



Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England (The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science)

By Joy Dixon

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In 1891, newspapers all over the world carried reports of the death of H. P. Blavatsky, the mysterious Russian woman who was the spiritual founder of the Theosophical Society. With the help of the equally mysterious Mahatmas who were her teachers, Blavatsky claimed to have brought the "ancient wisdom of the East" to the rescue of a materialistic West. In England, Blavatsky's earliest followers were mostly men, but a generation later the Theosophical Society was dominated by women, and theosophy had become a crucial part of feminist political culture.

Divine Feminine is the first full-length study of the relationship between alternative or esoteric spirituality and the feminist movement in England. Historian Joy Dixon examines the Theosophical Society's claims that women and the East were the repositories of spiritual forces which English men had forfeited in their scramble for material and imperial power. Theosophists produced arguments that became key tools in many feminist campaigns. Many women of the Theosophical Society became suffragists to promote the spiritualizing of politics, attempting to create a political role for women as a way to "sacralize the public sphere." Dixon also shows that theosophy provides much of the framework and the vocabulary for today's New Age movement. Many of the assumptions about class, race, and gender which marked the emergence of esoteric religions at the end of the nineteenth century continue to shape alternative spiritualities today.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This triumphantly successful book,... subtle, persuasive, and frequently witty, will be of real value to all those interested in women's history and the history or religion alike."

(William Whyte *English Historical Review*)

"[Dixon's] insightful, meticulously researched book is a model of the scholarly investigation of alternative spiritual movements."

(Elaine Showalter *Times Literary Supplement*)

"Dixon has written a fascinating history of the theosophical movement in England, situating it in its political and, significantly, sexual contexts... her book is a timely period piece because the 'West' and 'East' are both currently engaged in seismic shifts of consciousness that are calling into question traditional notions of sexuality, spirituality, hierarchy, and institutional organization."

(*Choice*)

"An impressive first book, meticulously researched and carefully written."

(Catherine Hall *Historical Journal*)

"Dixon successfully brings together for the first time an analysis that demonstrates the way in which Theosophy crossed and brought together many strands of upper-middle class and high-brow culture in England. If not for this reason alone, the book is worth reading for the in-depth and fascinating story it tells of a shifting slice of British culture."

(Etta M. Madden *Utopian Studies*)

"An elegant and closely argued work."

(George Fetherling *Vancouver Sun*)

"Dixon writes clearly and elegantly and has carved her subject into coherent and attractively presented chapters. The central chapters are packed with subtle and interesting insights into how feminism, religious culture, and theosophical and spiritualist thought interacted in the intellectual turbulence of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. The discussion of the links between religion and racial ideas is a fascinating addition to a much-neglected subject."

(Susan Mumm *Journal of Contemporary Religion*)

"Dixon has written a provocative and timely book.. She asks important questions about the relationship of politics and spirituality, and offers sensitively nuanced answers that draw upon the past but contain meaning for the present."

(Patricia S. Kruppa *Albion*)

"Dixon's attention to the role of spirituality in modern life, and her insistence that the spiritual is always constituted in relation to a specific historical moment, offers new and exciting ways of thinking not only about late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain but also about the relationship of politics and religion in our own times."

(Laura E. Nym Mayhall *Journal of Modern History*)

"In revealing the long-neglected intersection of spiritualism and feminist politics, Dixon's book will prompt a more general reconsideration of the relations of religious and political transformation in the period."

(Andrew H. Miller *Studies in English Literature*)

"An exemplary historical account of spirituality as a cultural formation... It develops with great subtlety recent accounts of English feminism, examining the role of class and racial privilege in feminist interventions in progressive politics and the imperial project."

(Sandra Stanley Holton *Victorian Studies*)

"Dixon has opened up a great new avenue of investigation in her excellent book by challenging the secularist bias of analysis of the feminist movement."

(Samuel Wagar *Canadian Woman Studies*)

"Startling and original... An important contribution of the book is to show how the constantly shifting construction of gender and sexuality among theosophists was related to notions of race and class."

(June Hadden Hobbs *NWSA Journal*)

"Joy Dixon's meticulous and brilliant study of the relationship between the feminist movement and esoteric (alternative) spirituality in England stands as a model for how such work ought be undertaken in the future."

(Randi R. Warne *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal*)

"In this imaginatively conceived, extensively researched, and insightfully analyzed study, Dixon convincingly argues the complicated but crucial connections between the spiritual and the political during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. *Divine Feminine* is a highly original and substantial

contribution to the fields of English feminism and religion."

(Nancy Fix Anderson, Loyola University New Orleans, author of *Woman against Woman in Victorian England*)

"A stimulating and original study. Clearly written and well researched."

(Caroline Roberts *University of Toronto Quarterly*)

About the Author

Joy Dixon is an assistant professor of history at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

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