

# Women and Religious Traditions

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## WOMEN IN CHRISTIANITY

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### INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Christianity is a religious tradition that arose around Jesus, whom early followers began to call 'the Christ', which means the Messiah, the one sent and anointed by God. Jesus was born around 4 BCE. He was Jewish, as were most of his early followers; those he seems to have attracted through his charisma. After Jesus' death, the followers continued to recount stories about him and his effect on them, and they tried to convert others to follow Jesus as well. The existing sources about him and his life are mostly from the Christian New Testament, which means that they are texts composed by followers who testify to his effect on them rather than recount historical facts. The gospels are not eyewitness accounts and they are not history books. Traditions about Jesus circulated orally and in snippets of writing before they were finally compiled in their current forms as the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each gospel has its own particular emphasis.

The New Testament is a collection of books, including the four gospels, which appeared in written form between about 50 to 100 CE. Much of the rest of the New Testament consists of letters from early converts to Christianity, especially Paul, who wrote to various churches. The Christian churches also count the Hebrew Bible (which they rename the Old Testament) as sacred scripture.

Jesus' followers were men and women who gave up virtually everything, including their families to go with him. The stories about Jesus are many, several of which tell us about the interaction between Jesus and women. Remarkably enough, given the patriarchal times in which the stories were told and written down, none portrays Jesus as re-inscribing the view that women are lesser beings than men.

Christianity was, from early on, a missionary religion, seeking not only to win formerly Jewish followers, but also to extend itself throughout the

known world. Over the centuries, Christianity has taken a wide variety of historical and cultural forms, and some of these forms are the results of major splits within the church. In the first five centuries of Christianity much effort was expended to define orthodoxy or right belief. Many of the traditional Christian ideas or doctrines date from this era.

In 1054 the first major split in Christianity occurred when the churches in the East (now called 'Orthodox' churches) separated from the churches of the West (the Roman Catholic Church), mostly over disagreements about the Holy Spirit. Then, in the sixteenth century, another major division took place in the churches of the West when a number of 'reformers' such as Martin Luther and John Calvin tried to reform what they saw as the excesses of the church. Both Luther and Calvin found themselves excommunicated as a result. Since the beginnings of this Protestant Reformation there have been many different splits resulting in the formation of many different Christian denominations too numerous to detail here.

One of the main differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism is the official locus of authority. For Roman Catholicism, authority is, finally, vested in the Pope and the Bishops. For Protestantism, the supreme locus of authority is usually seen to be scripture. Governance is generally carried out by the people, but the degree to which this is the case is tempered by the type of Protestantism.

Christianity is not monolithic. There is never one single 'Christian' way to believe or act. Christianity takes a wide variety of social, historical, geographic, and cultural forms. Thus, when feminists study 'Christianity' it is always helpful to remember that they are studying particular forms of Christianity, not a single unified and univocal religious tradition. All conclusions about, for example, whether Christianity is liberating to or oppressive for women, have to recognize the particular context in which that judgement is situated.

To urge caution here does not, for a minute, suggest one overlook the fact that much in the history of Christianity has been oppressive to women. Historically within Christian thought, when the topic of women arose, it was mostly men talking about women: about women's nature and purpose, about whether or not women were in the image of God, about whether women could be saved, about what sorts of leadership roles women could and could not play.

Thus, for example, Tertullian, a second-century 'father' of the church, called women 'the Devil's gateway' (Tertullian 1869: 1.1.2). Augustine, a famous and influential fourth- and fifth-century thinker, believed that males alone were the full image of God and that women could only be in the image of God when joined to males as helpers (Rueher 1974: 156). For Augustine, women were equated with the body and men with the mind. This made women sexually dangerous to men. According to Augustine, women are more

carnal than men and therefore more subject to temptation and to sin. Women, however, can only overcome such temptation and be rational instead of carnal if they renounce sexuality completely.

That woman has a rational mind equivalent to man's is never entirely denied, and indeed is assumed by the view that allows her to lead the monastic life. But since she is somehow made peculiarly the symbol of 'body' in relation to the male (i.e., in a male visual perspective), and is associated with all the sensual and depraved characteristics of mind through this peculiar 'corporeality' her salvation must be seen not as an affirmation of her nature but a negation of her nature, both physically and mentally and a transformation into a possibility beyond her natural capacities. (Ruether 1974: 161)

For Augustine, before sin entered the world through the fall (that is, before Eve ate the forbidden fruit and gave it to Adam), sexuality was dispassionate, for procreative purposes only. After sin, sinful carnality overcame rationality in the form of human sexual arousal. For Augustine, the male erection becomes the 'essence of sin [and] woman, as its source, became peculiarly the cause, object and extension of it' (Ruether 1974: 163). Thus, sin is transmitted throughout the human race by the sexual act, and woman as both original and continuing sexual temptress is primarily to blame.

### TEXTS, INTERPRETATIONS, AND RITUALS

The central texts of the Christian tradition are those of the Bible. The biblical texts include the texts of the Jewish Bible (usually referred to as the Old Testament by Christians) and the New Testament texts. The New Testament was written over a period from about 50 CE to the early second century by a variety of different authors who, as far as we know, were all male. Oral traditions preceded the writing down of the gospel texts. It took several centuries before the Christian church decided more-or-less definitively on which texts were to be seen as authoritative. (This is known as the process of canonization.) There were other texts that could have been included in the New Testament canon but which were not, such as the gospel of Thomas or the various Gnostic gospels.

The biblical texts are human documents, written for particular purposes in specific times and places. The New Testament texts themselves are already interpretations of the event and importance of Jesus and testimonies to the growth of a community of followers around him. Thus, texts are already interpretations, and, subsequent to their being written, the biblical texts have histories of interpretation that can give a particular focus to the way they are read today. For example, the common reading of Eve in Christian tradition as the

temptress and the source of all sin in the world is only one possible reading of the text of Genesis 3, read back through the eyes of Augustine's interpretation of original sin. The text itself mentions disobedience, but the notion that there is an inherited sinfulness for which Eve is primarily responsible is a Christian reading of the text that comes much later. The biblical texts, even when they mention women (sometimes named women, often unnamed women), present women or any particular woman in the male, patriarchal perspective. This is simply to say that women in the biblical texts are seen through men's eyes. The texts about Jesus are somewhat removed already from Jesus and show him as interpreted by those who told the stories and eventually wrote down the texts. Not all the texts view women in the same way.

Even though there is dispute among feminists about how to interpret New Testament texts, if one reads the texts with the question of women and their status and roles in mind, some insights are notable. For example, the interactions between Jesus and women are in all cases presented as remarkably open. Women listen to Jesus; they also teach Jesus (Mark 7:24-30; John 4:1-39). And they are commissioned to preach (John 20:17-18). The purity laws that affected women's qualifications for public action do not seem to have mattered to Jesus (Mark 5:25-34). Although no women are named in the list of the 12 central disciples, the actual listing of these names varies somewhat and the list is more dependent on the importance of the number '12' (after the 12 tribes of Israel) than on the specific names. But many people, including women, followed Jesus from place to place (Matthew 27:55-6), and this is one of the central understandings of what it means to be a disciple.

There are indications that women occupied many leadership roles in the early Christian community. Women are called 'deacon' and 'apostle' (Romans 16:1, 7). Women preach. They have churches in their houses, or are in other ways patrons of the new Christian community.

The early Christian movement was what is usually called a 'charismatic' movement, which means that it did not have set structures or rules for organization. In the early Christian movement the roles of women and men seem in large part interchangeable. The earliest Christians tended to think that the end of history was at hand and that the second coming of Jesus Christ would take place in their own lifetimes. As time went on and this did not happen, more formal structures were put in place that tended to exclude women (for example, I Timothy 3:2-13). Many of the passages most problematic for women are from this later period of New Testament composition (I and II Timothy and Titus, which, according to most scholars, are not written by Paul). In letters thought by most scholars to be by Paul, there are still some problematic passages where women are enjoined to silence in churches and seen in relation to the husband who is 'head' (see I Corinthians 11:2-16; Ephesians

5:22-33). There is no question that Paul was a person of his time who had a patriarchal understanding of the place of women. This is occasionally balanced by places where he seems to see the message of Jesus as abolishing traditional hierarchical distinctions (Galatians 3:27-9).

Christians have used the biblical texts in a variety of ways throughout history. Since the eighteenth century, biblical scholars have understood the texts to be historical texts written for particular purposes in particular times and places. Biblical scholarship does not regard the texts as given directly by God.

In the late nineteenth century, a group of female scholars led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton published a book entitled *The Woman's Bible*, in which they sought to comment on the texts that were of particular interest and importance to women. They commented, for instance, on the creation stories and on the stories of Sarah and Abraham. They commented when women were visible as actors and when they were treated as second-class citizens. They commented on women's leadership in Romans 16 and on the passages of the New Testament where women seemed to be subordinated (Stanton et al., 1974).

When, in the mid-twentieth century, feminists began interpreting the biblical texts, they did so using a variety of strategies and with a several purposes in mind. 'In the footsteps of Cady Stanton, women's biblical studies have developed a dualistic hermeneutical, or interpretive, strategy that is able to acknowledge two seemingly contradictory facts. On the one hand, the Bible is written in androcentric language, has its origin in the patriarchal cultures of antiquity; and has functioned throughout its history to inculcate androcentric and patriarchal values. On the other hand, the Bible has also served to inspire and authorize women and other nonpersons in their struggles against patriarchal oppression' (Fiorenza 1993a: 5). Thus, those who seek to be feminists within the Christian tradition generally do not deny the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts and contexts, but, for the most part, they see the texts as potentially valuable beyond their patriarchal context and content.

One feminist approach to reading biblical texts argues that the texts need to be read in light of their historical, patriarchal contexts. When we interpret these texts we must be willing to give them the most charitable interpretations possible. This approach tends to be taken by feminists in more conservative denominations, where the biblical texts are seen as divinely inspired.

A second approach argues that one can look to the texts for a liberating message or some support for a liberating movement, or some other liberatory features, but one cannot assume that such a message can always be found, nor that it exists everywhere in the biblical texts. Some texts according to this approach may not be redeemable. Such an approach looks perhaps to the example of Jesus, or to stories such as that of the Exodus, the liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt.

A third approach tends to read the biblical texts without regarding them as authoritative for the Christian tradition. The Bible here is not a set of normative texts, but 'a cacophony of interested historical voices and a field of rhetorical struggles in which questions of truth and meaning are being negotiated' (Fiorenza 1993a: 8). Because the whole process of canonization itself inscribed certain values and visions, the texts and the final canon must themselves be questioned.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues for a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that approaches the biblical texts searching for patriarchy and looking for who benefits and who is injured. She also argues for a 'hermeneutics of re-vision' that looks at texts broadly for 'values and visions that can nurture those who live in subjection and authorize their struggles for liberation and transformation' (Fiorenza 1993a: 10).

After the earliest period of Christianity, when it seems that both men and women were ritual actors in roles that were defined as needs arose, it has been mostly men who have acted in official capacities in ritual. In most churches only the ordained can function as celebrants of the sacraments and as preachers, and since most of those ordained have been male, little has changed until recently, when more women have begun to be ordained in various Protestant denominations. Thus, for most of the church's history, sacraments and preaching have been mainly a male preserve. When women have been ritual actors, it has mostly been in small groups of women who met for prayer or teaching on their own, but rarely has there been official sanction.

### SYMBOLS AND GENDER

A symbol is a picture, word, thing, act, or concept that bears particular meanings for a particular group. Christianity employs a variety of symbols to convey its tradition and message. One central symbol for Christianity is the word and concept 'God'. Another is the concept of Jesus as Christ or saviour, which captures meaning and importance beyond simply seeing Jesus as a historical person who lived in a particular place and time. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is also a symbol as well as a character in the biblical texts. Actions such as the performing of the Christian sacraments of baptism and eucharist are symbolic actions. The cross too is a typically Christian symbol.

This section focuses on two of the central symbols of Christian tradition: God, and Jesus as the Christ or saviour.

Although some scholars would argue that all religious symbols are projections of human needs and desires rather than symbols that point to a transcendent reality, adherents of the Christian tradition usually agree that *God* points to some reality beyond the mere word. No single view of God is held by all

Christians. That said, it is also generally agreed that whatever God is, God does not have biological sex of the sort that human beings have. Yet most Christian language for God has been male language and male pronouns, and thus it evokes stereotypical male images.

Feminists have long raised questions about what it means to use primarily or solely male language and imagery for God. Religious symbols function both as symbols of reality as well as symbols *for* reality. That is, they claim to portray reality as it is as well as to act as prototypes for how reality ought to be (see Geertz 1966; Christ 1979: 274–5). Thus, presenting the symbol of God only in male language and images might give the impression that the 'reality' of God is that God is male. In turn, the apparent maleness of God might also reinforce a social system that connects maleness to godliness. Mary Daly argues that 'if God is male, then the male is God' (Daly 1973: 19). What she means is that male language for God associates God more closely with males than with females. It gives the impression that maleness is more like godliness than femaleness, hence males have the right to exercise godlike power.

If language about God were simply a matter of convenience and convention for most Christians, there would be no problem in changing the language about God to a language that uses female images or pronouns instead of or alongside male ones. Many Christians have found the idea of 'God-she' problematic, which then raises for feminists questions about how language for God has an impact on our views of the status of women *vis-à-vis* men. Thus, some scholars, like Daly, have argued that the Christian God is so inherently male that no change of language can or will alter the Christian tradition about God.

There are, in fact, some biblical images for God that portray God in female terms. For example, God is portrayed as a midwife (Isaiah 66:9; Psalm 22:9–10); as a woman giving birth (Isaiah 4:14; Deuteronomy 32:18); and as a mother hen (Matthew 23:27) (see Mollenkott 1985). Most feminist Christians have argued that one needs to augment male language for God with female language for God, and that neither is superior to the other. This argument also often goes hand in hand with recognition that, because Christians speak of a personal relationship with God, language about God needs, at least in part, to be personal. Thus, depersonalizing all language about God is not an option for most Christian feminists. Further, depersonalizing all language about God might well mean that the assumptions about the appropriateness of male language about God will never be directly or fully challenged.

Elizabeth Johnson, for example, has developed a wide-ranging rethinking of the Christian God in terms of the biblical image of 'Sophia' (wisdom). In the biblical tradition (both Hebrew Bible and New Testament), Sophia is one possible name for or aspect of God who is always personified as female. Johnson suggests that one can rename the Christian Trinity as Mother-Sophia,

Jesus-Sophia, Spirit-Sophia, where female language can rightly be used for all three traditional persons of the Christian Trinity (Johnson 1992). Feminist Christians also caution against using only 'mothering' language as a way to provide female images of God because that may simply re-inscribe rather than challenge stereotypical views of parenting (Ruether 1983: 69–70).

Jesus, a historically male figure, is central to the Christian tradition as the one who is claimed as Christ or Messiah, Saviour, Lord, and so on. Christian feminists examine what it means to have a male figure at the centre of a tradition. They ask: Can a male saviour save women? (Ruether 1983: 116). Is Jesus' maleness essential to his role as saviour? Here the question of the overlap between Jesus' historical maleness and his symbolic function of salvation come to the fore.

As there is no single Christian view of God, so there is no single Christian view of Jesus and how he 'saves' humans. Early on, Christians came to the agreement that salvation was offered to women as well as to men (Ruether 1998). Thus, women were welcomed as members of the Christian church. That said, however, the maleness of Jesus has had serious implications for women. For one thing, the maleness of Jesus reinforces and extends the notion of the maleness of God. If, as Christians claim, Jesus is the incarnation of God, and if Jesus is male, then maleness is even more like godliness than it is in a tradition such as Judaism where male language is the chief problem.

Also under discussion is the idea that God 'chose' a male human being in which to become incarnate rather than a female human being. Thus, God's choice of maleness must indicate something of the importance of maleness, or the normativity of maleness instead of femaleness.

There is a long history in Christianity of debating what exactly incarnation—that is, God's coming in human flesh—means. Although many Christians read the idea of incarnation as a straight equation that somehow Jesus is the same as God, there is a whole history of nuanced discussion on this matter that looks at exactly what incarnation could reasonably mean. The maleness of Jesus is also used in Roman Catholicism as one of the justifications for an all-male priesthood (Paul VI 1977). When a priest celebrates the mass he is said to represent Jesus to the people. Jesus was male, therefore priests must be male, for only maleness can represent Jesus.

Thus, the maleness of Jesus has been used in ways that subordinate women. And any feminist response must take these long-standing problems seriously.

## SEXUALITY

Christianity has historically been far more ambivalent about sexuality than has Judaism. There is no evidence that Jesus was married, although that would

have been unusual for a Jewish man of his time. The earliest Christians thought that the second coming of Christ would occur during their lifetimes. Also, one became a Christian by conversion, not by being born into a Christian family. Thus, the value placed on procreation was less than in Judaism.

Christianity arose under the influence of both Jewish apocalypticism and classical Neoplatonism (Ruether 1979). Around the time of Jesus, Judaism developed an apocalyptic pattern of thinking that looked less and less toward God's fulfillment of human hopes within history and more and more to an otherworldly fulfillment after a cataclysmic destruction of the present world. In Neoplatonism, the intellect/soul longs to be separated from the body, which drags it down from its true spiritual home with God. The upshot of such influences was a Christian tradition that associated maleness with mind and soul as superior, and femaleness with body as inferior. Although it had other strands recognizing the goodness of creation, Christian tradition tended to be fearful of the body and all its appetites. Rosemary Ruether sees these 'thalisms' (as she calls them) to be at the root of traditional Christian attitudes both toward women and toward sexuality.

Virginity came to be seen as the preferred Christian calling, although it was clear that this was not everyone's calling. Today we tend to read the notion of virginity as a choice for women that devalues sexuality, especially in light of the interpretations of fourth- and fifth-century Christian men such as Augustine, Ambrose, or Jerome. However, there is also a countercultural possibility of reading women's early choices of virginity as renouncing the authority of a man over them (Malone 2002: 146–9). A woman who chose virginity and a life of holiness could, if she was a hermit, avoid the control of men entirely. Or, if she lived in a monastic community of women under the official authority of bishops or priests, she could live in such a way that her day-to-day life was not determined by men.

Still, by the fourth century, sexuality, especially women's sexuality, had become an object of fear and revulsion at the hands of 'fathers' of the church who clearly felt their own sexuality out of control but blamed women. Augustine, for instance, thought that lust was a result of the sin of Adam and Eve. He believed that through the weakness of human will, rooted in lust, the original sin of Adam and Eve was passed on to each new generation. Augustine's works give us insight into the fact that he himself was troubled that he could not control his own sexual urges. Scholars know that, before his conversion to Christianity, he had a concubine and a son. But after his conversion he renounced sexuality and, insofar as possible, the company of women. The Virgin Mary, who was understood to have had no lust, became the model of Christian living. She was the asexual woman whose body was simply a vessel for the birth of Jesus and who remained ever a virgin.

Thus, even though celibacy was not absolutely required of male clergy until the Middle Ages, the life of virginity was officially established as the preferable life by about the fifth century. Consequently, although all women were viewed as temptresses because women were more associated with the body and men with the spirit, those women who chose virginity were seen, at least to a certain extent, to be more like men. In the face of the lauding of virginity and the equation of women with unruly sexuality, Christian churches have found it difficult to retrieve a notion of the goodness of sexuality.

In the Protestant Reformation (sixteenth century), Luther was an exponent of the positive value of marriage. But historic Christian views of marriage considered women the property of their husbands, so it was not until recently, when a view of marriage as a relationship between equals emerged, that a central emphasis began to be placed on the quality of a marriage relationship. The result has been a reevaluation of the goodness of marriage, and with it, sexuality.

In more contemporary times, different churches hold very different official views of sexuality. From the 1950s onward, many North American Protestant churches began to laud birth control for married couples as a means to prevent unwanted pregnancy and thus eliminate undue strain on marriages. As the women's movement in North America developed, churches began to recognize the importance of allowing women to control their lives. One way of accomplishing this was ensuring that they had access to birth control.

In the 1970s and 1980s churches had to struggle with premarital sex. The focus of most Protestant writing on sexuality changed from one on marriage to one on the quality of human relationships. In most Protestant churches in North America today, official opinions on sexuality are based less on traditional 'rules' about sexuality than they are on discussions of the human relationship that should underlie and support sexual activity.

Worries about sexuality in most Protestant churches in North America have changed to concentration on gay and lesbian sexuality. At the time of writing, there is a spectrum of official opinions concerning gay and lesbian sexuality in North American Protestantism. The Metropolitan Community Church was founded to welcome and minister with gay men and lesbians. Churches such as the United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ have extended their views on sexuality as relationship to include gay and lesbian sexuality and have stopped speaking of heterosexuality as normative. Presbyterians, Anglicans, and United Methodists have positions that separate the person from the sexual activity, arguing that it is no sin to be gay or lesbian, but that 'acting on' gay or lesbian sexuality is sinful.

In this progression we can see that, in North American Protestantism, discussions about sexuality have been coincident with those in the broader culture

of which these churches are a part. Roman Catholicism is a different matter. Whereas it appeared to many in the 1960s that the Roman Catholic Church was going to embrace artificial means of birth control, all inclination to do so changed with Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, which directly forbade any means of birth control except the rhythm method. Although *Humanae Vitae* names unity (for the couple) as one of the goods (virtues) of marriage, procreation is still seen as the primary good of marriage and goal of sexual relationship. Sexual activity, in Roman Catholicism, does not have a place outside marriage. Divorce is still prohibited insofar as divorced Catholics may not remarry within the Roman Catholic Church. Gay and lesbian sexuality is reduced to sexual activity and identified as sinful. Thus, a rules-based approach to sexuality is still in place in official Roman Catholicism.

Lesbian sexuality has never been as central to Churches' worries as has the sexuality of gay men. In the Hebrew Bible no mention is made of women being sexual with women. In the New Testament, the only mention of what might be seen as same-sex activity between women is in Romans 1:26 in the context of a discussion of those who worship idols instead of the true God: 'For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameful acts with men and received their own persons the due penalty for their error'.

Historically, most churches have extrapolated from what they see as scriptural condemnations of male same-sex activity to female same-sex activity. Such positions usually rely on a relatively literalist interpretation of texts such as Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; I Corinthians 6:9ff.; and I Timothy 1:8-10. Churches that are opposed to same-sex activity often try to differentiate between the activity, which they see as sinful, and persons who might have a homosexual orientation but not act on it—that is, they say they condemn the sin, not the person.

Churches that are reinterpreting gay and lesbian sexuality in a positive light (as are, for example, the Metropolitan Community Church, the United Church of Canada, and the United Church of Christ [in the US]) first of all do not treat the texts (which are, in any event, very few in number) as rules to be followed. They argue that there are biblical principles (for example, that Jesus teaches us to love one another as God loves us) that are more central to understanding Christianity than establishing certain texts (whose principle of selection is not always immediately obvious) as rules. Secondly, they note that there are disputes about what sorts of activity are actually in question in these texts. Is it all same-sex activity, or only certain sorts of such activity (some, for example, have suggested that relationships of older persons with younger persons is what is

at issue in the Romans texts). Third, they argue (with Foucault) that 'homosexuality' as a category is a relatively recent invention, as is the notion that one has a sexual orientation. Most inclusive churches also argue that sexual orientation is a given and thus that gay men and lesbians cannot be, and ought not to be, expected to change. At the same time, they ought not to be told that any sexual relationship is out of the question. So, most such churches embrace gay and lesbian sexuality under the heading of sexuality in general and talk about the importance of the quality of the relationship between two people (same sex or opposite sex) as central to determining what is morally acceptable.

Even the inclusive views of homosexuality held by some churches depend in large part on views that sexual orientation is a given (even a given-by-God) and that it cannot be changed. Thus, churches have not yet even begun to deal with the view that sexuality is socially constructed, whether it be male-female or gay-lesbian.

## SOCIAL CHANGE

Many people today view organized religion as a force that strengthens rather than challenges the status quo. Thus, it is often assumed that Christianity cannot be a means to improve the status of women. The following are two examples of ways in which Christianity has been part of a social change for the better in the roles of women.

In the late-twelfth century in Europe there arose a movement of women who were pious and dedicated to good works but who did not want the restrictive life of the cloister. These women, called beguines, sometimes lived in houses with other such women and lived solitary lives. They did not follow any particular accepted religious rule and were not directly subject to a bishop or male abbot, although sometimes they made alliances with local Franciscan or Dominican male orders. Beguine houses often included women of mixed class origins, unlike cloistered women who were often upper-class and who could not work outside the cloister and thus had to support themselves by bringing dowries with them.

Beguines earned their livings in a variety of ways, including teaching, preaching, nursing, and engaging in commerce, as well as sometimes begging. Because these women lived lives of poverty and did not demand as much as their counterparts in the market in return for their labour, their entry into commerce and manufacture, such as weaving, spinning, and so on, often ran these women afoul of men in the labour market.

As one might imagine, the question of whose authority should be exercised over these women was an important one. The Second Council of Lyons in 1274 declared that any religious orders founded without papal approval must

be dissolved. In a 1298 Papal Bull, Boniface VIII decreed that all religious women had to live cloistered lives. There followed countless edicts by bishops and councils designed to wipe out uncontrolled women such as these. Often beguines were persecuted and killed. Some were among the targets of the witch craze.

Some beguines left writings, or had 'lives' written of them, among them Mary of Oignes (1177/78-1213), Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), Hadewijch, and Mechthild of Magdeberg (1210?-1294?). In her book *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, Mechthild of Magdeberg criticized the corruption of the church and the clergy of her day, and, as a consequence, she had to flee from Magdeberg to a convent at Helfta. Marguerite Porete's book *The Mirror of Simple Souls* was read throughout the late Middle Ages despite her condemnation for heresy. In the book she argues that the institutional Church itself is not the final word on what is holy or loving (Porete 1993: 122). Marguerite refused to obey an ecclesiastical order not to distribute her book; she also refused to answer to the Inquisition. She was burned as a heretic in 1310. These women often endured persecution and death as the price of the freedoms they sought. They also provide excellent examples of those who challenged the status quo and attained a certain degree of social change for women in their time.

Nellie McClung (1873-1951) was a first-wave feminist and an activist for social reform and women's rights in Canada. She was an advocate for women's suffrage and served as a Liberal Member of Parliament in the Alberta Legislative Assembly from 1921 to 1926. She was one of the 'Famous Five' women who in 1929 argued to the Canadian government that women, like men, were 'persons'. She was a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and Canadian delegate to the League of Nations in 1930. She was a Methodist and an advocate for the ordination of women. She was a temperance worker. She believed that women and men were equal and needed to be treated equally by state and church alike. 'Man long ago decided that woman's sphere was anything he did not wish to do himself, and as he did not particularly care for the straight and narrow way, he felt free to recommend it to women in general' (McClung 1972: 70). She was a prolific writer who published books, novels, stories, speeches, and newspaper columns.

What is most important to note for purposes here is that the main motivation in all her activities was her understanding of the Christian message (Warne 1993: 186). Although she was certainly aware that churches were not living up to her understanding of the essential Christian message, she took her inspiration from that message. 'Christ was a true democrat. He made no discrimination between men and women . . . . He applied to men and women the same rule of conduct' (McClung 1972: 68). She thought that Christianity had a particular obligation to be concerned about those who were oppressed in society,

and she advocated that Christian women had a specific responsibility for the conditions of society: 'When Christian women ask to vote, it is in the hope that they may be able with their ballots to protect the weak and innocent, and make the world a safer place for the young feet' (McClung 1972: 77).

McClung advocated theological ideas that have only recently been 'rediscovered'. For instance, she was an advocate of using female as well as male imagery for God: 'I believe the Protestant religion has lost much when it lost the idea of the motherhood of God' (McClung 1972: 79).

McClung uses the biblical story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42) to argue that women are called to 'thinking', not just to serving. 'The question of whether or not women should think was settled long ago. We must think because we were given something to think with, ages ago, at the time of our creation. If God had not intended us to think, he would not have given us our intelligence. It would be a shabby trick, too, to give women brains to think, with no hope for results, for thinking is just aggravation if nothing comes out of it' (McClung 1972: 32).

McClung was a liberal feminist and a product of her times, but she does give us insight into the fact that Christian beliefs can be the source and sustainer of social reform, particularly reform for women.

#### OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL ROLES OF WOMEN

As mentioned above, women took on leadership roles in the biblical Christian communities. As time went on, those roles that were associated with power and liturgical leadership came officially to be given to men. But that does not mean that women did not have an important place in the Church.

In the Priscilla Catacombs in Rome there is a fresco dated at least to the early third century, but probably earlier. In this fresco we see seven women at a table where bread and wine and fish are visible. The woman on the far left of the table has her hands raised in a gesture of eucharistic celebration. Here is pictorial evidence that women were in liturgical leadership. Although some have tried to argue that these figures are men, the body shapes, hairstyles, jewelry, lack of beards, and length of skirts indicate females (see Houts 1999 and Irwin 1980).

Women were among those persecuted by the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries and revered by the Church for their martyrdom. By the end of the fourth century Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire, and persecution of Christians had ceased.

From the second century onward, women gave themselves to lives of chastity and asceticism. They were given titles such as deaconess, widow, and virgin. *The Apostolic Constitutions*, a fourth-century document, contains a service



for the ordination of a deaconess. Deaconesses seem to have been entrusted with the pastoral care of married women as well as with ministering to the poor and the infirm. But by the fifth century the role of deaconess seems virtually to have disappeared in the Western churches, and bishops were revising history, arguing that there had never been deaconesses at all (Malone 2000: 126–8).

Sometimes in these first few centuries of Christianity women lived ascetic lives in the desert alongside men who did the same, since the desert was seen as a place to escape the temptations of the flesh. Sometimes ascetic women lived in cities where this life was an option mostly for well-to-do, educated females. Some of these women became founders of communities of women. Although the ascetic movement in Christianity does tend to denigrate the body and sexuality, it also provided women a spiritual equality with men and a certain amount of freedom from the direct control of men.

Women also began to cluster together in Christian communities. Marcella was the leader of a group of Christian women in fourth-century Rome. 'Under her guidance, the women learned to pray; to dispose of their possessions wisely; to live in utter simplicity; and to learn the art of governing their own lives' (Malone 2000: 139). Such were among the benefits that the calling to Christian communities offered women and, over the next centuries, women flocked to such communities, which quickly became formalized as religious orders. Women in such orders, although they were ultimately responsible to bishops and dependent on male priests for the sacraments, developed a fair amount of independence in their communal lives. The religious life for women was an alternative avenue to marriage and the male dominance that came with it. In addition, religious life often offered the possibility of education to women, and it has remained such an alternative for Roman Catholic women ever since. There also developed a tradition (in about the seventh century) of double monasteries (one of men, one of women) headed by an abbess. One such famous abbess is Hilda (d. 680 CE) of the monastery in Whitby, England. Hilda was a scholar and developed an enormous library at Whitby that became an important gathering place for theologians and a teaching centre.

The Protestant Reformation (sixteenth century), which disavowed the calling of celibacy and tried to reclaim the positive value of sexuality within marriage, eliminated the calling to the religious life for women, eliminating an option that allowed women to live outside of direct male control. In the Reformation churches until the late nineteenth century, one of the main leadership callings of an active Protestant woman was as a minister's wife. Protestant women in general were expected to live out the Christian callings of wife and mother.

In nineteenth- and twentieth-century North America, women's roles in churches changed, sometimes propelling, sometimes following societal

changes. In Methodism, founded by John Wesley in the late-eighteenth century, there was an emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and consequently women who felt a calling to pray and testify to their conversions as well as to preach began to do so.

In the nineteenth century, Protestant women's groups began to do various kinds of charity work at home and abroad. This work was aimed at education, social reform, taking care of the poor, and mission. A whole class of women church workers known as 'deaconesses' materialized. These deaconesses worked primarily for the underprivileged in cities, in the fields of social work and evangelism, but they were not considered to be members of the ordained clergy. This changed in the mid-nineteenth century with the movement for women's ordination. The first woman ordained in modern times was Antoinette Brown, in 1853 in the Congregationalist Church in East Butler, New York. In Congregationalism, early ordinations were possible because local churches were able to make individual decisions about who could and could not be ordained. Some groups of Methodists also ordained a few women in the late-nineteenth century. The first woman to be ordained in the United Church of Canada was Lydia Gruchy, in 1936.

It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that most mainline Protestant churches in the United States and Canada either began to ordain women or to accord them equal status to ordained men. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that the numbers of women in Protestant theological schools became equal to and then exceeded the numbers of men.

The Roman Catholic Church does not ordain women. The argument against the ordination of women, stated in detail by Pope Paul VI in 1976 and reaffirmed in recent years by Pope John Paul II, makes three main points. First, tradition, assumed to have been dictated by God, has always affirmed that men only be priests. Second, Jesus had an open attitude toward women and could have chosen women to be part of the 12 disciples but he did not. This decision applies to all times and places. Third, when the priest celebrates the mass he is called to represent Jesus Christ to the people. This representation requires a 'natural resemblance' between the priest and Jesus Christ, and this natural resemblance must be the resemblance of maleness.

Many people, including many Roman Catholics, have refuted all three arguments. Briefly, these arguments take the following forms. First, the church has changed in a variety of ways over time. Why not in this way, too? Second, the lists of the 12 disciples or apostles are not uniform in the biblical sources (compare Mark 3:14–19 and Acts 1:12–13). Further, many other people, including women, followed Jesus from place to place. Twelve is a significant number because of the 12 tribes of Israel, but there is no indication that these 12 individuals alone are important in Jesus' life and ministry. As well, one

cannot simply make an equation between the choosing of followers and ordination. Jesus does not seem to have been cognizant of founding an institution that would remain in perpetuity. How can one move so quickly from a charismatic movement to a notion that this movement determines the structures of the institutional church for all time? Third, why is it the 'natural resemblance' of maleness that is all-important? Jesus was Jewish; he probably had brown eyes; he probably had dark skin. Why is genitalia more important than these characteristics in establishing 'natural resemblance'?

These refutations of the official arguments against the ordination of women, however, are not likely to sway the current Pope or his bishops. A different decision on the matter of the ordination of women will have to wait for another Pope who is more open to change within the Church. The fact that fewer and fewer men are choosing the calling of celibate priesthood, especially in North America and Northern Europe, will probably eventually have an impact on this matter as well as on others.

## BACKLASH

As defined by Letty Russell, backlash is 'a powerful counterassault on the rights of women of all colors, men of color, gay, lesbian and bisexual persons, working-class persons, poor persons and other less powerful groups both in the US and abroad' (Russell 1996: 477). In other words, backlash is a strategy for the traditionally powerful and privileged to retain power and privilege against arguments for full inclusion of others in the church and in society. Backlash is the enemy of diversity and of those who are marginalized. In North America, backlash against women is often supported by Christians who, theologically or politically, are opposed to changes in the status and roles of women and to ideologies that support such changes.

One common form that backlash takes is to blame societal woes on the breakdown of 'traditional' families. The idea is that before women worked outside the home, before so much divorce, before single parenting was considered socially acceptable, before there was so much recognition of gay and lesbian relationships, families were more stable, children were better raised, and everyone knew his or her place in the social structure. One problem with this argument is that it is not historically supportable. In fact, 'Backlash rewrites history' (Hunt 1996: 50). The whole notion of separate private spheres for women away from the public, and especially away from economic production, is largely a product of the Industrial Revolution when families ceased to be the economic unit and men became wage earners. Further, this separation of spheres only worked for upper-class women. Poor women, especially poor 'women of colour', have always had to work outside the 'private sphere'. When

private and public are separate spheres, women become the guardians of the private, including the guardians of family piety (Rudy 1997: 26).

Supporting this ideology of the family through Christian argumentation also has its serious limitations. The New Testament does not teach or uphold anything like the modern notion of family. People lived in extended kinship groupings. Jesus called people to leave their families and follow him. And Paul thought that singleness was a better state than marriage.

Yet the idealized non-historical view of family has had a powerful impact on Church and politics, precisely because it allows those who have traditionally held power and privilege to retain it. In the United States, the Christian right has been strongly allied with the Republican Party, and successive Republican presidents and candidates since Ronald Reagan have enlisted Christian preachers and 'biblical' arguments to bolster their appeal. In Canada, where the population as a whole is less susceptible to arguments of religious authority, only the Alliance Party makes any overt use of the 'Christian values' argument. Even the Alliance Party position on this matter is subdued given that there is Alliance support beyond those who are Christian and that Canadians expect their politicians at least to pay lip service to cultural diversity.

Often when religious institutions seek to put forward or defend positions that are against advances in the status and roles of women, they use female spokespersons to assure listeners that there are women who do not want gains such as ordination; access to safe, legal abortions; more social funding for women raising children alone; and so on. This strategy is supposed to make one think that only 'radicals' or those 'far to the left' want such changes. It is a strategy devised to pit women against each other. It is also deceptive in that it shifts the focus from the question of whether something is merely for the marginalized to the question of whether 'all women' want it.

Positions that would restrict women's roles in Church and society are often bolstered by a sprinkling of particular biblical passages and theological interpretations sometimes called 'fundamentalist'. Fundamentalism, however, is hard to define. The notion of fundamentalism grows out of the American Christian context of the early twentieth century, when a series of pamphlets called *The Fundamentals* was published. But more recently fundamentalism has been used to describe particular movements within many world religions, which, among other things, are opposed to Enlightenment values of critical and rational inquiry and depend on a highly structured and authoritarian view of the particular religious tradition. All the major leadership roles in Christian fundamentalisms are taken by males with a central charismatic male leader (Lawrence 1989; Marty and Appleby 1991-5).

Christian fundamentalists take a view that the Bible is the literal and inerrant Word of God. Statements on women from I Corinthians, Ephesians,

Timothy, and Titus are often used to substantiate such views. One hallmark of such use is that the passages are not read in the historical contexts discussed above, but read as if they were literal words of God that one could simply take from the first century and apply in the twentieth century. What is deceptive here, though, is that not all biblical passages are used equally. In fact, as noted above, the views of women and family that inform the selection and interpretation of particular passages are themselves relatively recent and from a particular historical and cultural point of view. Conservative Christians, whether or not they would call themselves fundamentalists, usually hold the view that male language for God is the language that God 'himself' wants used.

## UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS

Some symbols, movements, and themes are unique to Christianity, or take specifically Christian forms. In the following pages a few of these are explored.

### Mary

Mary the mother of Jesus has been an ambiguous figure for Christian feminists. She is one of the few biblical women whose name is known and about whom we have more than just a few words of text. She has not figured as prominently for Protestants as the early Protestant Reformers thought that veneration of Mary was too easily confused with worship of her. The traditional image of her as fostered by the church, especially the Roman Catholic Church, has been one of the obedient woman who was chosen precisely because she was demure and passive and who acted as the vessel for God's plan. Mary, the obedient one, is often contrasted to Eve, the disobedient one. Women are instructed to model their lives on this passive, obedient Mary who served her son and his interests. The Roman Catholic doctrines of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (Mary herself was conceived without sin), of Mary's perpetual virginity, and of her bodily Assumption into heaven were set in place to protect Jesus' sinlessness and his intimate relationship to God. But they also serve to create an idealized woman: the unattainable virgin-mother. Thus, Mary, unlike all other women, is the woman untainted by sexuality.

Yet Mary has not been confined to such a role in the church. In the devotion of Catholic women worldwide, Mary has also been a strong and powerful figure who has supported them in standing up for their rights. Often such views of Mary quote the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), where Mary says that God has 'brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly'; and has 'filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty'. Mary is the one who understands their plights even when God and Jesus seem

far away. Not only that, but because the line between devotion to Mary and worship of Mary does get blurred, Mary at times seems very much like God, only nearer and more accessible. And so we do have a female figure who functions goddess-like in the devotion of many Roman Catholic women (see Daly 1973: 90-2).

### Women as Missionaries

In the nineteenth century women became heavily involved in the missionary enterprises of extending the Church, both Catholic and Protestant, to all parts of the world. At first, Protestant women were involved in organizing funding and support for the missionary effort without themselves becoming missionaries. Throughout the nineteenth century, however, Women's Missionary organizations grew in both the US and Canada. Such missionary organizations were among the first organized women's activities in the Church. They focused on educating their own members and raising money for the missionary efforts. Initially many women spent their lives doing 'good works' in the 'mission field' as missionaries' wives. Finally churches realized that male missionaries were not always allowed contact with the women of the peoples among whom they were supposed to work, and so, by the mid-nineteenth century, Protestant churches began to send single women as missionaries. Indeed, many single women who were professionally trained, such as the early female doctors, often found that they were more accepted in the mission field than back at home (MacHaffie 1986: 93-106; Grant 1972: 57-8).

Roman Catholic nuns also entered into mission work in the nineteenth century. Pope Pius XI ordered that all congregations of nuns should have missionary communities to convert non-Westerners to Christianity, and some new religious orders were founded specifically as missionary orders (McNamara 1996).

### Development of Feminist Theologies

As the women's movement developed in North America in the 1960s and 1970s, women within the churches began to articulate feminist critiques of both the institutional churches and the patriarchal theologies that supported them. Further, they began to propose new ways of thinking about theology (see Young 1995).

In 1960, Valerie Saiving wrote what is usually considered the first article in contemporary feminist theology, 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View', where she raises the question of experience that becomes central to feminist theology. She opines that women do not experience the world in the same way men do and thus that traditional theological definitions of sin and salvation do not apply to women in the same way they apply to men (Saving 1979). In

1968, Mary Daly wrote *The Church and the Second Sex*, raising questions about the status and roles of women in the history of the Church. And from these roots, and other books and articles like them that began to appear, a whole set of questions emerged. There were questions about the biblical texts and interpretations. There were historical questions. Where were the women in the Bible and in church history? Could their stories be recovered? What is the importance of noticing that the biblical texts and the history of the Church are told from a male/patriarchal point of view? And there were theological questions. Why is God always portrayed as male? Why are women seen to be primarily responsible for sin?

Feminists who wanted to stay within the church began to write biblical commentaries, histories, and theologies that took women's experiences within the church seriously and that took with utmost seriousness the full humanity of women. Thus, feminist theology quickly moved beyond critique to the construction of new ways of thinking about history and theology. Feminist theologians arose from both Roman Catholic and Protestant women who did not accept that the patriarchal institutional church was the only or best interpreter of Christianity. Although some feminist theologians like Mary Daly (1973, 1975) and Daphne Hampson (1990, 1996) have left the Christian Church behind as irretrievably patriarchal, many other feminist theologians have decided that within Christianity there are liberating strands that can be woven together into a non-patriarchal whole (Young 1990).

The work of feminist historian and theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether has spanned more than three decades. It was she who brought attention to the construction of Christianity in hierarchical dualisms such as mind/soul over body and humans over nature (Ruether 1975). She wrote one of the first books of constructive theology where, going beyond criticism of the patriarchal theologies, she formulated a theology from a feminist starting point (Ruether 1983). Letty Russell, whose work was parallel to Ruether's, developed ideas of partnership to overcome hierarchical thinking (Russell 1974, 1979, 1993). Today feminist theologies are many, varied, and diverse, arising from new contexts to speak to new experiences.

Christian feminism has a variety of global and cultural forms. Early Christian feminist theologies were rightly criticized for speaking from basically one stance, that of white, educated, heterosexual, and relatively privileged women, yet using the term *woman* as a generic. Women of colour, women from geographic locations outside North America and Europe, and lesbian women began to raise questions about the assumptions of these early theologies that all women's experiences were alike. They raised new questions. They explored new outlooks. Lesbian women began questioning the construction of sexuality as focused on heterosexual pairs (Heyward 1989). Within North America

there are womanist theologies (from an African-American perspective), and *mujerista* theologies (from a Hispanic perspective). There are also *mujerista* theologies from Central and South America, African feminist theologies, and Asian feminist theologies (Russell et al. 1988; Fabella and Oduyoye 1988; Fabella and Park 1989; Chung 1990; Aquino 1993; Oduyoye 1995; Isasi-Diaz 1996). Each of these theologies tries to take its own cultural context and its own particular version of patriarchy into consideration. For example, Maria Pilar Aquino, writing of Latin America, specifically addresses issues within the Roman Catholic Church, the dominant church in Latin America. Issues of colonialism and capitalism affect women in Latin America. She also examines the cultural specificity of *machismo*.

*Machismo* does not derive or have its origin in capitalism, although it converges and combines with it in mutual reinforcement. But it can also combine with socialist structures in which unequal relationships persist between men and women, if there is insufficient criticism of women's double workload, the sexual division of labor, and inequalities between the sexes in general. (Aquino 1993: 23)

Aquino suggests many contributions that a specifically feminist Latin American theology can make to theological understanding. One such contribution is to portray God as a God of life:

The starting point for this new experience of faith is the general context of suffering and oppression of the Latin American masses. In the light of faith this situation is *unnatural*, and God is not indifferent to it. On the contrary, realizing that this immense suffering is against God's plan for fullness of life for humanity has led to the discovery of God in the suffering faces of the oppressed. . . . This encounter with God in the faces of the poor, of women, and all the oppressed has given faith a new meaning. . . . [P]recisely because life is preminent to women, they feel called by God—like the biblical prophets—to denounce every threat to it. (Aquino 1993: 132–3)

Chung Hyun Kyung is a Korean feminist theologian who has sought to integrate traditional Korean women's shamanistic practices and beliefs and other expressions of women's popular religion in Asia into her feminist Christianity. Indeed, when she invoked the spirits of her ancestors in the context of a speech to the World Council of Churches in 1991, she was denounced by many of the more conservative church persons present as a syncretist (one who indiscriminately combines or collapses two or more religions into one) (see Chung 1988 and 1990).

We Asian women theologians must move away from our imposed fear of losing Christian identity, in the opinion of the mainline theological circles, and instead risk that we might be transformed by the religious wisdom of our own people. We may find that to the extent that we are willing to lose our old identity, we will be transformed into truly Asian Christians. . . . Who owns Christianity? (Chung 1990: 113)

Chung notes that because most shamans in Korea have been women, Korean women relate best to Jesus in the image of a woman. To make her point, she quotes from the poem 'One Day I Shall Be Like a Banyan Tree', by Indian theologian Gabriele Dietrich:

I am a woman  
and the blood  
of my sacrifices  
cries out to the sky  
which you call heaven.  
I am sick of you priests  
who have never bled  
and yet say:  
This is my body  
given up for you  
and my blood  
shed for you  
drink it.  
Whose blood  
has been shed  
for life  
since eternity?

(Quoted in Chung 1990: 69 from  
Gabriele Dietrich [1985])

### Christian Feminist Anti-Semitism

One of the temptations of Christian feminist theology is to portray Christianity as superior to Judaism on the matter of the status of women. When Christian women began express concern about the patriarchy endemic to the Christian tradition they often began with Jesus' teachings and acts as recorded in the New Testament. Often, a contrast was too quickly drawn between 'Christianity' and its non-patriarchal roots and 'Judaism' as patriarchal. This characterization fails to recognize that Jesus was himself a Jew and that what became Christianity was in its beginnings a movement within Judaism. It also fails to

take seriously the official Judaism of Jesus' time and place (centred on the temple and ritual practices by a priestly caste), which was no more a mono-lithic representation of all Judaism than the Christianity of any particular time and place is of all Christianity. In Jesus' time there was reaction against this official Judaism from a number of Jewish quarters (see Ruether 1998: 14-15). The aims of Christian feminism cannot be met if the route to 'rescuing' Christianity for women means denigrating another religious tradition. Christian feminists can draw on Jesus' acts and teachings without having to find them superior to all other religious movements of the period (see Fiorenza 1994: 67-73).

### CONCLUSION

There is no singular way to talk about women in the history of Christianity. Women's roles have been varied and variable. Patriarchy has been a given and women have worked around that to discern roles. For many women, Christianity has offered more than its patriarchal forms would seem to suggest. There is also no singular way to talk about the prospects of reforming Christianity in a non-patriarchal manner. Like all other cultural forms, Christianity is closely related to the values of the cultures in which it finds itself. Sometimes forms of Christianity lag behind those values, sometimes they forge ahead, sometimes they simply keep pace.

The question of whether one can be Christian and feminist at the same time does not allow for an easy answer. One response is that there are lots of women in a variety of social and geographical contexts who name themselves this way. They see liberating potential within some forms of Christianity even as they recognize the patriarchy. They see the possibility of reform.

It will be crucial to examine how Christianity modifies as scholarship begins to take seriously the critiques of feminist theory on issues that once seemed simple and straightforward, such as whether 'women' is a category defined only or fully by biology or whether one might, regardless of one's biology, perform (or refuse to perform) the gender role 'women'. It is clear that ongoing feminist reflections will continue to be important and necessary to the academic study of Christianity.

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