**Conclusion**

By 1715, female prophecy as manifested in the groups considered here had begun to change. The Quakers, well into the third generation of their existence, still accepted women as prophets and missionaries in their movement. But the millenarian context in which Quakerism developed had waned. Deborah Bell, a young Yorkshire Quaker, managed to attract crowds at the meetings in her hometown when she spoke. However, they came mainly out of curiosity to see the young woman preach. Indeed, Bell’s lengthy 1711 defense of female prophecy and preaching—perhaps the most substantial defense since Margaret Fell Fox’s 1667 treatise on the subject—used the terms “preaching” and “prophesying” interchangeably. According to Bell, preaching, prophesying, and praying publicly were all acts of religious expression, and they were all open to women as well as men.[[1]](#footnote-1) For Bell, prophesying had less to do with the warnings of the early Quakers who believed themselves to be living in the last days, and more to do with a focus on the conduct of her fellow Quakers.[[2]](#footnote-2)

By the end of the Stuart era, other groups that had emerged out of the Civil Wars—such as the General Baptists, Particular Baptists, Independents, Fifth Monarchists, and Seventh-Day Baptists—had either died out or abandoned their intense chiliasm.[[3]](#footnote-3) In 1715, Labadists still existed in on both sides of the Atlantic but the nuclei of their communities had disintegrated.[[4]](#footnote-4) For the French Prophets, the years after 1715 brought death, dispersion, and a decline in prophecy.[[5]](#footnote-5) Many of the most prolific female prophets among radical Pietist groups—Rosamunde von Asseburg, Johanna Petersen, Anna Maria Schuchart, Eva von Buttlar—also flourished before 1715.[[6]](#footnote-6)

While these groups and their female prophets declined, however, campaigns for religious reform and spiritual renewal continued into the mid-eighteenth century with the rise of Methodism and the transatlantic revivals.[[7]](#footnote-7) This dissertation has considered how a transnational religious sphere, propelled by the mechanisms and structures of an emerging public sphere, emerged in the generation before revivalists turned to similar mechanisms to create their own religious public sphere. I have argued that a transnational religious sphere of seventeenth-century dissenters informed the transatlantic awakenings in a way that challenges the construct of *the* Great Awakening. Scholars such as Jon Butler, Frank Lambert, and Joseph Conforti have questioned the idea of a single, cohesive awakening. Rather, they propose that there were a series of small-scale revivals that were neither uniquely Calvinist nor uniquely American. The prophets in this study certainly support this argument. They made their own transnational attempts at spiritual renewal a full generation before the revivalists, and they did so through the creation of a religious sphere that anticipated the more fully developed religious public sphere of the revivalists.

Unlike the religious public sphere of the awakenings, however, the networks of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century dissenters and prophets differed in two important ways. First, the religious sphere considered here was open to women, while participation in the public sphere of the transatlantic revivalists was for the most part restricted to men.[[8]](#footnote-8) Second, the claim to authority of those considered in this dissertation was a spiritual or prophetic authority that often drew on a language of election. By the time of the transatlantic awakenings, participants in the public sphere of religion were appealing to reason, the same currency that drove the Enlightenment public sphere.[[9]](#footnote-9) The purpose of this dissertation has been to explore how these two factors—election rhetoric and female participation in public religion—came together in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The project has highlighted the importance of election to dissenters and, more specifically, to female prophets of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Female prophets throughout the British Atlantic devoted considerable effort to negotiating and defining election. Some focused on election in a Calvinist doctrinal sense. We see this, for example, in the example of the Labadists, who engaged in debates over doctrinal election with Antoinette Bourignon. Calvinism was a defining point around which many dissenting groups established their doctrinal positions on salvation: they identified either as Calvinist or anti-Calvinist. Even among some groups who did not espouse the Calvinist doctrine of election, the working out of questions of doctrinal grace and election remained central. The Philadelphians, for example, came to espouse *apocatastasis,* the belief in an eventual universal restoration of all souls. But this belief did not preclude them from embracing other ideas of election and limited grace in the present—such as a belief that they were a chosen Society, or even a belief in the 144,000 elect.[[10]](#footnote-10) What we see with the Philadelphians, as well as with the other groups in this study, is the idea of election as a highly adaptable concept, both doctrinally and metaphorically.

Indeed, many female prophets removed election entirely from its Calvinist doctrinal context. For them, election had the meaning of “chosenness” but not in a strictly salvific sense. For example, dissenters ranging from Mary Cary to the Quakers and those associated with Johannes Kelpius believed in various iterations of the belief that God had chosen a “remnant” of true believers. The Philadelphians saw their society—wherever members existed throughout the world—as “called and elected of God to be of the first fruits” of the new Church.[[11]](#footnote-11) Kelpius believed the group he led to the wilderness of Pennsylvania would await the Second Coming as a remnant of the elect who would usher in the new age. The early Quakers compared themselves to the biblical remnant of Israel.

The relationship between the nation and election also stood out as important to female prophets. During the mid seventeenth-century, a tension developed between the construction of England as an elect nation and the construction of select groups—such as the Quakers—as an elect remnant among a corrupt nation. By the late seventeenth century, especially after William III’s arrival, new challenges awaited prophets who sought to define the relationship between election and the nation. The French Prophets and their detractors, for example, both faced the same paradox: how did one reconcile England’s national Protestant identity with the pull of cosmopolitan Protestantism?[[12]](#footnote-12) As dissenters traveled throughout the Atlantic, prophets’ encounters with those of other nationalities challenged and shaped their own national identity. On the one hand, national identities remained strong. Two years after the Act of Union, Deborah Bell, a native of Yorkshire, traveled with a fellow Quaker only a couple of hundred miles northward to Glasgow. When her companion spoke, the gathered crowd threw objects and broke windows. In chiding the audience, Bell chose to highlight their difference of nationality: “We are come from another Nation in the Love of Christ to visit you, and at our Return it is likely they will enquire of us, concerning the People of Scotland; and what shall we say…You are a reproach to your Nation.”[[13]](#footnote-13) At the same time, however, millenarian groups such as the Philadelphians, Quakers, and Labadists were eager to seek out other “elect” in other parts of the world. They formed supranational imagined and real communities with other would-be reformers. The nation, like election, was thus a fluid concept during this era—but one that female prophetic discourse sought to address.

Throughout this period, we have also seen how prophets used the idea of their elect or chosen status, whether as prophets or as members of elect communities, to convey authority. The female prophets in this study believed that they were chosen vessels who had the obligation and (in many cases) the compulsion to speak for God. Election and chosenness, like prophecy, became concepts that prophets negotiated continually as they staked out claims to authority as prophets, religious leaders, and members of non-tolerated religious communities. Election—whether soteriological, millenarian, or non-doctrinal in its implications, and whether individual or collective in its construction—occupied the prophets considered in this study. The adaptability of a language of election to the various situations in which prophets found themselves suggests that election had rhetorical weight in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The language of election was a significant force in shaping the direction of radical religion and its relationship to various religious and civic communities.

The second way in which the transnational religious sphere of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries differed from its later eighteenth-century counterpart was that women were accorded participation as prophets, writers, missionaries, and in some cases leaders of religious communities. For these women, who broke societal gender norms as public speakers and writers, constructions of gender influenced the religious context in which their prophecy emerged.[[14]](#footnote-14) In other words, gender functioned as a category of religious prophecy.

Dissenters frequently defended female prophecy using scriptural references. For example, some dissenters quoted the passage in Galatians 3:28 that there was neither male nor female in Christ. Roach mentioned this passage in his defense of female prophecy, as did the Quaker Deborah Bell in hers.[[15]](#footnote-15) But while female prophets often turned to scripture to defend their right to prophesy, there were significant variations in how women prophesied and in the position and status of women within their respective religious communities. We can define roughly three categories of female prophets.[[16]](#footnote-16)

First, we can group together the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century prophets influenced by Jacob Boehme. Behmenism contributed to the development of a prophetic discourse that was gendered, and prophets such as Ann Bathurst and Antoinette Bourignon invoked a feminized language. Ann Bathurst, for example, repeatedly drew on bridal and maternal language in constructing her identity as a visionary and prophet. Richard Roach stressed that women such as Jane Lead and Sarah Wiltshire were “female ambassadresses” of Divine Wisdom. These women saw themselves as having highly defined and highly individualized roles as both womenand millenarian reformers.

Among groups influenced by Boehme, individual women tended to rise to positions of prominence or leadership, and they often attracted a following. Ann Bathurst, Jane Lead, Sarah Wiltshire, Rosamunde von Asseburg, Eva von Buttlar, and Antoinette Bourignon all stand as examples of this. The Philadelphians recognized prophetic women as the representatives or “female ambassadresses” of Divine Wisdom, while some of Antoinette Bourignon’s followers in Germany believed her to be the woman described in Revelation 12. These women and their followers, while differing in their beliefs about how exactly the millennium would unfold,[[17]](#footnote-17) all believed that there would be a period of reform in which they, as chosen women, would serve as key reformers.

The early Quakers and many of the Civil War prophets belonged to a second category. These prophets assigned eschatological meaning to prophecy, believing that they were living in the last days. Some, such as the early Quakers, were nebulous about how (or, in some cases, if) the millennium would unfold, although they tended to express the idea that they were living in a time that pointed either to the physical or spiritual coming of Christ.[[18]](#footnote-18) The Fifth Monarchists, by contrast, expressed a concrete pre-millennarianist belief they were living in the last days before Christ’s arrival to preside over his physical kingdom of elect saints on earth. Within this range of beliefs, however, all shared an understanding that they were living in the last days, and they sought to figure out who comprised the elect. The relationship of the nation to election was important to many of these prophets, who engaged in discourse that created a tension between the idea of England as an elect nation and the idea of a remnant of true believers living in a corrupt England.

Dissenters in this second category interpreted both Joel 2:28-9 (“your sons and your daughters shall prophesy…and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit,” cf. Acts 2:17-8) and Galatians 3:28 in the context of an eradication of social distinction—one that included gender. These groups thus recognized women as prophets, but women tended not have specifically gendered religious roles within their religious communities. Among the Quakers, for example, women had full participation in public religious life. They spoke in meetings when led by the Spirit, and they traveled as missionaries. But they—and their Quaker audiences—recognized women as prophets due to the belief that there was neither male nor female in Christ and that they were living in a time of heightened eschatological significance, rather than the belief that prophetic women had special millenarian roles based on their gender.

Prophets who followed this second model tended to have less of an individualized prophetic identity than their Behmenist counterparts.[[19]](#footnote-19) Quaker women, for example, prophesied as individuals in the sense that they spoke and wrote as the Spirit led them. However, they prophesied as part of a group in the sense that they represented broader Quaker principles and ideas in their prophecy. Unlike Rosamunde von Asseburg or Jane Lead, Quaker women did not attract a following; nor did they form their own communities like Antoinette Bourignon.

The French Prophets represent a third category of prophecy. Like some of the prophets of the Civil Wars, they spread a message that called for repentance and for the recognition that judgment and the Kingdom were impending.[[20]](#footnote-20) But they often did so in a collective setting, traveling in a group to prophesy to various cities. Moreover, their prophetic performances utilized multiple prophets. The Spirit “jumped” from prophet to prophet, as we saw in the examples of Mary Keimer and Ann Topham. More than one female prophet imitated or performed the roles of figures from Revelation, such as the Whore of Babylon or the woman in Revelation 12, in a theatrical manner. In these prophetic performances, they participated in the larger narratives of eschatological warning that marked French Prophets’ prophetic performances, and they thus filled an important role in the prophetic life of the French Prophets. But female French Prophets occupied an unstable position within the broader community. When they imitated the Whore of Babylon, for example, they walked a fine line between contributing to the prophetic performances of the French Prophets and overstepping their bounds within the group. Among the French Prophets, transgression from the group or the attempt to assert too much individuality could result in ostracization. Female prophets such as Dorothy Harling or Elizabeth Gray, who engaged in behavior that went against the broader program of the French Prophets, found themselves censured or even shunned.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The study of female prophecy from a transconfessional standpoint offers us a better understanding of how prophecy evolved. Female prophecy, however categorized, operated cyclically: it was characterized by continual manifestations rather than by a “rise and decline” model. The feminization of religious discourse in the late seventeenth century, for example, did not indicate a decline in either the intensity or the radicality of female prophecy.[[22]](#footnote-22) Within individual groups, such as the Quakers, the changes that accompanied the second generation of a group’s existence did point to decline in female prophecy—especially in its more radical forms. But female prophecy as part of a transconfessional religious sphere of dissenters continued in various manifestations throughout the mid seventeenth- to early eighteenth-century British Atlantic.

While prophecy continued throughout the period, though, it was not static. As we have seen, prophecy adapted and responded to a number of outside factors, including social and political crisis, developments in religious thought, the emergence of networks that allowed for the exchange of ideas across national and confessional boundaries, and changes to the relationship between prophet and audience. As dissenters gained toleration or societal acceptance, and as the religious or political crises that contextualized their prophecy declined, so too did their prophecy. Prophecy cannot be distilled into mere recourse; it came out of a religious framework that had implications greater than that of human agency. However, prophecy always remained most useful to those on the fringe of society because it allowed them to make the claim that their message should be heard because it came from God. This was especially true of female prophecy, which gave women the opportunity to travel, speak publicly, and publish writings in a time when entrance into the public sphere was difficult for women.

Because female prophecy involved public speech or writing, it has interested scholars as a way to address questions of agency and authority. Women prophets claimed that they were chosen by God in order to establish their authority as prophets. They believed that their chosenness gave them an immediate claim to authority both within their religious communities and as they addressed their audiences and readerships. At the same time, we cannot understand female prophecy without moving past the debates over agency that have guided studies on women and prophecy.[[23]](#footnote-23) Female prophecy involved more than just questions of individual agency: women prophets also participated as actors in various overlapping religious networks.[[24]](#footnote-24) One of these networks centered on the transmission and reception of prophecy; it involved (at various times) prophets, followers, promoters, sponsors, audiences, publishers, and critics. Women prophets also participated in the transconfessional networks that came together to form a religious sphere of dissenters in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Europe and the British Atlantic. Female prophets illustrate how communities and networks of dissenting Protestants functioned in this period, and these women became a key element in the growth and expansion of these communities throughout the Atlantic world.

The goal of much scholarship on female prophecy has been to locate the legacy of individual sectarian groups within the larger context of eighteenth- to twentieth-century religious history. Hence the female Quaker prophetic tradition influenced female abolitionists and suffragettes, while the French Prophets shaped American Shakers and Ann Lee.[[25]](#footnote-25) But the challenge for us here has been to assess the legacy not of an individual group but, rather, of the entire transconfessional, transnational phenomenon of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century female prophecy.

This task has demanded our recognition of election as an important discursive and rhetorical tool that reached past its Calvinist soteriological implications. Prophets assigned election millenarian, individual, and collective nuances. Election informed how prophets inscribed boundaries around confessional and national communities. Prophecy and its language of election thus gave female dissenters the opportunity to respond to and re-envision the various religious and civic communities with which they engaged. This task has also demanded a reconsideration of the place of female prophets in the religious networks that predated the transatlantic revivals. Scholars are just now beginning to recognize the extent to which networks facilitated the development of the early modern Atlantic world as an arena made up of composite nations, religions, and social and economic systems.[[26]](#footnote-26) Female prophets played a significant role as agents in the radical religious networks that emerged throughout Europe and the Atlantic world in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. As women and religious radicals, female prophets remained on the margins of society; their contributions to the development of the early modern Atlantic world and the religious and civic communities that composed it, however, were far from peripheral.

1. Deborah Bell, *A short journal of the labours and travels in the work of the ministry, of that faithful servant of Christ, Deborah Bell* (London, 1762); see also Margaret Fell Fox, *Women's Speaking Justified* (London, 1667). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Kelsall notes, for example, that Bell’s message at the meeting in Dolobran centered on exhorting parents to bring up their children in the fear of God and on following the “narrow way.” See Kelsall, “An Account of Friends Who Visited Dolobran, 1701-1712,” MS Vol. S 193/4, pp. 176-79, Society of Friends Library, London. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Mark R. Bell, *Apocalypse How?: Baptist Movements During the English Revolution* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Trevor Saxby, *The Quest for the New Jerusalem, Jean de Labadie and the Labadists, 1610-1730* (Boston: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 313-336; Bartlett Burleigh James, *The Labadist Colony in Maryland* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1899), 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hillel Schwartz, *The French Prophets in England: A Social History of a Millenarian Group in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1980), 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. With the exception of Buttlar (d. 1721), whose group started around 1700, most of these women flourished as prophets in the late seventeenth century. See Judd Stitziel, “God, the Devil, Medicine, and the Word: A Controversy over Ecstatic Women in Protestant Middle Germany 1691-1693,” *Central European History* 29, no. 3 (1996): 309-337. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As Jon Butler proposes, the transatlantic revivals were “part of a long-term pattern of erratic movements for spiritual renewal and revival that had long characterized Western Christianity and Protestantism since its birth two centuries earlier.” See Butler, “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction,” *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 2 (1982): 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Ibid.,323-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On religion and the public sphere during the Great Awakening see T. H. Breen, “Retrieving Common Sense: Rights, Liberties, and the Religious Public Sphere in Late Eighteenth Century America,” in *To Secure the Blessings of Liberty: Rights in American History,* ed. Josephine Pacheco (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1993), 60; Frank Lambert, *Pedlar in Divinity: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On the Philadelphians and election, see Chapter Four of this dissertation. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [Philadelphian Society], *Theosophical Transactions by the Philadelphian Society Consisting of Memoirs, Letters, Dissertations, Inquiries, etc., vol. 1* (London, July and August 1697), 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Tony Claydon, *William III and the Godly Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Ibid.*, Europe and the Making of England, 1660-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bell, *A short journal*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For radical religionists such as the prophets considered here, religious beliefs dictated social lives to the point that they were a determining factor in how radical Protestants performed gender. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Richard Roach, “Mr. Roach, a Philadelphian. His Answer to some queries,” Lambeth Palace MSS 942/141, p. 10, Lambeth Palace Library, London; Bell, *A short journal,* 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A few prophets in this study fall outside of this categorization. For the most part these were prophets who flourished at the beginning or end of the chronological parameters of this study. For example, Sarah Jessey, who prophesied in the 1640s, combined elements of the Civil War prophets with characteristics of female medieval mystics. See Chapter 1 of this dissertation. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For the most part, these groups embraced a more mystical eschatological framework than their mid seventeenth-century counterparts. For example, mystical elements were a central part of the millenarian beliefs of Eva von Buttlar, Kelpius’ Chapter of Perfection, Bourignon, and the Philadelphians. The Philadelphians went so far as to embrace a unitive mysticism, both in their nuptial imagery and in their imagery surrounding the belief in a universal restoration. Kelpius’ group traveled to Pennsylvania to prepare for the millennium (which they believed would arrive in 1694), and they were influenced by the mysticism and esotericism of both Behmenism and Rosicrucianism. On the mysticisim of the Philadelphians see Chapter Three of this dissertation. On Kelpius see Elizabeth W. Fisher, “’Prophesies and Revelations’: German Cabbalists in Early Pennsylvania, *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 109, no. 3 (1985): 299-333. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Quakerism was not as specific about how the millennium would unfold as were some other sects that came out of the Civil Wars (i.e. the Fifth Monarchists who believed there would be an earthly rule of the elect). Early Quakers tended to focus on the present and the imminent future, which led them to develop the understanding that their age was one of great eschatological fulfillment. By the second generation, however, this intense focus had dissipated and Quakers began to see the Second Coming in a spiritual and inward light. They interpreted the events that eventually would unfold throughout all Creation—revelation, judgment, purging and restoration—as first being enacted on the personal level among believers. See Catherine Wilcox, *Theology and Women's Ministry in Seventeenth-Century English Quakerism* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. While some Quakers were familiar with Boehme, they tended to express disagreement with his theosophy. See B. J. Gibbons, *Gender in Mystical and Occult Thought: Behmenism and its Development in England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 127-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Hillel Schwartz, *The French Prophets in England: A Social History of a Millenarian Group in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. Another factor in the excommunication of female prophets was the common belief that women were easily controlled by emotions and thus less able to distinguish between good and bad or the true and false spirits of prophecy. See Schwartz, *The French Prophets in England,* 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. As Sarah Apetrei has pointed out, for example, a number of late seventeenth-century women and their fellow believers began to regard the female sex as defenders of faith, rationality and morality. See Apetrei, *Women, Feminism, and Religion in Early Enlightenment England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For an overview of the historiography on female prophecy and its engagement with the question of agency see the introduction to this dissertation. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. On the perspective of networks see David Hancock, *Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Taste* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), xx-xxi. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1992), 349; Schwartz, *The French Prophets in England,* 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. On networks and the Atlantic world see Rosalind J. Beiler, “Dissenting Religious Communication Networks and European Migration, 1660-1710,” in *Soundings in Atlantic History: Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents,* eds. Bernard Bailyn and Patricia L. Denault (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 210-236; Alison Games, “Atlantic Constraints and Global Opportunities,” *History* *Compass* 1, no. 1 (2003): 1-4; Hancock, *Oceans of Wine*; Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675-1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)