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Review Of "American Feminism And The Birth Of New Age Spirituality: Searching For The Higher Self, 1875–1915" By C. Tumber

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American Feminism and the Birth of New Age Spirituality: Searching for the Higher Self, 1875–1915. By Catherine Tumber. Rowman and Littlefield, 2002. 189 pages + index. \$65.00 cloth; \$23.95 paper.

In this treatise (part of the American Intellectual Culture series, edited by Jean Bethke Elshtain, Ted V. McAllister, and Wilfred M. McClay), Catherine Tumber traces connections between New Thought and late nineteenth-century feminism. Tumber claims this strand of feminist philosophy “so often gave way to the gnostic spiritual escapism of New Thought—both precipitated and responded to the blurring of public and private in middle-class manners, politics, and religion” (p. 171). For Tumber this blurring has led to the current “growth of the modern corporation and reinforces the techno-managerial elitism and consumer culture” (p. 13). Now forgotten activists and theorists such as Abby Morton Diaz, Helen Campbell, and Ursula Gestefeld popularized New Thought feminism. Tumber’s most devastating attacks are reserved for Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, and Theosophist Helena P. Blavatsky. She states that “in repudiating Christian faith in a loving, though mysterious creator whose world included suffering and disappointment, beauty, and love, these women [Eddy and Blavatsky] committed themselves to gnosis . . . and in this way abandoned the hope of grace for the pursuit of power” (p. 20).

Unfortunately, this book is marred by historical errors and a lack of concern for accuracy. Tumber herself admits to not being concerned with “the fine distinctions . . . between various gnostic groups.” She charges “recent scholars of the New Age . . . [who] have called for a ‘nonjudgmental approach’ to the subject . . . [have] lost sight of larger interpretive questions in a forest of ephemeral and therefore misleading detail” (p. 13). Among this book’s many factual errors, Tumber never once uses the correct name of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, although she discusses it many times throughout the text. The WCTU’s most famous president, Frances Willard, is sometimes identified correctly and at others is called Florence, even on the same page.

Perplexing conclusions and religious opinion presented as fact often damage the author’s attempt at historical interpretation. Tumber admits that the nineteenth-century women she investigates “incorporated politics into their metaphysics,” but as she does not like their spiritualities, she belittles the women’s reform work, stating that they confused their “own desires with the common will” (p. 157). Tumber identifies Gloria Steinem,

Mary Daly, and Starhawk as examples of modern gnostic feminism, who are responsible for a degeneration of current spirituality and political life. Given Tumber's own views that the "biggest threat to democratic political culture since the post-Civil War period . . . [is] corporate concentration of wealth and power" (p. 14), the inclusion here of such activists as Starhawk, a long-time political leader in the anti-globalization movement, is puzzling, to say the least.

Tumber's personal religious beliefs and ethical positions stand in as facts throughout the book. About Abby Morton Diaz, Tumber writes: "in seeking air-tight political claims, gnostic feminists like Diaz emptied the divine of moral force and replaced it with scientific certainty . . . she urged her students to practice humility. But . . . [Diaz] did not mean that students should cultivate the spiritual modesty that comes with reconciliation to God's mysterious purposes" (p. 76). In her conclusion Tumber sermonizes: "being bound to God ties one ever more securely to worldly historical memory, even as it engages and enlivens the senses in the present" (p. 175). This book should be considered a personal theological and political treatise, rather than relied upon as intellectual history.

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