In 1900 George Albert Coe, a liberal Methodist and professor of moral and intellectual philosophy at Northwestern University, wrote concerning the "persistent excess of women in the Churches":

If we view the problem psychologically we shall feel perfectly safe in assuming that any large and persistent excess of women in the Churches is chiefly due to a superior adaptation of Church life to the female nature. It is because the Church looks at things with feminine eyes, and calls chiefly into exercises the faculties in which women excel men. A feminine element is as necessary to religion as woman to the life of the species. But, in the spiritual as in the natural realm, whatever tends to isolate this element tends also to make it barren and unfruitful. Neither the man alone nor the woman alone is a perfect type, but rather the family, in which the two complementary qualities are balanced the one over against the other.¹

At first glance there is nothing remarkable in any of this. Coe, it would appear, was reacting to what scholars have described as the widespread feminization of American Protestantism during the nineteenth century, expressing a common turn-of-the-century concern regarding the disproportionate number of women in churches, and calling for a church more suited to men.² Based on a careful reading of Coe and re-reading of the secondary literature on the feminization and masculinization of Protestantism, I will suggest that we have oversimplified what is, in fact, a more complex and interesting situation.

First, the words feminine, masculine, and their derivatives were neither universal in meaning nor fixed in terms of referent. Failure to recognize that point has led to a conflation of bits of historical evidence as if they were all referring to the same thing, and the tendency to impose categories (e.g., "feminization" and "masculinization") on the past uncritically, as if historians were always describing the same thing. Second, I want to raise the possibility that the "feminine church" of the nineteenth century was the invention of turn-of-the-century Protestants rather than something that had existed as such since the early national period. In other words, perhaps turn-of-the-century depictions of the feminine church were re-readings of the past in light of contemporary, turn-of-the-century concerns. In Coe’s case, it is clear that his depiction of the church as feminine tells us more about Coe’s modernist views than it does about the traditional form of Methodism he was trying to displace. Third, the variety of meanings and referents associated with the words feminine and masculine at the turn of the century suggest that we might better understand what historians usually depict as a masculinizing reaction to a feminized Protestantism in relation to competing (but not mutually exclusive) models of gender and society that were implicit in contending views of Protestantism.

My underlying contention is that we as historians have been guilty of what Wayne Proudfoot has termed "descriptive reduction" in our interpretations and guilty of uncritically accepting into our sources' descriptive reductions of others. In the first instance, we have too often failed to specify experiences in question "under a description that can plausibly be ascribed to the person to whom we attribute the experience" before going on to explain them as (to their way of thinking) feminized or masculinized.³ In the second, we have not paused to reconstitute in their own terms the experience of those whom our sources want to characterize as masculine or feminine. My methodological aim in this essay is, insofar as I can, to avoid both pitfalls and, through "peeling off" successive layers of descriptive reductions, reconstruct some of the contending views of gender and Protestantism operative at the turn of the century.

I will focus on Coe and the Methodist tradition more generally for several reasons. First, Coe made his remarks about the "Eternally Feminine" in the Church" in the context of an overall argument that we can analyze to reveal how his feminine church was constructed. Second, as a professor of religious education at Union Theological Seminary in New York as of 1909, Coe played a leading role in promoting modernist ideas in theological schools (through the publication of widely used textbooks) and churches (through Sunday school curricula).³ Third, Methodism, the largest Protestant denomination for much of the nineteenth century, has been overshadowed by the Reformed tradition in discussions of the feminization and masculinization of Protestantism.
Feminization Revisited

The feminization of American religion thesis has had remarkable staying power, especially among historians of American religion, despite numerous significant critiques. Ann Braude, for example, points out that historians of American religion have used the term feminization in at least three ways: to signify demographic shifts, to characterize changes in ideology, and to express normative judgments. Richard Shibley’s essay “The Feminization of American Congregationalism” illustrates the use of the term to describe changes in religious demographics, specifically the changing ratio of women to men in pews. As Braude points out, everyone, including Shibley, agrees that women outnumbered men in pews throughout American history, except perhaps in the very earliest years of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Although the ratios of men to women in pews may have had locally significant fluctuations, Braude argues that the fact that women consistently outnumbered men over the course of three centuries means that American Protestantism was not feminized in any overt demographic sense.

In a longitudinal study of Center (Congregational) Church in New Haven, Connecticut, Harry S. Stout and Catherine Brekus found that women from the mid-seventeenth century to the 1980s consistently outnumbered men in pews by a ratio of about 2:1. Given this overall consistency, they argue for more subtle demographic signs of feminization, such as a shift from men to women as “carriers of the faith” and the severing of connections between conversion and male communal leadership. In a similar vein, I have argued that shifts in the nature of parenting, connected to the decline in the household economy in the northeastern United States during the early nineteenth century, led to an intensification of the mother-child relationship, as well as a tendency for adults to view their mothers as the sources of their religious feelings and conflate their feelings for sacred figures with love of their mothers. These studies, both centered on the more established denominations of the northeastern United States, link feminization not to the ratio of men to women in pews but rather to changes in gender roles.

More commonly, as Braude points out, historians have used the term feminization to refer to ideological changes. Focusing on a theological trajectory running from the orthodox Calvinist Joseph Bellamy through the liberal Congregationalist Horace Bushnell, Ann Douglas argued for a shift from a “basically paternal (or gubernatorial) and authoritarian view to a fundamentally maternal and affective one.” A close reading of her sources indicates that the changes involved an increasing focus on Jesus as an object of devotion along with or instead of God and changes in the metaphors used to describe both Jesus and God. Although there was increasing emphasis on the love, rather than the wrath, of God along this trajectory, maternal (as opposed to paternal) metaphors for this love do not appear in Douglas’s sources until Bushnell at mid-century.

When it comes to shifts in ideology, historians have counted any number of changes as evidence of feminization, including an increasing emphasis on emotion, experience, relationality, suffering, and self-sacrifice. Usually the historians in question assume that people at the time would have associated whatever change they were lifting up with the feminine, but that is usually assumed rather than argued. The use of feminization to refer to changes in ideology, when not rigorously rooted in the literal and often contested use of gendered metaphors and ascriptions, risks imposing our understandings of the feminine and masculine (and our normative associations with those terms) on our historical sources. Ann Douglas did this explicitly, using a Freudian developmental model to disparage the changes she described. Others have not been so candid and have tacitly replicated the normative judgments of their sources.

In an analysis of the early-twentieth-century “Men and Religion Forward Movement,” Gail Bederman rightly recognizes that turn-of-the-century church leaders’ sudden preoccupation with gender imbalance in pews did not result from a change in demographics. Rather, she concludes, “Churchmen [...] ignoring the fact that the churches had been two-thirds female for over two hundred years, [...] discovered—or, more accurately, constructed—a ‘crisis,’ pointing to the ‘excess of women over men in church life’ as a new and dangerous threat, requiring immediate attention.” Traditionalists attributing gender disparity to recent causes constructed it as a new threat.

Coe, a modernist, blamed the “excess” on traditional, and thus longstanding, features of Christianity. For Coe, Protestant modernism was not a cause of the crisis, as traditionalists contended, but a potential solution to a longstanding problem.

In light of the many meanings ascribed to feminization, it is important to note that Coe did not equate the “excess of women in the Churches” with the feminization of the church but rather with the “adaptation of the Church to the female nature.” He personified the church as feminine (“the Church [...] with feminine eyes”) and offered the adaptation of the church to the female nature (presumably an evolutionary adaptation to the excess of women in the church environment) as an explanation for why so many women were in churches in the first place. He personified the church as feminine because it had taken on attributes he associated with the “female nature.” If we reject his circular evolutionary logic, then we are left simply with a church that
Coe coded as feminine based on characteristics he associated with “female nature.”

There is nothing in what I have quoted so far that indicates what Coe took those attributes to be. For him, the church’s chief feminine attributes were emotionality, subjectivity, and introspection. But—and this is a critical but—for Coe these attributes had less to do with gender ratios in pews than with certain ideological features of “old-time” Methodism that he coded as feminine. Coe’s feminine church, that is to say, was his particular brand of feminine church and not necessarily the same as the next turn-of-the-century church leader’s. Linking gender disparities in membership (“the excess of women”) with disparaging characterizations of Christianity as unmanly or feminine created a sense of crisis and legitimated calls for change while masking the constructed character of the feminine church.

Constructing a Feminine Church

Coe’s explanation of the “persistent excess of women in the Churches” appeared in his first book, The Spiritual Life: Studies in the Science of Religion (1900), a pioneering work in the psychology of religion. Like the work of his contemporaries Edwin Starbuck and William James, Coe’s study focused on the conversion experience of Protestants. He contended that such experiences placed too much emphasis on the subjective, inward, and emotional. Coe coded these attributes as “feminine” and argued that they reflected the church’s adaptation to the disproportionate number of women in pews. Two years later, in The Religion of a Mature Mind, he offered a modern, scientific alternative designed to appeal to the “modern man” of mature mind. Coe depicted this alternative approach, which downplayed the conversion experience, as objective, rational, and outer-directed. Coe’s book immediately appeared on recommended reading lists for Protestant clergy and were widely read in seminary classes. They were also discussed in the press, both religious and secular, under such headlines as “Sex in Religion: Are Women Really More Religious Than Men?” and “Why Men Are Not in Church.”

The Spiritual Life was based on an empirical study of the conversion experiences of seventy-four college students (fifty male and twenty-four female), the large majority of whom had been “brought up under the influence of the Methodist Church.” More than half had a dramatic conversion experience, and more than a quarter experienced “mental and motor automatisms” (e.g., the striking dreams, visions, or involuntary bodily movements associated with the old-fashioned Methodist conversion experience). Coe found that the same sorts of phenomena were associated with the experience of “entire sanctification,” a second experience that Methodists traditionally expected sometime after conversion.

Coe’s central concern was less with those who had had traditional conversion or sanctification experiences than with those who expected to have such experiences and yet did not. As he put it, “Why is it that of two persons who have had the same bringing up, and who seek conversion [or sanctification] with equal earnestness, one is ushered into the new life with shoutings and blowing of trumpets, as it were, while the other, however earnestly he may seek such experiences, never attains them at all?”

That, it turns out, was Coe’s own question. The son of a Methodist minister, he was raised with a traditional Methodist understanding of the importance of religious experience. When he was young, he said, Methodists “laid great store by testimony to a ‘personal experience’ of ‘conversion’ and ‘witness of the Spirit’ or ‘assurance’ that one had been pardoned and ‘accepted’ of God.” Like many of his modernist peers, however, he never had a personal experience of conversion in which, in classical Wesleyan fashion, “the Spirit witnessed with his spirit that he was a child of God.”

That lack caused him considerable anguish until he finally, as an undergraduate, decided to “cut the knot by a rational and ethical act.” Doing so not only “ended the turmoil[,] . . . it led on towards endeavours to explain the experiences that some had while I did not have them.”

As Edwin Starbuck noted in a review, Coe’s distinctive contribution and the “chief interest of the volume [The Spiritual Life]” was its focus on “temperament, both as a factor in the variety of religious experiences and in the determination of the peculiar types of religious expression.” Actually, Coe argued that there were “three sets of factors [that] favor the attainment of a striking religious transformation—the temperament factor, the factor of expectation, and the tendency to automatisms and passive suggestibility.”

He found that those for whom emotion was the predominant faculty and those whose mental processes were melancholic or sanguine were likely to have dramatic conversion experiences, whereas those for whom intellect was the predominant faculty and those whose mental processes were choleric (i.e., oriented toward practical action) were not. Those least likely to experience a sudden conversion, in other words, were intellectuals who had an orientation toward practical action—that is, people like Coe himself.

Coe’s statements about gender were derived not from an analysis of his data but from a reading of Havelock Ellis’s Man and Woman (1895). From it, Coe concluded that “[t]wo of the best established general differences between the male and the female mind are these: first, the female mind tends more than the male to feeling; and, second, it is more suggestible.”
these differences to bear on his own research on conversion, Coe argued that women were not more religious than men, as was commonly believed, but rather temperamentally distinct. "[T]he real difference is less in the degree of religiousness [between men and women] than in the general make-up of mind."22 Coe, in short, used Ellis to argue that women's emotional nature made them more susceptible to a particular way of being religious that was too often regarded as the only authentic way of being religious. Specifically, Coe drew from Ellis the idea that women were more susceptible to hypnotic phenomena, which Ellis defined broadly to include not only the phenomena of mesmerism and animal magnetism (hypnotism proper) but also the "allied phenomena of ecstasy, trance, and catalepsy" (what Coe referred to as "automatisms" and traditional Methodists as trances, visions, and the power of the Spirit).20

Ellis linked hypnosis, religion, and gender and placed the whole within an evolutionary framework. The control exercised by the "higher intellectual centres" was "more highly co-ordinated" and demonstrated a higher degree of "mental integration." As one ascended the evolutionary scale, "the [nerve] centres ... become more and more intimately bound up and associated with each other in action." Civilized races thus were characterized by a higher degree of mental integration and less liable to the loss of higher mental control associated with hypnosis. This higher mental control was associated with reason, whereas hypnotic phenomena were associated physiologically with the emotions. Thus, said Ellis, "When ... we conclude that women are more liable than men to present hypnotic phenomena, we have but discovered in a more definite and fundamental manner that women are more 'emotional' than men."24

The process of cultural evolution for Ellis was not simply a movement from the feminine and primitive to the masculine and civilized. Rather, he argued that "[s]avagery and barbarism have more usually than not been predominantly militant, that is to say masculine, in character, while modern civilization is becoming industrial, that is to say feminine, in character, for the industries belonged primitive to women." For him, industrialization tended to "make men like women," a process he referred to explicitly as "feminisation," where the masculine was associated with warfare and the feminine with manufacturing. Overall, he said, the periods least favorable to women are those that are "very militant ... and those so-called advanced periods in which the complicated and artificial products of the variational tendency of men are held in chief honour." Ellis described Greece and Rome as "emphatically masculine states of culture" and indicated that "when the feminine element at last came to the front with Christianity and the barbarians, clas-

sic civilisation went, and for a long time the masculine element in life also largely went."25 That, I suggest, is the source of Coe's claim that the church was feminine.

For Ellis, and for Coe as well, the ideal was not a reassertion of the masculine over the feminine. Rather, as Ellis stated, "The hope of our future civilisation lies in the development of equal freedom of both the masculine and feminine elements in life. The broader and more varied character of modern civilisation seems to render this more possible than did the narrow basis of classic civilisation, and there is much evidence around us that a twin movement of this kind is in progress."26 Coe's ideal, following Ellis, was neither the "emphatically masculine state of culture" associated with Greece and Rome nor an emphatically feminine state of culture associated with the church, but "the equal freedom of both the masculine and feminine elements of life." Or, as Coe put it, "Neither the man alone nor the woman alone is a perfect type, but rather the family, in which the two complementary qualities are balanced the one over against the other."27

Throughout, Coe's analysis was premised on a redescriptions (or descriptive reduction) of traditional Methodism such that what old-time Methodists referred to as trances, visions, or falling under the power of the Spirit were recast by Coe as automatism and Ellis as hypnotic phenomena. Experiences of the "power of God" or the "witness of the Holy Spirit" were redescribed as subjective, inward, and emotional. Once redescribed, they could then be analyzed in terms of temperament, explained in terms of psychology, and characterized on the basis of prevailing views of gender differences. Redescriptions provided the foundation for Coe's depiction of the church as feminine and did not, generally speaking, reflect the language of those who had, and continued to advocate, such experiences.28

In referring to old-fashioned Methodism as emotional, Coe articulated a view that was to become a commonplace in the psychology of religion. In everyday language, it found a place in (usually disparaging) references to "emotional religion," where what was being coded as "emotional" was, among other things, the traditional, supernaturalistic Methodist conversion experience. Coe's use of the term emotional was evaluative rather than descriptive. As he acknowledged, he used the word to refer to what he took to be "feeling for its own sake." Thus, "When we speak of emotional temperament, emotional novels, emotional religious meetings, and the like, what we really have in mind is not merely the abundance of emotion, but also the quality."29 When he described traditional Methodism as emotional, he was targeting what he viewed as its one-sided emphasis on subjective experience. Coe's research thus represented a fundamental recasting of the traditional
Methodist understanding of religious experience, such that what had been understood as signs of the "power of God" or the "witness of the Holy Spirit" were now merely manifestations of temperamental differences.

As the many congratulatory reviews and letters in his scrapbooks attest, Coe's early work spoke to a definite hunger on the part of the more progressive Methodist clergy for a modern, scientifically justifiable way to move away from their experientially oriented evangelical heritage. Coe's redeployment of the tradition was not uncontested, however. In a series of letters written on the stationary of the Cincinnati Camp Meeting Association, the Rev. E. S. Gaddis of Loveland, Ohio, criticized him for attacking what he took to be true Wesleyanism. Coe denied any such intent, and Gaddis ultimately reconsidered his claims in light of Coe's argument. In an abject capitulation to modernity, Gaddis conceded, "My conclusion theerfrom must be, according to your book, attributed to my peculiar temperamental qualities. . . . I believe I need just such teaching to keep me from trying to push people through the same mold, I went myself. Please count me one of the pastors who have received help from your book."

The Rev. D. C. John, a Methodist presiding elder from Milwaukee, was less traditional in his outlook than Gaddis and more experienced in the ways of the academy. He criticized Coe for attempting to eliminate emotion from religion but was not overawed by Coe's denials of such an intent. Despite Coe's disavowal, he insisted, "the trend of [Coe's] book was in that direction" and added, for good measure, that he thought that Coe's "treatment of feminine mind [was] . . . unjust and in violent antagonism to the facts." Pulling no punches, he forthrightly declared, "Women did not shout more and get the power more in the emotional epoch of Methodism than did men. To come to close quarters [Coe's hometown], Evanston never had a greater or more masterful mind, masculine or feminine, than Frances E. Willard. The attempt to show that women are more emotional and less intellectual than men is a self-complacent assumption untenable in the face of current history. You will surely have to revise this part of your book or fall under just condemnation."

Coe did in fact avoid such claims in his later works, perhaps because he was not entirely convinced by his own arguments. Although, in keeping with common nineteenth-century usage, Coe often used the words feminine and masculine as synonyms for female and male, he did not do so consistently. Sometimes, as in the opening quotation, he seemed to presuppose the complementarity of the sexes. At other points he seemed to make a distinction between women and the feminine. Thus, although he coded the church and certain temperaments as feminine, he stated, "The temperamental interpre-


tation of Christianity is likewise one probable reason for the aloofness from the Church of a strangely large proportion of the most high-minded, morally earnest, and intelligent men and women." Moreover, Coe's own marriage was untraditional. Like others married to socially progressive, modernist men, Sarah Coe was college-educated and committed to pursing her own career. The Coes had no children, and George enthusiastically supported Sarah's career as a musician, composer, and professor of music throughout their seventeen-year marriage. When she died unexpectedly in 1905, her hometown newspaper commented, "Mrs. Coe's character was a rare one, combining an intellectualism almost masculine, with a remarkable feminine intuition and a thorough womanliness in every direction. Mrs. Coe's life was a particularly happy one. Professor Coe, who . . . is a man of great intellectual power, was perfectly in sympathy with the aims of the wife, whom he adored."

Within a few years, the overtly gendered language of Coe's earlier writings was replaced with generic references to selves and parents. His primary concern, as his subsequent works made clear, was to institutionalize a Bushnellian vision of Christian nurture by aligning religious education with the movement for progressive education led by John Dewey. Religious education, in Coe's view, was neither ancillary to secular progressivism nor to the ministry of the church, but rather integral to a full realization of both. Coe's vision as a religious educator encompassed all institutions that engaged in the nurture of the young, from the family and the Sunday school to public schools, colleges, and universities. Implicit within that vision was a new understanding of gender and society that differed in significant ways from two older understandings it sought to displace.

Competing Models of Gender and Society

Coe's modernist understanding of the relationship between gender and society was one of three competing models implicit in the thought of Protestants at the turn of the twentieth century. Both of these competing models had earlier, nineteenth-century roots. Early American Methodists and the more radical wing of the late-nineteenth-century Holiness movement generally advocated what I refer to as the "patriarchal model," bourgeois Methodists of the mid-to-late nineteenth century advocated what I refer to as the "maternal (or domestic) model"; and modernists of Coe's generation what I refer to as the "scientific model." Each model could be adapted to more or less egalitarian ends. In their less-egalitarian forms, each agreed that women's primary place was in the home and that their primary role was as a wife and