious belief and practice in public life. So what would it mean to read our current situation secularly?

For one thing, it means recognizing both the differences and the continuities between our current secular situation and earlier eras of American religious history. While each generation believes it is living at a time of unprecedented rupture and change, the fact is that in its broad outlines, the twenty-first-century United States is not all that different from the nineteenth-century United States. Our era is marked by an explosion of communication
and new media technologies that have altered how we communicate with one another and the world; by debates about race, immigration, and citizenship whose participants seek to adjudicate who and what is properly American; by military actions that extend the colonial and imperial reach of the state; by white supremacist nationalism and the incarceration and destruction of black and brown bodies; and by patriarchal systems that, despite advancements in women’s equality, continue to police women’s personal, professional, social, and embodied experiences.

Among these continuities, the religious situation in the United States remains similar in outline, though different in its details, to the early nineteenth century. Just as the period following the Second Great Awakening showed a rise in religious affiliation, a proliferation of Christian sects, and the flowering of theological innovations that arose not only from the clergy but from devout laypeople, including the authors in this book, we are currently living through a period of immense religious ferment. Our current form of secularity can be difficult to discern, however, because persistent ideas about secularization continue to distort our public discussions of religion. I conclude this book by thinking through our secular situation and pointing to some of the ways that secular agency operates in the political and religious lives of women in our own time.

Seeing Religion Clearly

In 2012 the Pew Research Center’s Religion and Public Life project produced a new report on religious affiliation in the United States. Titled “Nones” on the Rise, the report began by proclaiming that the “number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace.” According to Pew, the religiously unaffiliated had increased in number, from roughly 15 percent to 20 percent of all U.S. adults, between 2007 and 2012, and 6 percent of the U.S. adult population had come to describe themselves as “agnostic” or “atheist.” The story of the country’s increasing religious apostasy was picked up immediately by major news outlets. The Washington Post ran the headline “Losing Our Religion: One in Five Americans Are Now ‘Nones’” and focused primarily on the political implications of the survey, particularly for Republicans. NPR likewise landed on both the REM reference and the political possibilities: “Losing Our Religion: The Growth of the ‘Nones,’” it reported, as well as “Religious Nones Are Growing Quickly: Should Republicans Worry?” USA Today also invoked the political angle: “The Emerging Social, Political Force: ‘Nones,’” it proclaimed.
The Pew Center’s findings received considerable media attention because they seemed to confirm an assumption that has animated American public discourse at least since the 1960s: that American religion is in decline, except perhaps among the “religious right.” But buried somewhere deep in each of these articles was a caveat: the Pew Center’s report had shown that while religious affiliation was declining among U.S. adults, other measures of religious adherence or identification, such as belief in God, frequency of prayer, or self-identification as “religious” or “spiritual,” had largely remained steady. Indeed, despite Pew’s own attention-grabbing headline, the report provided ample evidence of continuing religiosity; 80 percent of Americans still described themselves as affiliated with a religion. The percentage of Americans who attended religious services had hardly changed. And even among the 20 percent of Americans who declared themselves religiously unaffiliated, the “nones,” 68 percent said they believed in God, and 41 percent said they prayed at least once a week. Lack of religious affiliation, in other words, does not equate to lack of religious attachments. Indeed, between 2007 and 2012 the number of self-identified atheists in the United States grew by only 0.8 percent, a number that was statistically significant but did not evidence a drastic decline in American religiosity.

Four years after the nones findings appeared to much media attention, the Pew Center issued another report, this time on the relative participation of women and men in religious activities. Titled The Gender Gap in Religion around the World, the report aggregated survey data from 192 countries and six different religious groups: Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and the religiously unaffiliated. Researchers measured multiple indicators of religious commitment, including religious affiliation, attendance at worship services, frequency of prayer, and the self-reported importance of religion in a person’s life. They found that “globally, women are more devout than men by several standard measures of religious commitment.” These measures differ among regions and religious groups, of course, but the gender gap was significant and observable across most traditions and measures of religious commitment: women, on average, are 3.5 percent more likely than men to claim a religious affiliation and 8 percent more likely to report that they pray daily. Among Christians, the differences are stark: around the world, Christian women’s religious commitment exceeds men’s on all measures, by as much as 10 percent. In the United States, the differences are particularly pronounced, with Christian women, for instance, up to 14 percent more likely to engage in daily prayer than men.

In contrast to the 2012 report on the nones, however, the 2016 report received little media attention; most responses to it came from scholars of
religion and Christian denominational publications. Mainstream outlets that covered it were most likely to express befuddlement. The Washington Post ran the story but was more interested in puzzling out the why than reporting the what: their article “Why Women Are More Religious Than Men” skipped to the (short) portion of the report that posited potential explanations for the gender gap. The UK Guardian accompanied their article “Women More Religiously Devout Than Men, New Study Finds” with a stock photograph of a niqab-clad woman and a link to an editorial titled “It’s Not Surprising That Women Are More Religious Than Men: What Else Do They Have to Believe In?”

These expressions of befuddlement expose the gendered ground on which our fantasies of an increasingly secularized society rest. If religion is destined to die out, these headlines imply, why haven’t women gotten the memo? The progressive-secular imaginary insists that women must shed their religion in order to become properly secularized subjects and thus worthy participants in the rational public sphere. When they don’t—when they display consistently higher rates of religious belief and behavior than men—they defy the progressive-secular narrative that insists that to be fully self-actualized, women must disentangle themselves from their religious attachments. When those higher rates of religious affiliation persist across national, regional, and ethnic borders—when women remain religious in both Western, “developed” nations and Eastern or Southern “undeveloped” ones, and when they remain religious in Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and even Muslim countries—they undermine Western secular chauvinism, which prides itself on “freeing” oppressed and deluded people, particularly women, from their “backward” religions.

Reading our secular situation correctly, then, means attending to the continued importance of religion in the life of the nation generally but specifically in the lives of women, who are its most numerous and ardent adherents. Despite evidence that women make up the majority of participants in nearly all American religious movements, however, U.S. popular and political discourse consistently identifies “religion” with “fundamentalist Christianity” and both with white men. In some ways, this association seems self-evident: the male leaders of the Christian right regularly insert themselves into political discourse and particularly into debates surrounding gender and sexuality, as they inveigh against gay marriage, contraception, and abortion. And yet their voices are not only loud but likely to be amplified: their authority, as always in the American public sphere, is conditioned on whiteness, maleness, and inherited privilege. And as self-appointed spokesmen for a fundamentalist religious movement, men like Jerry Falwell Jr. and Franklin Graham attract
attention in a public sphere that prefers to think of itself as fully secularized and as having efficiently done away with public expressions of religion.

Consider, for instance, the amount of media attention directed toward the Westboro Baptist Church, an extremist congregation that has made a name for itself by staging hate-filled demonstrations at Pride parades and service members’ funerals. The Westboro church is a tiny organization—it claims about seventy members total—and yet the media coverage it receives suggests a large and widespread movement. While white evangelicals do much damage in the United States, the mainstream media’s obsessive focus on them is an artifact of our post-Protestant version of secularity, in which “good” religious people (Episcopalians, for instance, who vote largely Democratic, don’t take the Bible literally, and are less likely to proselytize or speak in public about their faith) fly under the radar while “bad” religious people (white Southern Baptists, who vote Republican, insist on the Bible as the literal word of God and use it as a warrant for conservative political positions, and insist on placing religion at the center of political discourse) receive outsized attention in the putatively secularized public sphere.12

Our national tendency to recognize religion only when it is loudly performed by white men distorts our political discourse and makes it difficult to effect meaningful change around policy or social issues. The aftermath of the 2016 presidential election provides a particularly salient example. One of the most circulated headlines to come out of the election (again from Pew) proclaimed that “81% of Evangelical Christians Voted for Trump.” It is indeed a sobering statistic, one that paints evangelical Christians as both brainwashed (in an election in which certain states were decided by less than 1 percent of the total vote, a group with 81 percent agreement on a candidate seems monolithic) and hypocritical: how could four out of five so-called values voters choose a candidate with three ex-wives, numerous ongoing lawsuits, and a leaked video in which he bragged about grabbing women by their pussies?

Again, however, the public discussions surrounding the Pew Center’s findings (and, in many ways, the findings themselves) obscure more than they reveal. “Born-again/evangelical” is a self-reported category that cuts across many Christian sects and denominations and includes some Protestants, Catholics, and Mormons.13 White evangelicals made up 26 percent of the 2016 electorate, a striking fact in its own right, but as I discussed in my second chapter, the term evangelical, which was once a simple synonym for Protestant, has been appropriated in the last thirty years by “one conservative party in almost all the most notable denominations.”14 For many born-again Christians, in other words, evangelical is a political designation as much as a religious one: it is synonymous with conservative or Republican. And to report
that conservatives voted overwhelmingly for a Republican candidate is a tru-
ism rather than a revelation.

The conflation of “white” with “born-again/evangelical” in the Pew report
also functioned to erase nonwhite evangelicals and evangelical women from
discussions about the 2016 election. A quarter of American evangelicals are
nonwhite, but their voting behavior was not mentioned in Pew’s exit poll re-
ports.15 The voting behavior of other religious groups, however, suggests that
race was a more determining factor in the 2016 election than religion: white
Catholic voters, for instance, supported Trump by a 23-percentage-point mar-
gin (60 percent to 37 percent), while Hispanic Catholics supported Clinton by
a 41-percentage-point margin (67 percent to 26 percent).16 White evangelical
voters, in other words, likely voted for Trump as much because they were
white as because they were evangelical. And neither of the Pew Center’s re-
ports about the white evangelical vote examined the gender distribution of
religious voters, leading most commentators who reported the 81 percent sta-
tistic to either ignore gender altogether or to assume that male and female
evangelicals voted for Trump in equal numbers. But while Pew’s exit poll re-
ports erased female evangelicals, preelection polling of likely voters conducted
in September and October 2016 by the Public Religion Research Institute
showed a gender gap in every white Christian group. While 71 percent of white
evangelical Protestant men supported Trump before the election, 60 percent
of white evangelical Protestant women did (a number that is still high but no-
ticeably lower). Mainline Protestant men supported Trump at 54 percent,
while mainline Protestant women supported him at 45 percent (a number
identical to their support for Clinton). White Catholic men, meanwhile, sup-
ported Trump at 58 percent, while white Catholic women supported him at
38 percent (and Clinton at 49 percent).17

Attending to race and gender differences in religious and political affilia-
tion, it turns out, reveals significant and sometimes stark distinctions between
religiously affiliated whites and nonwhites and between men and women, both
within and outside of Protestant Christianity. But just as it was easier to blame
working-class Americans for Trump’s victory than to admit that wealthy white
suburbanites voted for him because of racial resentment, it has been more con-
venient to blame a poorly differentiated “evangelical” voting block for our
current political morass than to admit that the primary motivating factor
behind many Americans’ voting behavior is white supremacy.18 I am not sug-
gesting, of course, that our discussions of politics should ignore religion and
focus solely on race or gender or that race and gender identity will always over-
rule religious identity in political decision making. White heteropatriarchy’s
long history of wielding Christianity as a weapon against racial and sexual mi-
norities is a theopolitical arrangement that is dangerous to excluded individuals and to the nation as a whole. But conflating religion, Christianity, whiteness, and conservatism serves the purposes of white Christian heteropatriarchy by doing its dirty work: effacing the agency or the very existence of women and racial minorities.

This erasure can be seen in the predictable recurrence of calls for a “religious left,” which are repeated ad nauseum during every election cycle, always as if the “religious left” were a new and unthought idea. Most recently, as of this writing, Pete Buttigieg, a gay, Episcopal military veteran running for the presidency in 2020, has chided the Democratic Party for “los[ing] touch with a religious tradition that I think can help explain and relate our values. . . . It helps to root [in religion] a lot of what it is we do believe in, when it comes to protecting the sick and the stranger and the poor, as well as skepticism of the wealthy and the powerful and the established.”

The coming rise of the religious left is an evergreen trope in American politics, but the “religious tradition” at issue, of course, never Islam or Buddhism or Judaism but a more progressive form of Christianity. And as the statistics above suggest, the United States has and has long had a Christian left—it’s simply made up of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and women. Members of historically black Christian congregations, for instance, already vote overwhelmingly Democratic. Furthermore, the conflation of religion with Christianity in such calls reinforces the notion that American politics is Christian by definition, thus reifying the outsider status of non-Christian politicians, including but certainly not limited to Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib (Muslim members of the House of Representatives), Jared Huffman (atheist member of the House of Representatives), and Ravi Bhalla (Sikh mayor of Hoboken, New Jersey).

When it comes to triangulating religion and politics with race and gender, in other words, our public discourse is stubbornly inaccurate. “Religious” means “Christian,” “evangelical” means “conservative,” and all three mean “white and male”; non-Christians, women, and people of color are either erased or treated as monolithic. Given the obfuscating tendencies of our popular political discourse, reading our current moment secularly requires that we as scholars devote careful attention to the interpenetration of religion with politics and with other forms of identity, including gender, race, and class.

**Women’s Religious Agency in our Secular Age**

Precisely because the religious agency of women, people of color, and non-Christians is so apt to be erased, reading our current situation secularly also
means working to recognize the myriad ways that religious agency continues to operate in our contemporary world. As I have emphasized throughout this book, discussions about modern religion and secularity are always discussions about gender. Because secular modernity constructs women (real and imagined), with their ostensibly passionate, unruly, reproductive bodies, as outsiders to a public sphere defined as rational, deliberative, and disembodied, any attempt to define appropriate forms of secular subjecthood invokes the problem of gender, if only implicitly. As definitional outsiders to secular modernity, women have struggled for centuries to imagine forms of secular subjecthood that would allow them to achieve agency in a public sphere premised on their passivity and objectification.

Because both women and religion were constructed as secular modernity’s Others, the struggle for agency has sometimes prompted women to reject religion altogether—to sever ties with a tradition or set of practices that seemed to shackle them to an unenlightened past. But just as often, women have found ways to enact forms of agency that operated through their religious beliefs, behaviors, and affiliations. This book has examined some of the many ways women of the antebellum period used the novel to imagine new forms of religious agency within the secular situation of the early to mid-nineteenth century. I will close with a few examples of contemporary religious women who are negotiating their agency within the terms of our current secular situation—with all the complexity that entails.

As I noted above, popular discussion of American Christianity tends to focus on its fundamentalist wing, conservative evangelicalism, and within that on its most vocal white male members. And yet even within the openly patriarchal white evangelical movement, women have found ways to exercise both religious and political agency. Emily Johnson’s *This Is Our Message: Women’s Leadership in the New Christian Right* traces the crucial role played by white women in the evangelical movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Conservative Christian women including Beverly LaHaye, Tammy Faye Bakker, Dale Evans Rogers, Anita Bryant, and Marabel Morgan adapted many of the strategies used by nineteenth-century women writers to justify their involvement in public and political matters. They professed that their unwillingness to engage in public action had been overcome only by God’s call to witness; they claimed that their special status as Christian wives and mothers required them to weigh in on matters of family policy, including abortion and marriage equality; and they insisted that women’s voices were necessary to counter the rise of a godless feminism. Through denominational and ecumenical organizations and conferences, through authorship and publication, and through the new media genre of the television talk show, these women claimed central roles
for themselves within a movement that most often expressly forbade women’s ordination and looked askance at all forms of leadership that placed women above the authority of men. To dismiss late twentieth-century evangelical Christianity “as simply patriarchal or anti-woman,” Johnson writes, “is to ignore the millions of women who attend conservative Christian churches, who support conservative Christian organizations, and who vote for conservative Christian candidates.” Doing so also ignores a potent form of women’s religious agency that has far-reaching effects in the world—effects that those with progressive political commitments would do well to understand, if only to better counter them.

While women’s religious agency is easy to overlook when it occurs within such patriarchal structures as the modern evangelical movement, it is also often ignored or erased in contexts where religion is perceived as inappropriate or embarrassing. Azza Karam has remarked on “the relative amnesia Western feminists have of their own trajectory,” forgetting as they do the explicitly religious origins of the women’s rights movements in England and the United States. Ann Braude’s studies of the National Organization for Women reveal the critical role that Catholic nuns, Methodist lay leaders, and other religious feminists played in the group’s founding in the 1960s, as they established “an Ecumenical Task Force on Women and Religion that organized worship services as well as supporting women’s rights in religious contexts.” Histories of second-wave feminism that appeared during the 1980s and 1990s, however, erased these religious origins, “portraying religion exclusively as an enemy of feminism” and emphasizing the success of the “secular feminist” movement. Because histories of second-wave feminism have often deemphasized the movement’s religious roots in order to claim its proper place in a secularized public sphere, acknowledging women’s religious agency may mean retelling our own story to include the myriad opportunities for affiliation and commitment that religious belief and behavior have enabled.

Even within contemporary American evangelicalism, however, the inheritors of first- and second-wave feminism are exercising a new form of religious agency—one that counters the seemingly commonsense alignment of evangelical Christianity with conservative political causes. The progressive evangelical movement that has arisen in the last fifteen to twenty years has been contemporaneous, not coincidentally, with the global reach of social media, and though it has popular male spokespersons (Rob Bell, Shane Claiborne), it is being led by politically engaged women with massive social media followings. These women include Jen Hatmaker, Glennon Doyle, and Jamie Wright, each of whom maintains a multimedia presence that includes Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, long-form works of autobiography and
devotional writing, conference and public speaking appearances, and podcast and talk show interviews. Together and individually, these women have been criticized by conservative male religious leaders for their unorthodox and ostensibly “unbiblical” teachings about religious patriarchy and abuse, LGBTQ equality (Doyle is gay and married to the soccer star Abby Wambach), white supremacy, Christian imperialism (Wright nicknamed herself “the Very Worst Missionary” for her critique of evangelical missions), and women’s bodily autonomy.

Among the most successful and controversial of these progressive evangelical women was Rachel Held Evans, who died suddenly at the age of thirty-seven in May 2019. Once labeled by the Washington Post as “the most polarizing woman in evangelicalism,” Evans had a huge and devoted social media following. She was a perpetual thorn in the side of conservative evangelical men, particularly when she published an article in Vox in August 2016 encouraging fellow evangelicals to vote for Hillary Clinton. Though not an ordained member of the clergy, she was frequently invited to preach in progressive churches, where she administered the sacraments to members who had fled or been expelled from other congregations. And while she hadn’t attended seminary, she published four books of popular theology that earned the distinction of being labeled “unbiblical and theologically dangerous” by a leader of the Southern Baptist Convention. A Christian author and colleague tweeted that “What @rachelheldevans did for American Christian theology cannot be overstated. She democratized it. She insisted that a woman from small-town Tennessee without a theological degree could engage the sacred cows of Christian doctrine with common sense” (@MAGuyton, May 4, 2019). In doing so, many of her mourners claimed, she had changed not only her readers’ personal beliefs but the course of American Christianity.

While she was accused by Christian conservatives of embracing a “toxic theology” (@travis_vanmeter, May 4, 2019), Evans insisted that her arguments for feminism, LGBTQ equality, and racial justice were consistently biblical. Refusing to surrender the practice of exegesis to fundamentalist leaders, she aligned herself with a progressive Christian tradition that had been in place since at least the antebellum period. In a 2013 blog post titled “Is Abolition ‘Biblical’?” Evans noted that the Bible verses used in the nineteenth century to argue in favor of slavery are the same now used to justify gender inequality and LGBTQ exclusion in evangelical churches. Reiterating her own pro-LGBTQ stance, Evans wrote that “sometimes it’s not about the number of proof texts we can line up or about the most simplistic reading of the text, but rather some deep, intrinsic sense of right and wrong.” In another post inspired by Huckleberry Finn, Evans wrote that when conservative Christians
told her “the Bible is clear” about the sin of homosexuality, she often thought of Huck’s decision to “go to hell” rather than perform the supposedly righteous act of returning Jim to slavery. “The Bible has been ‘clear’ before, after all,” she wrote, “in support of wiping out entire people groups, in support of manifest destiny, in support of Indian removal, in support of anti-Semitism, in support of slavery, in support of ‘separate but equal,’ in support of constitutional amendments banning interracial marriage.” Like Huck, Evans wrote, she had decided that “sometimes true faithfulness requires something of a betrayal.”

Abandoning biblical literalism and proof texting in favor of a holistic reading of the Bible as a text that supports inclusion and social justice placed Evans in a long line of liberal Christian writers and thinkers, many of them women. Evans invoked one of these women in the “Is Abolition ‘Biblical’?” post: Harriet Beecher Stowe. In a brief discussion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Evans quoted the famous scene in which Senator Bird offers this patronizing response to his wife’s critique of the Fugitive Slave Act: “‘Your feelings are all quite right, dear, and interesting, and I love you for them; but, then, dear, we mustn’t suffer our feelings to run away with our judgment.’” Evans’s reaction, she wrote, was to “laugh out loud . . . . Reminds me of a few book reviews I’ve received.” Writing in a progressive Christian tradition that chose to err on the side of inclusion and welcome rather than exclusion and condemnation, Evans was subjected to the familiar gendered critique that she was writing from her “feelings” rather than from her “judgment.”

News of Evans’s death broke around the same time that the president of the United States was publicly attacking a Muslim member of Congress, Ilhan Omar, by retweeting a video that intercut a speech she made before the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) with footage of the 9/11 attacks. Omar makes an attractive target for anti-Muslim bigotry because she is an outspoken Muslim woman and an immigrant born in Somalia who wears a headscarf in public. Her religious agency is literally inseparable from her political agency: as a U.S. congresswoman, she wears the visible evidence of her Muslim identity on her body at all times, including on the floor of the House of Representatives. Conservative attacks on Omar rhetorically align her with 9/11 (as the president’s retweet did) by drawing tenuous links between CAIR and Hamas while also accusing Omar of conspiring with authoritarian governments. Commentators on both the Right and the Left, meanwhile, have accused her of anti-Semitism because she vocally objects to pro-Israel lobbying groups’ influence in Washington. While U.S. involvement with Israel is a long-standing source of disagreement in American politics, Omar’s statements receive outsized attention because of the visible intersection of her race, her
gender, and her religion. A *New Yorker* profile of Omar noted that she “refuses to assume the posture of the good immigrant” and “performs neither humility nor gratitude.” A white male columnist for the conservative online magazine *The Federalist* called Omar “an avatar for the intersectionalist, America-loathing, progressive-Islamic supremacist set” who hides behind “an identity politics veil.” The reference to Omar’s supposed commitment to “Islamic supremacy” alongside the gesture to the notorious “veiling” of Muslim women suggests how Omar’s Muslim identity functions in multivalent ways in the American media landscape. She is accused of overperforming a Muslim political identity associated with fundamentalism and violence while simultaneously failing to embody a Muslim female identity, signified by the veil, that should require her to be modest and submissive to authority. At the same time, her explicit religious and racial otherness to white American Protestantism makes her symbolically valuable to a white supremacist political faction that equates Protestant Christianity with whiteness and both with true Americanness.

The double bind in which Omar finds herself is shared by many American Muslim women, who appear most often in public discourse as abused victims of fundamentalist ideology or sinister agents of foreign power—sometimes simultaneously. Like anti-Catholic discourses of the nineteenth century that prompted not only the convent captivity narratives I discussed in chapter 4 but the burning of Catholic churches and violent attacks on Catholic immigrants, these depictions emphasize the supposed foreignness of Muslim women, even when those women were born in the United States and display myriad political and cultural markers of American identity. While hundreds of American Muslim women have raised their voices to dispute popular misconceptions about Islam and the role of women in it (Linda Sarsour and Mona Eltahawy are prominent examples), I would like to focus here on a particular expression of Muslim women’s religious agency: the Women’s Mosque of America (WMA).

The Women’s Mosque was founded by M. Hasna Maznavi in 2015 “to provide a platform for brilliant Muslim women to speak in a religious capacity for the benefit of the entire Muslim Ummah.” Headquartered in Los Angeles, the organization holds monthly woman-led Friday prayers; because it has no building of its own, it first offered services in an interfaith center and now meets in a Unitarian church. The Friday service is open to women and children only; while some co-ed events are held on other days, the Friday prayer services are (and, the organizers assert, always will be) restricted to women. The organizers compare the mosque to a women’s college where they seek to create “an atmosphere in which Muslim women are surrounded by their peers
and feel comfortable exploring more active leadership roles in a safe space.”

The mosque’s website describes it as a “middle ground space that welcomes all Muslims from every sect, background, school of thought, and level of religious practice” while also accommodating particular traditions. (Shi’a worshippers, for instance, are provided with rose petals and clay turbahs for use during prayer). And the mosque has a “come as you are” dress code policy, “meaning everyone is welcome to come dressed as they normally do outside of the mosque.” Attendees, in other words, need not wear a specific head covering to be welcome. Monthly prayer services and other offerings are meant to complement traditional mosque attendance, where services are sex segregated and leadership roles are filled by men; participants are encouraged to take what they have learned back to the mosques they regularly attend.

At each Friday meeting, a woman invited by the community delivers a khutbah, or discourse; these women are usually Muslim, but the Women’s Mosque “invite[s] our interfaith sisters from all religious backgrounds to join us as observers, participators, and supporters,” and thus khateebas (women delivering the khutbah) sometimes represent non-Muslim faiths. According to the mosque’s website, each khateeba “brings her own unique first-hand perspective and insights to topics that have either previously gone unaddressed in mosques or that have rarely been spoken about from the female perspective.”

These topics include domestic violence and sexual abuse, and the mosque has also held discussions that address social justice movements, including Black Lives Matter. Khateebas often preach from English translations of the Qur’an, a stance that challenges the long-standing alignment between the scriptural authority of the Qur’an and its original Arabic language. Since women have not always had opportunities to study the Qur’an in Arabic, preaching from English translations challenges patriarchal clerical prerogative. Khateebas engage in exegesis of the Qur’an while bringing to it a specifically female perspective—one the founders of the WMA claim has been excluded from Islamic tradition and that, they insist, can benefit every Muslim, not just the women who attend the mosque.

In keeping with their calling to benefit “the entire Muslim Ummah,” the Women’s Mosque of America maintains a robust internet presence. While attendance at Friday prayer services rarely crests 50 people (a drop from the 75–100 who attended services when the mosque first opened in 2015), the WMA YouTube channel has 724 subscribers and its archived videos of khutbahs and co-ed events at the mosque have received over 60,000 views. The mosque also maintains iTunes and SoundCloud accounts where users can listen to khutbahs or to episodes of the WMA podcast. This savvy use of social media extends the mosque’s reach well beyond its local Los Angeles community.
and makes its ideas available to women who are prevented—by geography or other constraints—from attending the mosque themselves.

The creation of a specifically female space in which Muslim women from various sects and communities can meet to engage in prayer and discussion represents a liberalization of Muslim religious practices that the mosque’s founders insist is consistent with Islamic tradition. Their “aim [is] to increase community access to female Muslim scholars and female perspectives on Islamic knowledge and spirituality”—not a deconstruction (as Rachel Held Evans’s followers sometimes claimed to be doing with evangelical Christianity) but a restoration. While the mosque’s website insists that the WMA is neither a progressive nor a conservative organization, the act of choosing women as imams and khateebahs extends religious authority to women in previously unprecedented ways. But by framing the mosque as a supplement to existing worship spaces rather than a replacement for them and by offering khutbahs that engage in direct exegesis of specific passages from the Qur’an, attendees and organizers of the Women’s Mosque present this immense accession of religious agency as the fulfillment of Islamic tradition, not a rebellion against it. The founders of the mosque insist that “a major part of uplifting the Muslim community is to harness the potential of the whole Ummah, including Muslim women, who make up more than half of our community.” In this nonsectarian Muslim space, women access greater religious agency by adopting, adapting, and reinterpreting Islamic tradition.

Like the nineteenth-century Christian women writers I have discussed in this book, the organizers and attendees of the Women’s Mosque are carving out space for agency in a tradition that might seem ill fitted or even hostile to their efforts. Unsatisfied with secularized discourses that insist that agency can only be found outside the bounds of organized religion or that self-actualization is synonymous with rebellion, these twenty-first-century religious women are adapting their communities’ sacred texts and traditions in ways that facilitate their agency while keeping them connected to a shared past. Women writers of the nineteenth century took advantage of increased literacy and cheaper print technologies to spread theological ideas by means of the popular novel. The Women’s Mosque’s organizers are embracing digital media—Instagram, YouTube, podcasts, and apps—to spread new visions of what religion can be in our secular age.

Like the subjects of this book, we are living through a time of immense social, economic, and technological upheaval. And though shifts in religious identification—including rising numbers of religiously unaffiliated people—might suggest that the long-promised secularization of American society is finally coming to fruition, a closer look tells us that while religious
beliefs and practices are changing, they are hardly on the decline. Though the loudest voices in American religion may be those of fundamentalist men, women are changing the face of American religion by finding new spaces for and modes of agency. In social media, in popular publishing, in conferences and workshops, and in houses of worship, women are shaping American religion by applying their minds to the social and intellectual needs of their communities. And they are doing so in ways that will have profound implications for the future. Just as nineteenth-century women writers changed the world—for better and for worse—by wresting theology from the hands of clerical leaders and wielding it in the public sphere, religious women of the present are shaping their families, communities, and the nation by making religious matters their own.