


work. Nor does he fully explore its reception, although he does explain its dimensions in ways that will be useful to non-expert readers. What he has done is to lay out the life of a man fairly prominent in his own day whose life and labors have been occluded by more famous or controversial figures such as the “Cambridge triumvirate” (whom he knew well), Samuel Davidson (with whom he sparred), or a galaxy of German grandees (with whom he corresponded). In that sense, Stunt has succeeded.

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***We Will Be Free: The Life and Faith of Sojourner Truth.* By Nancy Koester. Library of Religious Biography. By Mark A. Noll, Kathryn Gin Lum and Heath W. Carter. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023. 304 pp. \$29.99 hardcover; \$29.99 e-book.**

Sojourner Truth's (1797–1883) remarkable life story finds a new telling in Nancy Koester's *We Will Be Free: The Life and Faith of Sojourner Truth*. Koester's is the latest work to present Truth's narrative to a contemporary audience and to do so using limited and complicated sources. Koester acknowledges that Truth's story has been told many times, but that every author brings their unique perspective to it and that every generation writes its own history. Further, she argues, “Until everyone has their rights, there should never be a last biography of Sojourner Truth” (227). In this way, Koester makes room for this retelling in what might be perceived as an already crowded field with established landmarks and land mines of interpretation. Koester narrates Truth's life from her enslavement then freedom as Isabella Bomefree/Van Wagenen in upstate New York, to her embrace of itinerant ministry as Sojourner Truth in New York City and on to her abolitionist and woman's rights activism in the latter part of the nineteenth century. This story relies on the words nonliterate Truth dictated to her friends and amanuenses in her published narrative and letters to friends and newspapers, and newspaper accounts of her speeches and responses to them. Through this account, Truth's religious beliefs and evolution, personal challenges and triumphs and witty public speaking and social justice activism come into view.

Those familiar with the contours of Truth's story will find much of this present in Koester's version. Isabella, born the enslaved grandchild of African captives in Ulster County, New York, grew up speaking Dutch and as part of the Afro-Dutch community. Isabella's faith, Koester explains was rooted in the teachings of Isabella's mother' Mau-Mau Bett, and later in her mystical experiences of visions of Jesus (22). In 1826, one year before slavery was abolished in New York, Isabella negotiated her manumission. When her arrangement with her enslaver John Dumont broke down, she ran away and was aided in purchasing her freedom by the Van Wagenen family. In freedom, Isabella continued to fight for justice. When her son Peter's freedom was

jeopardized by enslavers who tried to sell him south, Isabella went to court to secure his freedom. This was the first time a black woman succeeded in using the courts to secure freedom of a family member (29).

Freedom transformed Isabella's religion when she began to unite with different church communities when she moved to New York City. There she joined a Methodist Church, then the African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion where she was reunited with some of her siblings, and later began enacting her perfectionist beliefs through preaching to prostitutes. She also met Elijah Pearson, her employer and a believer in perfectionism that gave way to her involvement with the Kingdom of Matthias. Finally, she united with abolitionist perfectionists in the Northampton Association for Education and Industry where she joined her spiritual and social justice activism.

When Isabella lost "a mind-set, imposed by slavery and prejudice," she renamed herself Sojourner and set off to travel and lecture beginning the itinerant phase of her life (65). That was June 1843. Seven years after she began her itinerant mission, she told her story to Olive Gilbert and had it published as *Narrative of the Life of Sojourner Truth* (1850). The goal of this publication was to provide her means to support herself. Truth continued her abolitionist activism and famously challenged Frederick Douglass with the provocative question "Is God gone/dead?" in response to his assertions that a people who had been as downtrodden as black people could not reasonably be expected to rely on moral suasion alone in securing freedom and justice (111). Koester presents Truth's famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention held in Akron, Ohio with attention to the various reports, leaning heavily on the one written by Marius Robinson and published in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* just days after. After the Civil War, Truth entered another phase of her activism working with freedpeople to secure themselves with jobs and opportunity, an effort that Koester suggests reflected the differences between Truth's vision and what the freedpeople wanted for themselves. Truth also participated in the equal rights conventions and the debates about women's rights reflecting the desire for black women to have their own rights.

While much of Truth's narrative is well known thanks to Carleton Mabee, Nell Irvin Painter, and Margaret Washington – upon whom Koester relies for much of the early narrative of the book – the way Koester grapples with some of the methodological and interpretive challenges Truth's narrative has presented is fresh. Notably, the matter of Truth's nonliteracy has raised questions about how one can access her voice and how critical one must be of the sources that do purport to represent her voice. But Truth saw her nonliteracy as evidence of the authentic inspiration at work within her and to those who said she should learn to read the Bible, she asserted, "I have a Bible in me" (91). Koester lifts up the reports of what Truth said in various moments using a wide variety of newspaper reports and acknowledges that these are as close as we can get to what she said in many instances. When multiple accounts are available she reads the accounts against each other for greater clarity. This careful reading is less transparent in the earlier parts of the book that rely on the narrative written by Olive Gilbert who took licenses with the story and the language (92). But the sense of Truth's wit and witticism captured in a variety of accounts like the Douglas encounter leaves a sense of the felt impact of her words even if the words are not certainly ones she spoke.

In addition to building the corpus of work on Sojourner Truth, the book contributes to our understanding of enslaved women's religious history an area that has been recently mined by Quincy Newell in *Your Sister in the Gospel: The Life of Jane Manning James, A Nineteenth Century Black Mormon* (Oxford, 2019) and Alexis

Wells-Oghoghomeh in *The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Culture of Enslaved Women in the Lower South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021). This book is especially suitable for undergraduate and general reading audiences but should enjoy a wider readership among academic scholars interested in the above themes and the art and craft of historical writing.

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***Visions of British Culture from the Reformation to Romanticism: The Protestant Discovery of Tradition.* By Celestina Savonius-Wroth. Histories of the Sacred and Secular, 1700–2000. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 2023. ix + 311 pp. \$129.99.**

The entire field of eighteenth-century British religious history has been indelibly stamped with the late John Pocock's insight that the enlightenment occurred *within* the Church of England rather than in opposition to it. Celestina Savonius-Wroth's magnificent new study *Visions of British Culture from the Reformation to Romanticism* pointedly reminds us that the forces of counter-enlightenment were nursed there as well. But *Visions of British Culture* is not an examination of the Church of England's contributions to political reaction. Rather, as the title of her book indicates, Savonius-Wroth seeks to trace the religious origins of what she calls (borrowing from the anthropologist Mary Douglass) the "sensitivity to symbols" (10) that would find its full flowering in the British romantic movement of the early nineteenth century. In Savonius-Wroth's telling, British romanticism stood heir to a longstanding – largely Anglican – project "to mitigate the extreme Protestant rejection of ritual and symbolism" (18) that commenced with the Reformation. In other words, the high Victorian romantic disdain for puritan philistinism was centuries in the making.

The established Church of England strikes us as an unlikely seedbed for the energies of British romanticism. (As does the presbyterian Church of Scotland, which also features in the narrative.) For all the interminable wrangling over what constitutes romanticism, the British variant of the movement has been indelibly associated with political radicalism, individualism, and a decidedly post-Christian spiritual sensibility. The historian Sheridan Gilley's pioneering formulation of a "Victorian churching of romanticism"¹ necessarily suggests a movement that was far from orthodox in its inception.

Yet, Savonius-Wroth discerns an ancestry in the high-church Anglican ideal of the "beauty of holiness" (27). In preserving its liturgical calendar and the ritual elements of public worship against the more zealous proponents of reform, the Church of England promoted a complex of attitudes toward custom, community, symbolism, and embodied religious practice that anticipated romantic aesthetics and social thought. Such ideals licensed the exploration and spirited defense, often by Anglican and Scottish

¹Sheridan Gilley, "John Keble and the Victorian Churching of Romanticism," in *An Infinite Complexity: Essays in Romanticism*, ed. J. R. Watson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), 226–239.