

Feminist Sexual Ethics Project

Literature Review by Monique Moultrie

Drew Gilpin Faust. “‘Without Pilot or Compass’: Elite Women and Religion in the Civil War South.” In *Religion and the American Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 250–260.

Drew Gilpin Faust is a professor of history at Harvard University and the Dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

Women of the southern evangelical culture, both enslaved and free, have been historically understudied; in this essay Drew Gilpin Faust unearths the experience of white elite women in this culture. She primarily concentrates on women in the elite master class for whom religion served an “important instrument of support, of self-examination...and self-transformation” (p. 251). For men and women, religion was touted as justification for the Civil War, as ministers dually preached patriotism and consolation.

Yet, for elite women, religion also provided a “new language with which to scrutinize public affairs,” since through the confines of religion (long considered a central component of the female sphere) doors were opened into the male world of politics and public life (p. 252). Faust contends that women organized prayer groups across their communities to acclimate themselves to leadership into these realms. Unfamiliar with both increased responsibilities in their homes and in their church, religion became the mode by which these women found the courage to step into larger roles. For instance, petitioning for economic support or to obtain military discharges for their husbands was uncharted territory for these elite women, but propelled by their own best interests and fortified by their leadership experience in the church, they were now prepared to try.

Faust also notes that, because church buildings had been damaged and the parishioners’ means of transportation had been commandeered for the war, civilian religion in this period became “domesticated—located and performed within the family and the home.” (p. 254). Thus, in prayer groups and church services women acted as layleaders while their men were away, which resulted in a shift from the church’s earlier focus on conversion toward an emphasis on practice.

After several key military setbacks, God had become “more the God of Jacob than of Jesus,” and women began searching their actions for deeds that might be incurring God’s wrath; they encouraged their male relatives to do the same (p. 253). Faced with the potential deaths of loved ones, they encouraged their spouses to become pious men so that their souls would be saved even if the war was lost. These elite women who had previously lived in God’s supposed favor had to change their mentality to reflect their humbling. As Faust aptly reiterates, they were aware that neither religion nor society would be as it had been before the war. The essay highlights the sharp reality that white southern women faced—the “dangers of passively depending upon God or man,” because

for the first time they felt unprotected by God and circumstances (p. 258). Yet, she concludes, they came through the situation changed, and they subsequently changed the postwar country. Thus, she observes the burgeoning of a new independence and a time when “women themselves would feel compelled to serve as both pilot and compass” (p. 258).

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