



The Woman I Am: Southern Baptist Women's Writings, 1906-2006 (Religion & American Culture)

Melody Maxwell

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Melody Maxwell's *The Woman I Am* analyzes the traditional, progressive, and potential roles female Southern Baptist writers and editors portrayed for Southern Baptist women from 1906 to 2006, particularly in the area of missions.

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) represents the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, yet Southern Baptist women's voices have been underreported in studies of American religion and culture. In *The Woman I Am*, Melody Maxwell explores how female Southern Baptist writers and editors in the twentieth century depicted changing roles for women and responded to the tensions that arose as Southern Baptist women assumed leadership positions, especially in the areas of missions and denominational support.

Given access to a century of primary sources and archival documents, Maxwell writes, as did many of her subjects, in a style that deftly combines the dispassionate eye of an observer with the multidimensional grasp of a participant. She examines magazines published by Woman's Missionary Union (WMU), an auxiliary to the SBC: *Our Mission Fields* (1906–1914), *Royal Service* (1914–1995), *Contempo* (1970–1995), and *Missions Mosaic* (1995–2006). In them, she traces how WMU writers and editors perceived, constructed, and expanded the lives of southern women.

Showing ingenuity and resiliency, these writers and editors continually, though not always consciously, reshaped their ideal of Christian womanhood to better fit the new paths open to women in American culture and Southern Baptist life. Maxwell's work demonstrates that Southern Baptists have transformed their views on biblically sanctioned roles for women over a relatively short historical period.

How Southern Baptist women perceive women's roles in their churches, homes, and the wider world is of central importance to readers interested in religion, society, and gender in the United States. *The Woman I Am* is a tour de force that makes a lasting contribution to the world's understanding of Southern Baptists and to their understanding of themselves.

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