

## Book Reviews

Thelma Stevens, *Legacy for the Future: The History of Christian Social Relations in the Women's Division of Christian Service 1940-1968*. Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1978. 130 pp., \$1.75 paperback.

*Legacy for the Future* challenges the church to witness for social justice in the last decades of the twentieth century.

This witness is a direct legacy from the Women's Division of Christian Service in The Methodist Church, 1940-1968. It unfolds in Thelma Stevens' book, a history of the Department of Christian Social Relations of the Women's Division during the twenty-eight years of its existence prior to union of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren Churches in 1968.

Stevens was senior staff executive of one of the three major departments of the Women's Division, Christian Social Relations, from 1940 until 1968. She initiated most of the changes which made the Women's Division a pioneer for racial justice and women's rights within The Methodist Church.

The author writes specifically to women of the United Methodist Church today. As women respond to emerging issues of human rights, they are claiming the heritage given by their sisters of past generations. In 1979, when the important contribution of clergy women in the United Methodist Church is becoming more widely accepted, it is significant to recognize the pioneering work which lay women have done and must continue to do in the church.

The Department of Christian Social Relations worked for social justice within the church through changes in the Women's Division and the Methodist denomination itself. At the same time, it responded to the critical needs of society created by United States participation in three international wars and by the demands of postwar adjustment, racial equality, and women's rights during the three decades of the mid-twentieth century.

Prior to the birth of the Women's Division and the Women's Society of Christian Service in 1940, women had traditionally understood "mission" to mean enlisting and supporting Christian workers in dark continents of the world. Stevens points out that the most crucial change in the history of social action by women in the Methodist tradition came through their recognition that all Christians must help improve human conditions and through development of a training program for Methodist women to fulfill this responsibility. This action

was rooted in the purpose of the Women's Division from the time of its birth.

Injustice in the church set a significant part of the agenda for the Department of Christian Social Relations. The Department continually worked to end racial segregation within the conferences and boards of the denomination and within women's groups of the church. It urged the Women's Division to set an example in the church by recruiting, training, and employing more black persons on its staff, and by filling offices without regard to race.

Similarly the Women's Division led in ending discrimination against women in the denomination. This was most dramatically attested when women were granted full ordination rights at the General Conference of The Methodist Church in 1956, climaxing efforts of women at each conference since union in 1939. Memorials from thousands of members of the Women's Society of Christian Service provided overwhelming support to grant full clergy rights to women.

The Women's Division was also a leader in the response of the church to national and international crises. In 1943, the Women's Division became one of the first national church agencies to oppose the government's forced removal of Japanese-Americans from California. Again in 1954, it was the first office of the denomination to support the Supreme Court decision in the Brown-vs.-Board of Education case, which declared segregation in public education unconstitutional and jarred the foundation of racial segregation in the United States. Strong support of the United Nations, from its formative stages, has always been a major commitment of the Division.

When Thelma Stevens challenges United Methodist Women and the present Women's Division of the Board of Global Missions to claim the *Legacy for the Future*, she correctly recognizes its roots in earlier women's organizations than the Department of Christian Social Relations. The inheritance was first granted through women's movements in the United Methodist tradition dating back to the late nineteenth century. This heritage is being recovered today through the Women's History Project of the United Methodist Church, sponsored by the General Commission on Archives and History under Project Coordinator Hilah Thomas.

The challenge which the legacy places upon the Women's Division and upon United Methodist Women today is one which the whole church must face. Stevens states it this way in concluding her book:

We are moving into a new awareness of our own humanity and of necessity, we have the responsibility to *demand* the full and equal rights with which God endowed every person. *This means moving with power and Christian commitment into responsible relations*

*and effective action for change as new urgencies confront us. We live in a small world where we are all responsible for the well-being of one another.*

Rosemary Skinner Keller  
Garrett-Evangelical Seminary

*Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions.* Edited by Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979. 400 pp. \$11.95.

In studying the place of women in patriarchal religions, it is important to distinguish between the image of women in a particular tradition and the reality or concrete texture of women's lives. While a tradition's male-authored mainline texts provide ample evidence of images of women, materials on women's roles are more difficult to come by. Traditional sources that do not neglect women entirely often edit their lives and teachings to conform to preconceived notions of women's nature. Given both the scarcity of sources and the difficulty of sifting through their biases, it is not surprising that far more feminist writing has dealt with images of women than women themselves.

*Women of Spirit* fills an important gap then in feminist literature in religion. Unlike Ruether's *Religion and Sexism* which explored male views of women's nature and function in Judaism and Christianity, this book looks at real women struggling with and transcending stereotypes as they actually live their religious lives. Not all the essays in *Women of Spirit* are equally sophisticated in historical method or feminist framework. But there is hardly one that is not a joy to read. In every chapter, we are introduced to women who, despite or because of their tradition's understanding of femininity, forged for themselves substantial, meaningful, and even authoritative religious roles.

This focus on women's leadership places much old material in new perspective. What a pleasure it is, for example, instead of reviewing Paul's attitudes toward women for the umpteenth time, to read Fiorenza's article on the leadership of women in early Christian communities — leadership which did not depend on Paul for approval or authentication. Or how refreshing to read, instead of Jerome's comments on virginity, an account of the women who were actually virgins with him — women who studied, taught, and traveled, giving up marriage and family to function as autonomous persons. These are only the first two chapters of *Women of Spirit*. The book also has essays on the religious roles of women in medieval and reformation times, Quaker women in the English left wing, Jane Lead as a Protestant mystic, and women as nuns, sectarians, evangelicals, and 19th century reformers. The collection ends with four chapters on the

struggle for ordination in mainstream Protestantism, Judaism, and the Episcopal and Roman Churches.

I do have one quarrel with the selection of essays for *Women of Spirit*. The book contains only three chapters on the ancient and medieval periods, and all of these focus on Orthodox sources. Obviously, there is more source material available on women in recent times, but exclusion of women in the "heresies" seems to have been a theoretical decision. In their introduction, the editors argue that women found more scope for self-expression in radically appropriating Orthodox theology than in moving outside it. While they may be right, it would have been nice to see this demonstrated in the course of several chapters instead of simply asserted.

This weakness does not prevent *Women of Spirit* from being a highly readable, stimulating, and significant collection. Indeed, I would like to see someone turn it into children's literature. It would provide young people with a variety of lively and inspiring models of women who managed to be self-defining within and against their patriarchal traditions.

Judith Plaskow  
Manhattan College

Norman W. Spellman, *Growing a Soul: The Story of A. Frank Smith*. Dallas: SMU Press, 1979. 513 pages. \$15.00.

I began reading *Growing a Soul* on a Friday afternoon and, although the text itself is more than four hundred pages, I finished it late the next afternoon. What kept me reading was not only the interesting way in which Spellman has told the story of Bishop A. Frank Smith's life but the way Spellman related Smith's life to the histories of several Methodist institutions. While I was in the process of reading the book for the first time, a friend who knew Smith reminisced that he was a man always primarily concerned about the establishment and growth of church institutions. A second reading of *Growing a Soul* has confirmed the impressions that to study Smith's life is to study the history of several Methodist institutions.

Indeed, the main body of Spellman's book is a description of Smith's leadership of eight Methodist institutions: University Methodist Church, Dallas; Laurel Heights Methodist Church, San Antonio; First Methodist Church, Houston; the episcopacy; the Board of Missions; Southwestern University; Southern Methodist University; and the Houston Methodist Hospital. Other sections tell of his family, education, preaching, and associates.

In telling his story, Spellman has used a wide variety of sources, including the papers of Smith, Bishops Edwin Mouzon and John H. Moore;

more than thirty tape-recorded interviews with Bishop Smith and some of his closest friends; *Advocates; Journals* of Annual, Jurisdictional, and General Conferences; and the Minutes of the boards of various institutions. In addition, Spellman, a professor in the Department of Religion at Southwestern University, has drawn upon his own close association with Texas Methodism for more than a quarter of a century and his family's association for another quarter of a century.

The picture that emerges of Smith is that of a middle-class Texan who spent virtually all his life with other middle and upper class white men as part of the ecclesiastical, educational, economic, and political power structure of Texas. He naturally conceived his ministry to be one which involved nurturing institutions which would serve the needs of middle-class Christians. Smith's nurturing was, according to Spellman, always done in a brotherly way; he was not the autocrat insisting on his own way, but the brother leading others to do those good and noble things they wanted to do.

One of the things which I had hoped to learn more about in this book, but did not, was the relationship between Bishops A. Frank and Angie Smith, the only two brothers who served for a very long time (sixteen years) in the Methodist episcopacy together. (John W. and Franklin E. E. Hamilton, and Edwin Holt and Matthew Simpson Hughes were bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church for brief times together in the early part of the twentieth century.) All the references to Angie Smith could be included in about two pages. But I would like to know to what extent there was a mutually beneficial relationship between these brothers and to what extent there was a rivalry for position and power. I have heard reliable stories about how Angie campaigned for his brother's election in 1930, and I have read material that suggested Angie's move back to Texas from Birmingham, Alabama, was partially motivated by his desire to serve in a Jurisdiction where his older brother was one of the bishops. I have also heard comments about the younger Smith that have led me to believe that he was not exactly brotherly. There are hints in the book of the close relationship which existed between the two brothers, but no suggestions about their differences in style and understanding of ministry. One hopes that when Angie Smith's biography is written, the story of what the relationship between these two brothers meant for Methodism will be told.

Spellman's work was made possible through the sponsorship of several Annual Conferences over which Bishop Smith presided and is thus an official biography. Its weaknesses are those inherent in such studies. Among the approximately ninety episcopal biographies, Spellman's work is clearly among the best five official works. However, in comparison with such unofficial studies as Robert D. Clark's *The Life of Matthew Simpson* and Harold Mann's *Atticus Haygood: Methodist Bishop, Editor, and*

*Educator*, Spellman's book does not measure up as a critical, scholarly study. He simply was not as free as Clark and Mann to give his readers Smith "warts and all." But, then, Spellman's subject has been dead for only about a decade, and both Simpson and Haygood had been dead more than fifty years when Clark and Mann wrote their books.

But having said this, I urge you, if you are interested in twentieth-century Texas Methodism, to read this book. In fact, whatever your interests, reading *Growing a Soul* may help your own soul to grow. It did mine!

Joseph Mitchell  
Troy State University