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Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920 (Book Review)

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Satter, Beryl. *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. ISBN 9780520217652

New Thought is one of those elusive movements, part religious, part social, that resists placement in either category. By focusing on the role of women in New Thought, Satter's book goes a long way towards defining the movement and assessing its cultural significance.

Most historians tell us that New Thought, like Christian Science, was rooted in the 19th century mind-cure movement which sought to harness the power of mind to obtain physical health. Yet in the early 20th century, New Thought distinguished itself from Christian Science by moving from a focus on health to the pursuit of wealth. The New Thought movement is thus often characterized as the popular ideology of consumer capitalism, a crass cult of success, a forerunner to New Age notions that you can fulfill all your desires through the power of positive thinking. By contrast, Satter's account reanimates the movement's earlier history, in 19th century Victorianism, when New Thought emphasized the rejection of desire. She argues that the movement's transformation "is not most accurately portrayed as a shift from a focus on health to a focus on wealth. Rather, the shift was from a rejection of desire to an acceptance of it" (p. 14). The debate over desire is important, according to Satter, because it provides a record of white women's efforts to reconstruct their culture's definition of manliness and womanliness.

Satter begins by arguing that desire, be it sexual or material, was problematic for Victorian women because 19th century culture denied their erotic needs and rendered them financially dependent on men. She asserts that there were always two competing viewpoints on desire within New Thought: the writings of Mary Baker Eddy are the prototype of the anti-desire school that appealed mostly to middle-class women, while the thoughts of Warren Felt Evans represent the pro-desire school that appealed more to men. Satter then shows how ideas from both schools were integrated in the writings of Emma Curtis Hopkins whom she sees as a kind of mother of New Thought. In subsequent chapters, Satter analyzes how the writings of Hopkins' followers move in opposite directions: from a rejection of desire in the writings of Helen Van Anderson to its uneasy acceptance by Alice Stockham and whole-hearted embrace by Helen Wilmans. Satter then discusses New Thought's connection to progressivism and popular psychology, and concludes with some reflections on the movement after 1920s.

Satter persuasively argues that New Thought authors, when they talked about desire for sex and money, were struggling more broadly with their craving for the right to think, feel, and act for themselves. By asserting the priority of mind/spirit/ dispassion over matter/body/desire and associating women with the former and men with the latter, antidesire New Thought allowed women to distance themselves from compulsory heterosexuality and motherhood (Satter hints at the possibility of homosexuality but does not elaborate). By asserting that mind is a means to achieve one's desire, prodesire New Thought gave women the potential to own their sexuality and financial independence. Satter points out that some proponents of the prodesire school were working class women; this suggests that the movement's emergent cult of wealth and success could be understood not just as an accommodation to consumer capitalism but as a populist revolt against the Victorian elite.

Satter adds new perspective not only to the history of New Thought but to our understanding of women's history. With the exception of some Evangelical accounts, most histories of feminism gloss over the spiritual dimensions of the women's movement, making only passing reference to the religious roots of Temperance and other Progressive reforms. By contrast, Satter takes seriously the fact that

many early feminists embraced New Thought as a means of not just social but spiritual transformation of the nation, thus revealing a millennialist aspect of the women's movement that is usually overlooked.

Satter also adds fresh perspective to historians' understanding of progressivism. Histories of the progressive movement describe reformers as dabbling in New Thought, if they mention it at all. Satter demonstrates that many reformers were deeply involved in the movement because it provided them with a spiritual language to express their deep consciousness of race. She coins the term "evolutionary republicanism" to describe the progressive belief that race perfection could save the republic. And she reminds the reader throughout the book that New Thought authors were "white middle-class women" who saw WASP culture as the apex of civilization. Whether by emphasizing womanly purity and the mind's control of base physical desires, or by using the mind to encourage the entrepreneurial spirit that fulfills all material desires, New Thought presented an avenue by which race perfection could be achieved.

Finally, Satter also gives a new slant to the history of psychology, pointing out the common roots of both New Thought and psychology in mesmerism, and demonstrating parallels between the cutting-edge thinkers of 19th century psychology and New Thought mental healers. New Thought authors, Satter argues, were among the first to understand that the psychological problems "plaguing late 19th century Americans were rooted not in physical weakness but in emotional and cultural tensions" (p.240). Yet New Thought texts were forgotten or written out of most histories of psychology. She implies that this was motivated by sexism in psychology, but I suspect it has more to do with psychology's wish to be seen as a science and not be associated with religion.

This is an important and thought-provoking book. Although some segments (such as the review of Hopkins' followers in chapter 3 are a bit encyclopedic), most of Satter's account is accessible and stimulating, filled with interesting anecdotes about the personal lives of New Thought authors, and analysis not just of their tracts but of letters and novels. I recommend this book to scholars and students of American history, women's studies, and religion.

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