
‘The Differences in Theology Also Appeared’: Ellen Tucker Emerson’s Intellectual Engagement Through Faith and Travel

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Abstract

Ellen Tucker Emerson (1839-1909), the daughter of Lidian Jackson and Ralph Waldo Emerson, is primarily known, when acknowledged at all, for her care of her father in his final years, as his memory failed. Descriptions note her piety and selflessness. Her eulogy states, "She loved the church, loved traditions her father could not do," while also praising her for being "the visible providence of her declining father, at home attentive to his need, faithful to his side when he walked abroad." While she was a committed congregant in the Concord First Parish, a Unitarian church where she taught Sunday school, the emphasis on her piety obscures the intellectual curiosity about other forms of faith that played an important role in her life and in her relationship with her father. Her trip with him to Europe and Egypt in 1872 and 1873 allowed her to explore different forms of religion, through visiting houses of worship, often accompanied by her father, and discussing religious matters with people she met. Her letters to family and friends document her intellectual exploration of faith, as well as the discussions she and her father had about religion. She wrote to her mother, "Never till just these circumstances made it manifest had I imagined what a revealing power there was in acts of worship," adding, "The differences in theology also appeared, and I got the first chance I ever had of well comparing ours with others." This paper will analyze the ways in which travel allowed her to engage intellectually with different forms of worship. It will also explore the reasons why, despite ample evidence of this engagement in her letters in the Emerson papers at the Houghton Library, Ellen Tucker Emerson’s legacy has evolved to obscure it.

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