

New Feminist Christianity

MANY VOICES, MANY VIEWS

Edited by Mary E. Hunt and Diann L. Neu
Cofounders of the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER)



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Walking Together, Finding the Way®

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New Feminist Christianity:

Many Voices, Many Views

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PRAISE FOR *New Feminist Christianity: Many Voices, Many Views*

"Both a rich, colorful sampler for those unfamiliar with feminist Christian work in the U.S. and an invitation to all of us to continue liberating Christianity from hegemonic 'isms.' This is a welcome resource for all who care about justice in the church and in the world."

—**Rev. Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock**, coauthor,
*Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of
This World for Crucifixion and Empire* and *Casting Stones:
Prostitution and Liberation in Asia and the United States*

"What is new about *New Feminist Christianity* is the depth and breadth and scope—Diann Neu and Mary Hunt do not shy away from all the intersectionalities that feminism in the context of Christianity contains. The inclusion of such powerful, diverse voices that deal with body, art, and ministry, as well as rich crosscultural lenses, will make this a powerful, required text for anyone wanting to understand Christianity or feminism today!"

—**Rev. Nancy Wilson**, moderator,
Metropolitan Community Churches

"Too often in monogendered theology, male eyes looked through the wrong end of the telescope and saw a world writ small. In this volume, woman-spirit that has long been rising comes of age, and Christianity is dynamically reimagined. This is the real, not the fictive, radical orthodoxy."

—**Daniel C. Maguire**, professor of religious ethics,
Marquette University

"A rich mix of topics and perspectives that clearly conveys where feminist Christianity has been and where it needs to go."

—**Judith Plaskow**, author, *Standing Again at Sinai:
Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*

"The twenty-eight authors in this collection give us a rich menu of voices, perspectives, and insights. They demonstrate that feminist Christianity is far from monolithic; rather it is diverse, thoughtful, incisive, pastoral, prophetic and, above all, deeply faithful."

—**Emilie M. Townes**, Andrew W. Mellon Professor of
African American Religion and Theology, Yale University

“With smarts, wit, and tantalizing moral vision, feminist movers and shakers illustrate how transforming patriarchy, religiously as well as socially, requires ‘changing the subject,’ both the ‘who’ that speaks (and is listened to) and the ‘what’ that’s spoken about. For women and men invested in a justice-centered Christianity that delights in women’s empowerment globally, this collection provides truly nourishing bread for the journey.”

—**Rev. Marvin M. Ellison, PhD**, Willard S. Bass Professor of Christian Ethics, Bangor Theological Seminary; co-editor, *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*

“Almost forty years after the emergence of feminist theological analysis and ministry, we have here a rich collection of some of the best and most cutting-edge thinking from academics, practitioners and activists. They call upon us to do together the hard yet hopeful work of dismantling sexism and domination—both within and among us—so that God’s earth and all who dwell upon it can be saved.”

—**Rev. Loey Powell**, executive for Administration & Women’s Justice, United Church of Christ

“An important—and exciting—book with both power and poignancy. Its power lies in its ability to put the reader down into the very vortex of the struggles women endure in their search for equality in churches that proclaim justice but deny it in practice. Its poignancy lies in its ability to teach us all about the other we do not know. This book makes a new community of us all. It is a very banquet of ideas big enough to reinvigorate the life of the Spirit. More than that, it is a catalyst for the ongoing process of achieving it.”

—**Joan Chittister, OSB**, co-chair, Global Peace Initiative of Women; author, *Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men*

“The voices in this book offer living proof that feminism has shaken the Christian patriarchal mindset to its core—from theology and Scripture studies to ethics, liturgy, art and ministry. With its multiracial and multi-ethnic array of authors, it is a must read for anyone interested in the future of Christianity in the twenty-first century.”

—**Maureen Fiedler**, host, *Interfaith Voices* (on public radio nationwide); editor, *Breaking Through the Stained Glass Ceiling: Women Religious Leaders in Their Own Words*

New
Feminist
Christianity

In gratitude and with deep respect for
the women scholars and activists
who led the way.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This anthology owes its existence to Jewish women. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein edited the wonderful collection *New Jewish Feminism: Probing the Past, Forging the Future* (Jewish Lights Publishing, SkyLight Paths Publishing's sister imprint). The many authors in that book prove that it takes a lot of voices and a lot of different views to change millennia of religious patriarchy. We follow their good lead with appreciation.

Marcia Broucek came to us from SkyLight Paths with the invitation to craft a similar volume bringing together feminist Christian authors. Her enthusiasm was contagious and we embarked on the task. Deep thanks to her for thinking generously and creatively about this volume. She got the process started.

We are grateful to the twenty-six women who wrote the chapters in this book. They did so in record time, with good humor, and with openness to crafting their individual work in relation to the whole. We come away from the process with renewed appreciation for the complexity and struggles of individual women's lives that make such books all the more precious. *Gracias mil. Merci beaucoup. Danke vielmals. Xièxie. Asante. תודה (toda). Ābhārī hōn. Muito obrigada.*

Lauren Hill was the ideal editorial colleague. Emily Wichland and the creative staff at SkyLight Paths made working together a pleasure. Their cover art and book design reflect the message here—bold and spirited, inviting and solid. Our hats go off to them for capturing the spirit of the volume in its form.

Laura Bernstein is the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual's (WATER) eagle-eyed editor. We are grateful to her for

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careful, competent work. Thank you also to WATER summer interns Nellie Beckett, Ikhlas Saleem, and Elizabeth Speigle, who edited the final manuscript.

WATER is an extensive alliance and a dynamic force that puts people and ideas together. Our goal is to actualize feminist religious values in the service of social justice. This book is part of WATER's work, which in its fullness includes men as well as women, and people from a range of religious traditions worldwide. We give thanks for all of our collaborators—interns, donors, colleagues, and staff—who make such work possible.

INTRODUCTION

Feminist Christianity is something new under the sun. While some may argue that both feminism and Christianity share many of the same values and commitments, the history of the movements demonstrates that their connections are not always obvious. A more accurate analysis is that feminists have been skeptical of patriarchal Christianity and patriarchal Christianity has distanced itself from feminism. Yet, there is the phenomenon called new feminist Christianity that is apparent in churches and seminaries, in the press, and on the front lines of most justice struggles. How did it emerge and where is it going? These are the questions underlying the chapters in this book.

Feminist Christianity is a hybrid notion in the twenty-first century. Christianity has been a source of the oppression of women, as well as a resource for unleashing women's full humanity. Women's oppression takes many forms, with race, age, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, ability, and other factors all interwoven. Feminist analysis and practice have recognized this, such that what began as a concern for gender is now a widely differentiated way of seeing structures that privilege some and marginalize others.

The result, feminist Christianity, is the product of far-reaching scholarship and wide-ranging practices. Without allowing any one approach to be emblematic, the movement of feminist Christianity is reshaping religious institutions and religious life in more holistic, inclusive, and justice-focused ways. It is influential across the board, in varying degrees, from Catholics to Unitarians, from Baptists to African Methodist Episcopal Zion members.

For the purposes of this book, we have narrowed the scope of our writers and their topics to the U.S. reality in order to focus sharply on

one social location. There are drawbacks to this approach, since feminist Christianity is a worldwide phenomenon. The hegemonic nature of the U.S. culture in the world and the equally hegemonic nature of Christianity in the United States give us pause. But we decided it was better to focus on a manageable part of a huge agenda, to look at the reality in one—albeit large and diverse—country, rather than try to cover the world. That way our authors make no claims beyond their own situations, though they do offer insights from them as illustrative of global trends. We await similar work in other countries and regions, where the results will differ and be instructive for us.

This book is meant to be a snapshot, not a movie. We invited the writers to describe what the future of feminist Christianity looks like from their various starting points. Some are scholars teaching in the academy, while others are ministers working in churches; still others are activists running centers or working in their denominations. To accomplish the same task, some have emphasized history; others have deepened the scholarship on their topic, while a few have chosen personal narrative as their primary mode. The variety of their methods and the range of their conclusions illustrate some of the many strands of feminist Christianity, which, when taken together, have an impact well beyond their own circles.

Feminist Christianity in the United States is the result of multiple factors. Chief among them is the role of global feminism in the lives of U.S. women. In the nineteenth century, some of the U.S. women's suffrage leaders, especially Matilda Jocelyn Gage and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, understood the nexus of religion and politics. They advocated for religious changes because they realized that without them no secular changes would take place. Prejudices against women were deeply rooted in the Christian fabric of their society. Stanton's project, *The Woman's Bible*, made clear some of these glaring problems and showed that women were interested in and capable of rectifying them.¹ From the beginning, feminist Christianity has been and remains a political as well as a religious movement.

In the middle of the twentieth century, as the so-called second wave of feminism gathered steam, the questions of religion emerged anew. By that time, there were some Protestant women in ministry, both ordained and lay. Lots of nuns and Catholic lay women were working in schools, colleges, and hospitals, many of which had been built by the women's own congregations. Being able to vote was simply the beginning of women's expectations of full civic and ecclesial citizenship. These religious women were in the vanguard of feminist Christians who gradually dealt with the spiritual dissonance created by what they knew intellectually about the equality of women and the second-class citizenship they were forced to endure in their churches. It would not last long without reply. However, racism and class differences were not taken as seriously as they ought to have been in those early years, something that has taken generations to rectify.

Women began to enter the ordained ministry in significant numbers throughout the twentieth century in many mainstream Protestant churches, though still not yet in the institutional Roman Catholic Church. They studied in seminaries that had theretofore been virtually all male in both faculty and student body. They worshiped in services that were rife with male-exclusive language and imagery both for the divine and for humans, words and symbols that were chosen without sensitivity to gender, race, ability, and the like. Because of women's persistent efforts, that gradually began to change.

In an early 1960s essay, theologian Valerie Saiving clarified that women's social situation caused women's religious lives to differ from men's.² It was not because women were physically different, but because of oppressive social conditions that women's sins were the opposite of men's: instead of sinning on the side of power, women, she argued, sin by not taking themselves and other women seriously enough, by doing too many things at once, by lacking focus. So to preach to women that they should be "meek" and "gentle" is to reinforce damaging stereotypes. To counsel them per the

Christian Scripture to “turn the other cheek” is to risk women’s lives. Thus the gendered nature of religion came into sharp focus just as liberation theologians highlighted the class-based nature and black theologians the racialized nature of religious experience.

Secular feminist writings and actions emerged apace. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* were cultural landmarks that expressed the spirit of the day.³ Groups of women began to work for equal pay for equal work, for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, for improved childcare and family leave. It all seems rather quaint now, but the 1960s’ anti-war, civil rights, and nascent gay/lesbian rights movements all erupted in a postwar culture that was intent on replicating the pre-war patterns, but this time with the economic and political clout of an emerging superpower. Social change was contested and slow in coming, but a new American society was being shaped and feminist religion was a part of it. Again, the political and religious dimensions are clear in the work of feminist Christians.

Feminist theologian and philosopher Mary Daly published *The Church and the Second Sex* in 1968, outlining the scandal of women’s exclusion from full participation in Catholicism.⁴ At the same time, Rosemary Radford Ruether began her lectures in feminist theology, in which she articulated the contradictions between male chauvinism and women’s equality.⁵ All of this work in English came several years after Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza had published in German her thesis on women’s ministry and church leadership.⁶ Others were working at the same time in churches and communities where the exclusion of women from leadership; the passing over of women in Scripture, church history, and theology; as well as the active disavowal of women’s moral agency began to dawn on millions of Christian women. Once the issues became clear, the American can-do spirit kicked in and women set about to fix the problems with a boldness that some in other countries found astonishing.

The intellectual pillars of the movement were solid, as many scholars began to problematize gender in the various subspecialties

of theology: feminist revisions of church history; feminist ethical analysis; feminist biblical and theological renewal; pastoral theology and counseling; practical theology, preaching, and liturgy all looked at through various feminist lenses. Pioneers including Nelle Morton, Anne McGrew Bennett, Pauli Murray, and others laid a firm foundation in the real lives of those who struggled to bring about the inclusion of women and to end racism, heterosexism, war, ecocide, and the oppression of animals.⁷

Many feminists in the 1970s were rightly suspicious of religion, especially Christianity, which they, like their nineteenth-century foresters, viewed as oppressive of women. With the rise of Christian fundamentalism, both Catholic and Protestant, that suspicion turned to contempt as right-wing bishops and televangelists became the voice of a patriarchal god for all to hear. Some feminists looked askance at feminist Christians, considering them misguided at best, part of the problem at worst. It is easy to see the logic of their position. At times, even now, there is reason to believe that their suspicions are well founded, especially in the face of continued recalcitrance on the part of many churches to embrace the ideas of feminism. But as a growing number of well-trained feminist Christians began to give the churches a run for their money from the inside as well as from the margins of the institutions, even skeptical feminists began to include religion among the social institutions that required feminist change.

Women ministers emerged as one strong cohort living the contradictions of feminism and Christianity. Some came out of seminary programs that included feminist work in the curriculum. Others met at a series of summer institutes called Seminary Quarter at Grailville, a living/learning program held in the mid-1970s at the Grail in Loveland, Ohio. There, dozens of women students from around the country took part in a plethora of workshops, lectures, and liturgies that shaped them as decisively as any seminary course. Still others were lone rangers in their denominations, struggling for what they knew to be more differentiated forms of Christianity.

Introduction

Women got together in working groups such as those sponsored by the National Council of Churches and later the Re-Imagining Conference to discuss and assess feminist issues, mainly from Protestant perspectives. The women-church movement reflected similar concerns among Catholics. Women began to bring their ideas into the mainstream of many Christian denominations. While structural changes were few and far between, ideological changes, including reforms of language and imagery, new thinking on ethical issues, challenges to theological givens, and new appreciation for women's historical contributions to the faith, emerged in many arenas.

Backlash against these efforts was vehement and virulent. Many women ministers found themselves assigned to small, far-flung congregations, making ministry as much an endurance sport as a profession. Feminist Catholic sisters were sanctioned. Efforts to diversify language and imagery, to create more horizontal forms of team ministry, and to experiment with innovative forms of worship and preaching were often met with resistance. Gradually, some women made inroads in some denominations, including access to leadership in larger churches. But the road has been rocky and the results mixed.

By the 1980s, what had been a predominantly white women's feminism became a more racially and ethnically diverse movement in Christian circles. African American women theologians including Katie Geneva Cannon and Delores Williams made clear that concern for the well-being of women and children was at the heart of their work, which was profoundly antiracist and attentive to class differences.⁸ They and their womanist sisters challenged white feminist women on matters of race and economics such that all subsequent feminist critiques included these issues as substantive dimensions of their analysis.

Likewise, Latin American women in their *feminista* and *mujerista* work demonstrated how community-based (versus more individualized) approaches to theological work enhance the projects. Asian American colleagues took on feminist work from the perspective of

those who could parse the complexities of colonialism. Native American women have been more focused on their own traditions than on feminist Christianity per se. In each instance, feminist work has been challenged, changed, and indeed enhanced by taking account of more factors and by including and being shaped by more women's realities.

Issues of sexuality have always been among the most contested parts of feminist work in religion. Lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer, and transgender voices are central to the discussion. Some of the most difficult and unfinished work has been to convince rank-and-file Christians who are led by allegedly heterosexual men that women should be able to make their own sexual and reproductive decisions. Now same-sex marriage is being challenged by some of the same kind of conservative thinking that restricts reproductive choice to a privileged few. These struggles are worldwide, with a lot of the opposition headquartered and funded in the United States. That is why U.S. feminists are so vocal on issues such as maternal mortality and rights of same-sex partners around the world—because we take responsibility for dealing with the despicable U.S. export of organized bigotry. The work of groups such as Catholics for Choice, the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, and the Religious Institute reflects the impact of feminist Christianity in concert with colleagues of other faiths and nations.

Feminist Christianity is but one new religious approach. Feminists in Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, pagan, and Wiccan traditions are exerting similar pressures in their circles. Religious pluralism is a given in the United States such that the new gold standard for feminist work in religion is multireligious. What began as a white concern for gender in one religious tradition is now a multiracial concern for many interlocking forms of oppression as they relate to many religions around the world.⁹

There is a growing number of resources for feminists who wish to deepen their study and practice. Academic groups include the American Academy of Religion, the Society of Biblical Literature,

the Society of Christian Ethics, the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the American Academy of Liturgy, where annual gatherings, both nationally and regionally, are occasions for presenting and responding to papers and panels. While there are some denominational groupings, the women's sections of these associations have generally become multireligious. It is in these settings that contemporary feminist Christian scholars do their work.

Publications mirror the same dynamic. The *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, for example, is now the journal of record in the field. It is multireligious and global in its reach. The same is true of centers that have nurtured feminist Christianity in the United States. For example, the Resource Center for Women and Ministry in the South "weaves feminism and spirituality into a vision of justice for the world."¹⁰ The FaithTrust Institute encourages "working together to end sexual and domestic violence."¹¹ The Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER) brings together "justice-seeking people who promote the use of feminist values to make religious and social change."¹² These groups have their roots in Christianity but are now broadening their scope and enriching their offerings by working in multireligious settings where many feminists dwell.

This is the context in which the authors of the following chapters live. Whether born in the United States or immigrants, whether part of the academy, the not-for-profit sector, or the churches, these writers are grounded in a new reality in which the parochial limits of denomination and the patriarchal constraints of male dominance have been transcended. They are also active in their respective local communities where feminist work in religion combines with feminist efforts more broadly to shape a new, more just, and more inclusive social fabric. Insofar as these essays contribute to that goal, this volume will serve its purpose.