

strates the utility of spatial theory for non-geographers, and in so doing gives historians new questions to ask about the intersection of space with race, gender, and immigration. It shows historians who are already interested in race, gender, migration, aboriginal peoples, colonization and settler societies how space interacts with and shapes the categories and questions we are already using in our analyses. Second, by pinpointing some of the ways in which race, space, and the law have interacted in Canada to marginalize First Nations people and people of colour, this collection offers another tool with which to unmap, and possibly dismantle, the pervasive racism that has structured Canada's past and present.

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Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine, Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001)

At the end of *Divine Feminine*, Joy Dixon states that one of the most significant questions that emerges from her study is the relationship of spirituality to modern political life. While Dixon's book takes on a number of topics it is the nexus of spirituality, feminism and socialism in late nineteenth to early twentieth century Britain that is the backbone of the work. Dixon argues that the Theosophical movement was a major site of feminist activity where crucial questions of the time were framed and debated.

The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 in New York City by Russian emigrée Helena Blavatsky and American Henry Steel Olcott. The society's stated aim was to "form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour." While interested in comparative religion generally, Theosophists focused particularly on the Indian religious traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism. The society was plagued by scandals and considered by many to be a refuge for "cranks" and eccentrics of all descriptions. Theosophy seemed destined to become an interesting footnote in western history. However, with the radical changes wrought in historical methodology particularly the rise of social history and feminist and esoteric studies, the impact of Theosophy has been reconsidered. A growing body of work has shown that Theosophy was influential far beyond what membership numbers would indicate. Historians have begun to map out the connections between this group and the counterculture of the 1960's, feminist spirituality and the New Age movement.

Dixon's book, which builds on her 1993 dissertation ("Gender, Politics and Culture in the New Age: Theosophy in England, 1880-1935"), contributes to this

growing field of research. One of Dixon's central claims is that most historians have mistakenly linked religion solely to conservatism and anti-modernism and that this impedes a true understanding of the early feminist movement in Britain. The author states that the ascendancy of scientific styles of socialism has "shaped the historiography of socialism itself." As a result, according to Dixon, histories of early feminism fail to take into account that causes such as woman suffrage, animal rights, and socialism were viewed by many of the women who fought for them as part of their larger religious worldview. Many accounts simply ignore the possibility that religious belief might be a factor in political action.

A growing number of feminist scholars in the field of alternative religion, however, have also viewed spirituality as a potentially liberating force for women. Both Ann Braude and Alex Owen, in their studies of women in the Spiritualist movement, have claimed that religion and political activism went hand in hand. In her work on women's leadership in alternative religious traditions, editor Catherine Wessinger notes the excellent track record in regard to female representation of groups such as Theosophists, Spiritualists and Christian Scientists. These religions offered women an opportunity to speak publicly, to write, and to take positions of power at a time when they were legally barred from voting, owning property, attending university or practicing a profession. Dixon argues in *Divine Feminine* that rather than being oppressive to women, alternative spirituality was often an empowering force. Dixon also notes that the sort of woman who was likely to join the Theosophical Society also often belonged to a much larger movement that included "oppositional politics and alternative spirituality." Theosophists like Annie Besant and Charlotte Despard were among the most radical and effective political organizers of their time and both were devoted to the spiritual ideals of the Theosophical Society.

The Theosophical Society was founded by a woman, and women maintained important leadership positions from 1875 onward. Theosophical beliefs postulated that the ideal person was mentally androgynous and did not privilege one gender over another (at least on an ideological level). While Dixon shows that Theosophists were heir to many of the sexist ideas of their time, she also demonstrates that many Theosophists made a concerted effort to rework ideas about gender and the role of women. As the result, the Theosophical Society then supported women's activity in public life in the realms of writing, lecturing and organizing and also contained an egalitarian ideal at the theological level. In this way, as Dixon's study shows, Theosophy carved out a space where women could engage with new ideas and influence the larger culture.

Dixon's work is something of an embarrassment of riches for a feminist historian of religion. This monograph discusses female leadership in alternative spirituality, the attempt to construct a feminine form of god or "divine feminine," and the complex and shifting discourse on race, class and gender in

England from the late 19th century to the 1920's. Dixon also asserts that the ideas developed in early British feminism continue to shape current discussions. The problems of race and internationalism were already evident by the early twentieth century as Theosophical feminists attempted to form links with the women's movement in India. The controversy over whether femaleness was an essential category had also already emerged at this early stage. On the extreme end of the argument Frances Swiney wrote in 1899 that women were the superior sex and that the male element was a "waste product of nature." Overall, however, Theosophical feminists took less of a hard-line and advocated the ideal of mental and spiritual androgyny in which aspects of both genders were maintained in balance. The debate over femininity and whether it is constructed or innate continues into the present. In her recent book *Communion: The Female Search for Love* bell hooks critiques Carol Gilligan and Jean Baker Miller for asserting that women are innately different from men. In *Divine Feminine Joy* Dixon reveals the genesis of these ongoing questions and the context in which they were formed.

Her analysis of the material is subtle and while she is clearly sympathetic to the Theosophical project, Dixon notes that many of their conceptions were shot through with ideas of class and race privilege. However, she refuses either to valorize or condemn the movement but instead demonstrates how Theosophical women negotiated questions related to spirituality, race, class and gender. *Divine Feminine* is scrupulously well-researched and Dixon uses Theosophical archival sources, British feminist weeklies, and the journals and biographies of women to good effect. The contents of the latter buttress the author's arguments as they allow a glimpse into the subjectivity of these women and their motivations for political action.

Divine Feminine would be of particular interest to historians of feminism and occult movements, but is also likely to appeal to general readers. Dixon writes engagingly and the Theosophists never fail to fascinate and entertain. In their case, Byron could not be more correct: fact is stranger than fiction. The author discusses some of the excrescences of the Theosophical Society such as Annie Besant's announcement of the arrival of the World Mother in the person of Rukmini Devi by putting it in the context of the feminist and millennial movements of the period. Dixon's work is original and she refuses to create dichotomies between the spiritual and the political, revealing the way in which Theosophical feminists blended the personal and public and their refusal to accept liberal ideas of individualism. The author shows how the multiplicity of causes espoused by these women were all related to their belief in a higher Life and an attempt to build a society in line with Theosophical ideals.

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