

Timing, Context and Charisma

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Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White. By Ronald L. Numbers. New York: Harper and Row publishers, 1976. 271 pp., \$10.00.

Seldom does the motivation for a book begin with a serendipitous finding. Such, however, was the case for this partial biography of Ellen G. White, the founder of Seventh Day Adventism. The author, a specialist in history of medicine, discovered an unusually close correspondence between the language of Ellen White's *Christian Temperance and Bible Hygiene* and an earlier work of Dr. L. B. Coles' *Philosophy of Health*. Mrs. White had steadfastly maintained that her religious and health ideas were the undiluted by-products of inspiration. She disclaimed any significant indebtedness to the works of health reformers like Coles. From this initial discovery of evidence in support of secular influence on the development of the Adventist movement, the investigation broadened and was finally published.

The author, reared as a Seventh Day Adventist, doesn't seem to have an axe to grind. The work is not apologetic, but neither is it intended as a frontal assault upon the tenets of Seventh Day Adventism. Even though serious questions are raised about some of the secular roots of Mrs. White's prophetic inspiration, she emerges as a woman whose indefatigable efforts provide impressive health dividends to her people. Whatever one's emotional response to the conclusions of the book, most will agree that there is evidence of fairness ("honest persons can look at the same evidence and see fundamentally different things"), courage and impressive documentation.

The most disappointing aspect of the book is the author's recurrent, but brief, psychological diagnoses of Mrs. White. Although the author denies both the inclination or expertise to delve into the mental health of Ellen White, he finds it difficult to restrain the impulse to entertain, though obliquely, psychological hypotheses for her behavior. Repeatedly, he refers to her "troubled mind," "deep despair," "terrible feelings of guilt," and then links these to the

beginnings of her religious dreams. He cites instances of her losing touch with the world; collapsing on the floor; temporary loss of eyesight, speech and hearing; fainting spells; and being struck over the heart with a ball of fire.

After stimulating the imagination of the reader by these brief, suggestive, psycho-historical forays, he withdraws to safer ground. By such a tactic he is able to have it both ways. Unwilling or unable to give a thoroughgoing psychological analysis, he lays suggestive groundwork in the mind of the reader for the "validity" of a psychological explanation of her religious behavior. Many readers will fail to realize how difficult it is to arrive at psychological profiles of the living that are acceptable to different schools and practitioners; retrospective analysis of the dead is doubly difficult. Ultimately, Numbers retreats to a more conservative social learning explanation for Mrs. White's spiritual experiences: her social milieu was full of visionary models, among them Joseph Smith.

The major theme of the book revolves around the charge that the founder of Seventh Day Adventism borrowed, from contemporary religious colleagues, health reformers, and other movements (e.g., phrenology), ideas which she had attributed to personal inspiration. Although some of the evidence is circumstantial, the author builds a well-documented case for substantial indebtedness on the part of Mrs. White to the Health Reform movement. A comparative analysis of texts, particularly the work of L. B. Coles, leaves little room for alternative explanations to the borrowing thesis. Moreover, there is indisputable evidence that she was influenced, as were many others, by the phrenological movement. For example, her fears that hair pieces and wigs worn by women inflamed the passions by heating the base of the brain had definite phrenological overtones. Such borrowing would not have serious implications for Seventh Day Adventism except for Mrs. White's persistent insistence that her religious and health ideas were independent of human influence.

For Mormons, particularly Mormon historians, the book is not only interesting but a rich source of ideas. The restoration grew out of a temporal and spatial context overlapping the emergence of the roots of the Adventist movement. Temperance, revelation, prophets, adventism, persecution—these and other interests were shared concerns of the two organizations. Their common and differential responses to these matters and to the general secular culture make an interesting study in comparative religion.

A Latter-day Saint cannot help but reflect that Joseph Smith, who of course claimed heavenly inspiration, was also sensitive to the movements and conditions of his time. The extent to which any specific statement or idea is drawn directly from the divine source of knowledge, or prompted by ideas and values in the surrounding environment, or is some mixture of the two, is a question

that believers have had to wrestle with from at least as long ago as the Biblical prophets. Many religious believers have found it quite unnecessary to believe that the prophets operated in a vacuum by ignoring the surrounding culture. On the other hand, to say that they simply took over existing notions and restated them seems a naive reductionism that fails to consider the nature of all creativity, the different ways in which inspiration can occur, and the importance of timing, of context and of charisma. While continuing to think through the implications of such ideas, readers of this book will learn much about the fads, enthusiasms and genuine religious commitment of many nineteenth-century Americans.

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It Bears the Arrington Hallmark

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From Quaker to Latter-day Saint: Bishop Edwin D. Woolley. By Leonard J. Arrington. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976. xiv + 592 pp, \$6.95.

From Quaker to Latter-day Saint is an unfortunate title. Neither interesting nor particularly descriptive, it combines with the design and size of the volume to suggest one of those wearying biographies of a minor figure primped and corsetted with reams of family "begats" into the role of someone major.

Unfortunate indeed. Whoever is willing to look beyond the cover will be well rewarded. Edwin D. Woolley was one of those solid, prosaic nineteenth-century Mormon businessmen and long-time bishops trusted and valued by Joseph Smith and Brigham Young alike. Because of this, *Quaker* is more than a biography; it is also a good look at the church's formative years. And bearing the Arrington hallmark, it is filled with engaging anecdotes, colorful details, strong descriptive writing and plenty of good humor. Few historians are as gifted as Leonard Arrington in coaxing the best from his sources. If young Edwin's diary contains no interesting material about

his trip from Pennsylvania to the Ohio River Valley in 1830, Dr. Arrington turns to diaries of other travelers for tidbits of adventure on those frontier thoroughfares. If the eulogizing becomes a bit heavy or the meetings get a little stuffy, the reader is suddenly refreshed by the simple eloquence of the Indian in testimony meeting: "Mormon tick-a-boo [friend]. White man, son of a bitch." Light verse and nonsense gleaned from the *Expositor* and Woolley's journal, a poetic repartee from W. W. Phelps and Parley P. Pratt on the challenge of polygamous living, doggerel rhyme from Carson Valley about Mormon girls—these and many other light touches beckon the reader and keep the narrative lively.

Ironically, the one obvious deficiency in the makeup of the book relates to the very matter of readability. Throughout, *Quaker* is burdened by long direct quotes, few of which are as interesting as an Arrington paraphrase would have been. They also add needless bulk to the book. Less bothersome, but begging mention in this regard, is the matter of too much detail and some repetition. In places the book simply lacks discipline. Chapter 12, for example, will fairly smother the reader with day-to-day comings and goings, including an account of an overland journey eastward that is a virtual mirror image of the westward account given in chapter 10.

But however viewed, this book is packed with good history. The account of early home building, homemaking, and farming in the Salt Lake Valley