



Beryl Satter. *Each Mind a Kingdom*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1999. xii + 382 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21765-2.



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Published on H-SHGAPE (July, 2000)

Gender, Selfhood, and the Power of Positive Thinking

Beryl Satter's *Each Mind a Kingdom* takes the reader into a world of high-minded late-Victorian moralism, the world of New Thought. It is an environment with which many of us had at least a glancing familiarity from the writings of Gail Thain Parker and especially Donald Meyer, but Satter fairly lays claim to being the first to do an in-depth exploration of its early years as a movement from the 1870s to the turn of the century. In so doing, she wishes to restore to New Thought something of its moral seriousness and to put into perspective the common view that New Thought was not much more than a formula for worldly success. This, indeed, it became in the early decades of the twentieth century, but it was something quite different in the nineteenth.

What was New Thought? Was it a philosophy, a theology, a therapy? Actually, it is not an easy movement to define, since its practitioners were wont to speak and write in cloudy generalities. New Thought had many similarities to Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science, with which it competed as a system of belief and therapeutic healing. Both emphasized that ultimate reality was mind; matter was subordinate, if not illusory. Both be-

lieved that the human mind was attuned to the divine, from which it received its creativity. Thought was powerful. Positive thoughts were the key to healthful living and could effect healing in the diseased and infirm.

The relationship of New Thought to mainstream Protestant religion was complex. Some, at least, of its adherents were Protestants disillusioned with orthodoxy. One excoriated the view that humans came into the world freighted with sinfulness. Such a view, she wrote, belonged to a "worn out creed": "We do not believe we are poor worms of dust. . . . We believe we are part of a divine system, and that we have a right to happiness, health, and success" (Fn. 64, pp. 327-238). Yet so vague was its theology (amounting to not much more than frequent references to God and the divine) that New Thought found favor among at least a few liberal churchmen like the Unitarian Minot Savage.

The world of New Thought was a world of women. It is easy to see why this was so. Women were identified with physical frailty. New Thought assured them that mind could dominate matter. Women were sensitive and intuitive. New Thought called on these gendered qual-

ities. Women were dependent on men. New Thought insisted that they need not be helpless if they used their minds to surmount their circumstances. New Thought, in sum, exalted the very feminine qualities that had so often worked to women's disadvantage. Some of its teachers went so far as to argue that women were the superior sex, who would take the lead in transforming society in this new "women's era." It is, in fact, remarkable how many of the leading reformers, male and female, of the late nineteenth century were sympathetic to New Thought teachings. One of the most interesting parts of this book describes the reform network of the period, shot through with ideas reflective of New Thought principles. The concept of transforming one's life and one's society through creative thought was, of course, well suited to reform work.

In a sophisticated analysis Satter shows the ambivalences and ambiguities inherent in New Thought ideology. There was not one single core message, but rather at least two, depending on whether the practitioner saw desire (in its broadest sense—what we would today refer to as subjectivity) as a positive or negative force. One school praised women; precisely for lacking desire. Women were selfless, devoted to others, sexually passionless, hence models of virtue who would remake their world. The other school promoted desire as the engine of social and economic progress. They argued, writes Satter, that "the race was being sabotaged by the repression of healthy desire." This was the view that would emerge ever stronger in the twentieth century, as the ideal of the passive, desireless woman faded.

Either way, as the author points out, the status of women was problematic. They might accept their innate kinship with the spiritual, and lay claim to an influence that was immaterial. But would that have any effect? "[H]ow could women's ethereal influence have real power in a material world" (p. 49). On the other hand, valorizing desire would mean privileging a male model of subjectivity, one that saw what it wanted and went after it. It would, in effect, mean urging women to be more like men. Could women do this and remain womanly? The problem lay with the rigid gender differentiation of the Victorian era; so long as that endured, New Thought could not help but offer conflicting and contradictory messages. The positive side of this confusion, on the other hand, was that seekers could find just the teachings that resonated with them.

Though so much of this story is redolent of a way of thinking largely forgotten today, the author concludes

with a brief update reminding the reader that positive thinking is still very much with us, from the writings of best-selling Norman Vincent Peale in the 1950s to the New Age culture of self-help. In this process of modernization, New Thought has lost its nineteenth-century penumbra of uplift and reform to become focused more single-mindedly on individual well-being and economic success.

For the most part, this study is highly readable. It does bog down in the detailed examination of the leading practitioners of New Thought, since their particular systems seem to have differed largely in the details and to have had so much in common a certain repetitiveness sets in.

At a few points Satter may overstate her case. When Dr. Alice Stockham fell afoul of the law for writing about sexuality in a pamphlet entitled "The Wedding Night," it seems strained to interpret her legal difficulties as an instance of "silenc[ing] those who promoted the positive force of female desire" (p. 230). After all, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Elizabeth Blackwell both spoke up for the existence of sexual desire in healthy women, and neither of them suffered for it.

I wish, too that Satter had more explicitly analyzed the relationship of New Thought to Protestant mainstream religion. While it would appear that most adherents of New Thought had abandoned orthodox religion, Frances Willard, for one, a committed Methodist, was sympathetic to New Thought. Was it possible to reconcile orthodoxy with New Thought? To the extent that New Thought was rather more a psychology and therapy than a structured body of religious doctrine, it may well have been possible.

Satter is commendably explicit about the inclusiveness of her study. She emphasizes that she is examining ideas current among the white, Anglo-Saxon population. Again and again she reminds us that whiteness, as well as gender, is a necessary category of analysis. I would hope, however, that it does not become standard practice to insert parentheses around the terms "white" or "Anglo-Saxon" when these adjectives modify "man" or "woman". Satter adopts this convention following Louise Newman's position that "To simply use the racial, gender or class modifiers (egs. [sic] white, female, middle-class) without parentheses . . . would give the false impression that the nineteenth-century discourse was nuanced in this way (Fn. 23, p. 258). To the contrary I believe that readers are smart enough to understand who comprise the community of discourse under examination, so long

as the author makes that clear at the outset. Parentheses are a visual distraction.

Each Mind a Kingdom is a rich and intricate study, extensively researched, that ably makes its point that to enter the world of New Thought is to have access to an amazingly wide swath of late Victorian culture. It should interest cultural and intellectual historians, historians of

the Victorian period, those interested in late nineteenth-century reform, and historians of women.

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Citation: Cynthia Russett. Review of Satter, Beryl, *Each Mind a Kingdom*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. July, 2000.

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