WOMEN'S HISTORY AND THE NEW HAGIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Flowers

In "The New American Hagiography," Rick Kennedy suggests that Christian hagiography’s long tradition cast such doubt on the objectivity of any “believer’s biography” that most credible church historians came to avoid the genre altogether. That is changing, he claims. “Call it postmodern,” a “return to classical, medieval, and renaissance humanism,” or “simply the practical recognition of the human condition,” says Kennedy, the “sterile pieties of ‘critical thinking’ no longer hold as much water as they used to” (293). Considering the recent spate of award-winning biographies in American religion not only of but also written by noted evangelicals and Mormons, Kennedy seeks to reclaim the term “hagiography.” “Christian historians,” he observes, “are now exploring new ways and methods of thinking and writing about holy people” (293). Showcasing Grant Wacker’s biography of Billy Graham and Thomas Kidd’s of George Whitefield (one might even add his own study of Cotton Mather), Kennedy heralds a new type of believer’s biography, the “new hagiography,” in his words, for its reverential tone, epistemological populism, empathy, and responsible critical analysis.

Prior to this panel, I had not contemplated the challenge of writing academically tenable religious biography. Perhaps my neglect can be explained by my scholarly location. While my primary field is American religious history, another includes women’s history. And over the 1970s and 1980s, biography was essential to that emerging discipline. Truth be told, I came to study American religion through these early biographies, biographies in which women wrote about women whom they admired and whose struggles they often shared. Several of the more noted biographers here considered religious women and treated their commitments, even evangelical ones, seriously. Take for instance, Kathryn Kish Sklar’s biographies of Catharine Beecher and Florence Kelley, Laurel Ulrich Thatcher’s tale of Martha Ballard, and Jacqueline Dowd Hall’s study of Jessie Daniel Ames.1 These biographies were actually my route to many of those Kennedy highlights, which are works I likewise appreciate and celebrate.

The emphasis on biography in women’s history has continued well past the field’s beginnings. According to a 2004 survey, one-fourth of all books, articles, and dissertations in women’s history were biographic in nature.2 And several books

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Elizabeth Flowers is an associate professor of religion at Texas Christian University. She is the author of Into the Pulpit: Southern Baptist Women and Power since World War II (University of North Carolina Press, 2012) and is working on a biography of Rosalynn Carter.
and journal articles have discussed the significance of the genre to the field. As they note, however, because of the nature of women's lives, biographies in women's history have read differently, tending more toward cultural and microhistory. More often than not, they have focused on gender as the category of analysis and incorporated a feminist analysis. Thus, women's historians have helped map out a new terrain in biography that some scholars refer to as the “new biography.”

Both the new hagiography and the new biography, as the latter applies to women, serve as paradigms for my current project on Rosalynn Carter, particularly how each assumes and encourages an authorial esteem for and personal connection to one's subject. While esteem is significant here, with the biographic subject as role model featured prominently in both, for the sake of this roundtable, I want to emphasize personal connection. And in showing how personal connection is shaping my current research and writing, I put new hagiography and new biography in conversation. This said, I would also acknowledge that new hagiography, with its lingering ties to traditional church history, and new biography, as tethered to women's history, are awkward conversation partners. So I close with a series of concerns about whether my own as well as other more feminist-leaning biographies of church-related women could be included in Kennedy's analysis.

As mentioned, my own biographical subject is Rosalynn Carter. I was initially drawn to her when writing a book on Southern Baptist women, gender, and issues of power. Not surprisingly, Jimmy Carter kept popping up. Yet the new religious right also targeted the first lady for her support of the Equal Rights Amendment as a Southern Baptist woman. Soon I saw Rosalynn as a means to delve more deeply into intersecting themes of faith, feminism, and family in post-World War II America and the South. I also recognized that as a Baptist, I felt a certain pride in her legacy, and that also inspired my decision. After all, in the process of writing my monograph, I returned to the Baptist fold, joining a church that held a Southern Baptist heritage and a new progressive Baptist identity, thus resembling the Carters. I felt eager to uphold this aspect of Baptist life and offer Rosalynn as its exemplar.

But the connection went further than that. Rosalynn and my mother are more or less contemporaneous; both were from aspirational working class families in small southern farming town communities; both left educational pursuits to marry; both experienced something of a feminist awakening later in life, after raising three children to adulthood; and both were devoted Southern Baptist women resistant to the fundamentalist movement that overtook their denomination. I

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4Banner, "Biography as History," 582. According to Banner, the new biography appeared in the 1990s and was "especially influenced by feminist, postmodern, and race theorists." She attributes the term to Jo Burr Margadant, ed. The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

5While the new biography is multifaceted and used by scholars in varied ways, often more psychoanalytically. I use it here in reference to shifts and changes brought about by women's history. When saying the new biography, I intend the new biography of women's history.
ELIZABETH FLOWERS

started my project the year after my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. In retrospect, I think deep anxieties about my mother's drift into dementia's darkness motivated my choice. Rosalynn became a way to stay connected to my mother, to the world we shared, and to the women, figurative mothers, who populated my childhood years.

Women's historians who write biography, especially women writing about women, have analyzed their attachment to their subjects as moving far beyond the usual connection experienced by a biographer, because of the "heightened consciousness of the role of gender." The examples they use of feeling like a sister to, dead relative of, or even being possessed by their subject add an existential dimension to new biography. Kennedy upholds similar sentiments, considering how new hagiographers share their subjects' struggles of faith, posing similar life questions and often learning from their subjects' responses. I find myself in the description of the women's historian Lois Rudnick, who calls herself a "subject-identified biographer," which seems apt for new hagiography and new biography, and thus my own work.

There is no escaping, then, that I am a subject-identified biographer. And this positioning has shaped my research and writing in distinct ways. Let me articulate two.

First, it has both challenged and enabled me to show vividly one of Rosalynn's several struggles. As I see it, she was forced to negotiate private matters (motherhood, marriage, and piety) publically, at a moment when the American family and gendered understandings of women were experiencing dramatic redefinition, changes that threatened further the conservative white South. That Rosalynn was not Jimmy, and thus experienced these changes differently, while many nevertheless conflated the two, is integral to her story. And it is a conflation that countless women of my mother's world shared. My own context heightens my sensitivity to this part of Rosalynn's narrative as one that has not been told, at least in the way only I can craft it.

Second, being a subject-identified biographer has fostered a higher degree of empathy and often in unexpected places. Kennedy favors an empathy that advances understanding in an apologetic, though not polemical, fashion or tone. Lois Banner thinks the empathetic imagination of new biography, or "transference," might stimulate a therapeutic reflection that facilitates personal transformation. Rosalynn has certainly renewed my appreciation for the everyday women of my formative years who, like my mother, married, mothered, and lived their lives during a time of tumultuous cultural and denominational conflict over who they were and who they should be. And Rosalynn has enabled me to recognize and accept a certain inheritance that allowed for, even if it never quite realized, faith and feminism's coexistence. This newfound empathy motivates me to answer her critics, particular-

7Ibid.
9See Rudnick's discussion of the male-identified woman, 124–28.
10Banner, "Biography as History," 582–86.
ly those feminists who felt her lacking the radicalism of the movement.

Relatedly, I am learning that empathy moves in multiple directions. And the interactions and interconnections of the various characters both on and off the page (myself included) lend themselves to a more representative tale, one that highlights the everyday women who responded to Rosalynn. Many of these evangelical, church-going, and Bible-believing women became “housewife feminists,” as one of Rosalynn’s inner circle dubbed them. I think this captures the epistemological populism Kennedy describes as characteristic of new hagiography. It also reflects the conviction in women’s history that the day-to-day lives and encounters of our biographic subjects are as important as their professional and public achievements, tethered, as women’s lives have been, to life cycle, family matters, personal relationships, and private intimacies. Thus, their biographies are increasingly seen as cultural history, focusing on the times as well as the life of its subject. Wacker certainly charts the course of twentieth-century evangelicalism through Graham. But Graham is “the great man” here, as Wacker notes. So too is George Whitefield. The new biography in women’s history often avoids the “great” alongside the “man,” leading to the question one historian in American religion once posed to me: “Why Rosalynn and not Jimmy”? To which I answered, “exactly.”

This question underlines the awkwardness of pairing new hagiography and new biography. When I attend conferences like the Berkshire in Women’s History or the National Association of Women’s Studies, I am one of few scholars focusing on religion. But if women’s history ignores and sometimes maligns religion, Kennedy’s description of new hagiography largely neglects women subjects and their concerns, thus at times (and I am sure not intentionally) reinscribing the patriarchal tendencies in evangelical scholarship.11 Regarding the latter, in 2014 Justin Taylor at the Gospel Coalition asked twelve notable evangelical historians, all men, in American religion for their five favorite biographies. Several historians and the biographies named appear in Kennedy’s analysis. But only one historian, indeed Thomas Kidd, included a woman, and he actually named three. Thus, of the sixty biographies recommended, only three (Kidd’s) were of a woman.12

I appreciate that three of us in this roundtable conversation are women writing about women and am especially honored to be here with our mentor Grant Wacker, whose biography of Billy Graham is nothing short of remarkable in scope and empathy. Does our inclusion then signal that we might be included in new hagiography, especially the two of us writing about women in our own Christian tradition? What too about recently published biographies, one of the most notable being Catherine Brekus’s award-winning Sarah Osborne’s World?13 Brekus is not an evangelical scholar and admits her ambivalence toward Osborne’s strong theology of predestination. Yet Brekus reveals: “I have been inspired by her determination to see God’s goodness in every part of her life” (xiv). One might even compare Brekus’s epilogue, “A Protestant Saint,” in which she addresses questions of admiration, if not emulation, to Wacker’s concluding account of “going up the mountain” to pray

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11 The exception is Edith Blumhoeffer’s biography of Fanny Crosby.
13 Catherine A. Brekus, Sarah Osborne’s World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013).
with Billy Graham. Equally significant is Brekus’s concern for Osborne’s evangelical followers and her conviction that their world “has much to say to our own” (xv).

Rick Kennedy’s instructive work has inspired me to pose questions whose answers do not come easily, so let me close by wondering again out loud: Can new biographers in women’s history also write from the perspective of new hagiography? Or does new hagiography still tend toward the public accomplishments of a great man—its traditions too tilted toward patriarchy? I hope that the lack of women is instead a navigable roadblock. And if so, then perhaps we can imagine ways to move forward toward a fuller and more participatory scholarship.
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