

GENDERING THE LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN WORLD



Edited by Holly Faith Nelson and Adrea Johnson

Negotiating Feminism and Faith in the Lives and Works of Late Medieval and Early Modern Women

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Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World

This series provides a forum for studies that investigate the themes of women and gender in the late medieval and early modern world. The editors invite proposals for book-length studies of an interdisciplinary nature, including but not exclusively, from the fields of history, literature, art and architectural history, and visual and material culture. Consideration will be given to both monographs and collections of essays. Chronologically, we welcome studies that look at the period between 1400 and 1700, with a focus on Britain, Europe and Global transnational histories. We invite proposals including, but not limited to, the following broad themes: methodologies, theories and meanings of gender; gender, power and political culture; monarchs, courts and power; construction of femininity and masculinities; gift-giving, diplomacy and the politics of exchange; gender and the politics of early modern archives and architectural spaces (court, salons, household); consumption and material culture; objects and gendered power; women's writing; gendered patronage and power; gendered activities, behaviours, rituals and fashions.

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To Mary Ellen Nelson and in memory of Kenneth Lee Nelson (1940–2016)

and

In memory of my grandmother, Susie Teichroeb (1922–2013)



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1. Feminism and Faith in the Lives and Works of Late Medieval and Early Modern Women: An Introduction

Holly Faith Nelson and Adrea Johnson

Abstract

Late medieval and early modern Western women critically and creatively drew on religious texts, traditions, rituals, and related spiritual practices to express feminist beliefs and engage in feminist activities. Although Catholic and Protestant churches in this period were patriarchal, this did not prevent some women authors from building a feminist foundation of thought and action through, not in spite of, their faith. In determining the extent to which late medieval and early modern women's faith-inflected artifacts are feminist, it is best to view the history of feminism as a rhizomatic network rather than a direct-line genealogy, as the collection's case studies demonstrate.

Keywords: history of feminism; feminism and religion; feminism and faith; medieval feminism; early modern feminism

I

This collection explores the ways in which feminism and monotheistic religion, chiefly Christianity, interface in the lives and works of Western women authors in the late medieval and early modern periods. It not only participates in the ongoing conversation on whether feminism and religion, especially monotheistic religion, are compatible or incompatible entities,¹ it

¹ In a recent essay on feminism and religion, Ali Altaf Mian contends that, despite ongoing claims to the contrary, "feminism and religion are not incompatible," especially if we take into

also argues for more flexible definitions of feminism and religion in order to take into account subtle or nuanced acts that intimate, acknowledge, or assert women's full and complete humanity and worth.² These acts do not always exhibit obvious features of feminism as it evolved in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and America, yet our contributors contend they should also be viewed as part of our feminist heritage despite differences in modes of enactment or expression.³ In *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England*, Erica Longfellow wonders whether "historicising our own feminism and recovering the history of early modern women" are not "mutually exclusive" objectives.⁴ In response, we maintain that while the feminism of late medieval and early modern Western women may not precisely anticipate or mirror contemporary Anglo-American feminism, if we view the evolution of feminism as analogous to a rhizomatic network rather than a direct-line genealogy, we observe more "entryways" into feminism than we might expect.⁵

With this analogy in mind, the contributors to this volume suggest that to attend to the feminist elements of late medieval and early modern women's writing is, therefore, *both* to recover their history *and* to historicize "our own feminism." Each chapter serves as a case study of a distinct stem in the rhizomatic network of Western feminist voices expressed between 1450 and 1805. While previous books and articles have examined late medieval

account the lived experience of believers: "the diverse ways in which religious folk themselves interpret scripture, perform devotional rituals, inhabit religious institutions, and transform their societies" ("Religion," in *The Routledge Global History of Feminism*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith and Nova Robinson [London: Routledge, 2022], 498).

2 We are indebted here to Rosemary Radford Ruether's early identification of the "critical principle of feminist theology" – that which "promote[s] the full humanity of women" ("Women and Interfaith Relations: Toward a Transnational Feminism," in *Women and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille and Jillian Maxey [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013], 12, and *Sexism and Godtalk: Toward a Feminist Theology* [Boston: Beacon, 1983], 19).

3 Our argument resonates with Mika Ahuvia and Rena Lauer's explanation that researchers in the history of women and religion now acknowledge "that female agency and power do not need to look identical to typically 'male' forms of power" and we must look for it in "unexpected places" ("The Premodern World," in *The Routledge Global History of Feminism*, 73, 80). In fact, while the terms most often invoked by modern feminists to describe their objectives for women (equality, power, agency, autonomy, and authority) remain relevant to some earlier forms of feminist expression and enactment, they may be less applicable to, or need to be reconceived in relation to, other earlier forms.

4 Erica Longfellow, *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

5 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 12.

and early modern women's writing and a series have applied feminist criticism to one or more of these writers, none (as far as we know) attempt to demonstrate the diversity, complexity, and subtlety of religion and feminism in the lives and works of women from Britain, Italy, France, Spain, and America over a 350-year period. Despite the breadth of the volume, each of the chapters drills down into the local lived experience of feminism and faith in a specific time and place from an intersectional perspective. This collection, therefore, recognizes the veracity of Ali Altaf Mian's assertion that "[t]he entanglement of feminism and religion is contingent on local factors" and thus "is best studied in concrete settings with reference to human actors and social institutions."⁶

Before providing an overview of each historical case study, we will briefly consider the ways in which contemporary feminist activists and scholars have described or theorized the interaction of feminism and religion in women's lives and works, thereby situating the collection in popular and scholarly debates on the subject matter and gesturing toward its contemporary significance.

II

The terms religion and feminism often inspire anxiety, angst, and even anger in some contemporary circles, especially when they are used in the same sentence. Both religion and feminism have been presented as salvific or diabolic in certain quarters, with proponents of each envisioning the other as a potential threat. A significant number of feminists and people of faith across the globe conceive of religion and feminism as mutually exclusive categories, warning adherents to avoid the other to prevent infection from its belief system and practices. Individuals claiming to cross the divide – to assume the identity, for example, of Muslim feminist, Christian feminist, or Jewish feminist – have at times been dismissed as confused at best and ignorant at worst, since they are viewed as wilfully or unwittingly failing to recognize the incompatibility of the two systems of thought. For many secular feminists, religion is not merely a benign remnant of a pre-modern belief in supernatural beings or forces; it is one of the root causes of gender inequality. As early as 1885, for instance, Elizabeth Cady Stanton announced that "[h]istory shows that the moral degradation of women is due more to

6 Mian, "Religion," 499.



theological superstitions than to all other influences together.”⁷ Stanton does not mince her words in her critique of Christianity: “A consideration of woman’s position before Christianity, under Christianity, and at the present time, shows that she is not indebted to any form of religion for one step of progress, or one new liberty; on the contrary, it has been through the perversion of her religious sentiments that she has been so long held in a condition of slavery.”⁸

Many contemporary feminist activists and researchers have reached a similar conclusion. Gloria Steinem, for example, views “monotheism” in particular “as part of the problem, not the solution,” despite voicing “respect [for] and kinship with people inside monotheistic institutional religions who are striving to restore spirituality to those religions.”⁹ While spirituality, for Steinem, is consistent with the feminist project, religion is not, since “spirituality is the opposite of religion” to her mind. Religion, claims Steinem, is simply patriarchal politics in disguise.¹⁰ In *Man’s Dominion: The Rise of Religion and the Eclipse of Women’s Rights*, the feminist political scientist Sheila Jeffreys similarly argues that the “domestic and international rise” of the major monotheistic religions has been “harmful to women’s human rights.” She looks back nostalgically to the time when “atheism was ... simply an underlying understanding upon which feminist ideas were built,” a necessary move in her opinion because “all religions were invented in historical situations where women were radically subordinate to men, and reflect their odious origins in their ideas and practices.”¹¹

While acknowledging the validity of many criticisms of religion voiced by modern secular feminists – and adding their own – religious feminists and feminist theologians writing on gender and the Judeo-Christian tradition highlight that women who choose to remain in the faith have worked hard for some time to divest it of its governing “patriarchal gender paradigm” by

7 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Has Christianity Benefited Women?” *North American Review* 140, no. 342 (1885): 389–90.

8 Stanton, “Has Christianity Benefited Women?” 389.

9 Gloria Steinem, “Sister Traveller,” interview by Elaine Storkey, *High Profiles*, January 21, 2016, <https://highprofiles.info/interview/gloria-steinem>.

10 Gloria Steinem, “The Humanist Interview with Gloria Steinem,” interview by Jennifer Bardi, *The Humanist.Com*, August 14, 2012, <https://thehumanist.com/magazine/september-october-2012/features/the-humanist-interview-with-gloria-steinem>; Adele M. Stan, “‘If We Each Have a Torch, There’s a Lot More Light’: Gloria Steinem Accepts the Presidential Medal of Freedom,” *Rewire News Group*, November 20, 2013, <https://rewirenewsgroup.com/article/2013/11/20/if-we-each-have-a-torch-theres-a-lot-more-light-gloria-steinem-accepts-the-presidential-medal-of-freedom>.

11 Sheila Jeffreys, *Man’s Dominion: The Rise of Religion and the Eclipse of Women’s Rights* (London: Routledge, 2011), 1–2.



renovating it, a task that has included reconsidering past interpretations of Scripture, revisiting historical beliefs and practices, interrogating doctrines used to “justify male dominance and female subordination,” and resignifying “basic theological symbols” in “a gender inclusive and egalitarian way.”¹² Feminists of faith have also contended that some religions are, in their most pure or authentic forms, egalitarian and point to the societal benefits of religion for all. This is the case with Martha Nussbaum, a self-identified “Reform Jew,” whose article “A Plea for Difficulty” responds to Susan Moller Okin’s claim that religion has unequivocally harmed women and their rights and is a threat to Enlightenment progress. Nussbaum argues that it is important not to ignore, in her opinion, the positive role that religion has played “in the search for women’s equality,” pointing to the religious commitments of many feminists and articulating the critical roles played by religion in sustaining the well-being of all members of society. Nussbaum theorizes that the latter includes religion’s “role in people’s search for the ultimate meaning of life; in consoling people for the deaths of loved ones and in helping them face their own mortality; in transmitting moral values; in giving people a sense of community and civic dignity; in giving them imaginative and emotional fulfillment”; and in motivating “many struggles for moral and political justice.”¹³ For Nussbaum, religion and feminism need not be at odds, and when a religion displays sexism, “internal reform” must remedy “defective historical practices.”¹⁴

Feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether also advocate for “internal reform,” though on a far larger scale than Nussbaum addresses in her article. In “The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology,” Ruether maintains that the powerful in society have shaped religious institutions and the doctrines, symbols, and rituals used to sustain them in ways that “validate their own power” via the “subjugation of women” among others. Ruether contends that major “cultural shifts of consciousness” are necessary for religious reform, as are women members or adherents “[g]aining education and agency in church as those allowed to learn, speak, and be heard as theologians.” Ruether briefly addresses in her essay those early women writers whom she praises for beginning to articulate “a critique

12 Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3–4.

13 Martha C. Nussbaum, “A Plea for Difficulty,” in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women? Susan Moller Okin with Respondents*, ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 107, 106.

14 Nussbaum, “A Plea for Difficulty,” 107, 114.

and reconstruction of sexist paradigms in religion,” thereby directly or indirectly inspiring reform.¹⁵

Since the 1970s, historians specializing in women’s history or the history of gender have traced the origins of Western feminism at least to medieval times, finding in the works of, for example, Christine de Pizan and Hildegard of Bingen, a “feminist consciousness,” “feminist thought,” or “feminist ideas.”¹⁶ Given that religion and religious texts were central to individual and communal identities in medieval and early modern Europe and America, these scholars inevitably find themselves exploring how early feminists are influenced by and navigate their religiously-inflected identities and experiences. In the main, the greatest attention has been paid to early women writers who appear to share the same objectives as contemporary feminists, which historians describe in a variety of ways. Writing of Renaissance feminism in a European context, Constance Jordan, for instance, defines it as “a (roughly) uniform and consistent theory of knowledge, recognized and recognizable as a theory or a point of view by which to justify feminist assumptions of the virtue of women and, conversely, to call into question patriarchal assumptions of their inferiority.”¹⁷ This definition, however, has been viewed as too vague by later historians, Hilda L. Smith finding it unclear and “difficult to apply when determining the extent of a text’s feminist content.”¹⁸ Most recently, Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, has explained in more concrete terms that early modern women, across the globe,

advocated for many things that would be key demands of later feminists, such as better education for women and more equitable marriage laws. They recognized and deplored ideas and institutions that hindered women and argued for women’s equality – or even superiority – in terms of rational capacity and moral virtue. They are some of the first individuals to exhibit what we could call a consciousness of gender.¹⁹

15 Ruether, “The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology,” 4, 4, 5.

16 Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 14; Hilda L. Smith, *Reason’s Disciples: Seventeenth-Century English Feminists* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), ix; Sarah Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8.

17 Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 6.

18 Hilda L. Smith, “Humanist Education and the Renaissance Concept of Woman,” in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1500–1700*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 14.

19 Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, “The Early Modern World,” in *The Routledge Global History of Feminism*, 90–104.



It is no surprise that the role of religion is one of the central topics Wiesner-Hanks explores in relation to early modern feminist action or expression. As a case in point, she highlights that the majority of the “100 women writers from the Ibero-Atlantic from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries,” many of whom wrote from a pro-woman perspective, were nuns whose belief in the equal worth of women was linked to their “religious beliefs and practices.”²⁰

While it is valuable to uncover transparent continuities between contemporary and historical feminist aims and expressions – which often begins in a European context with the much-discussed *querelle des femmes* – it is important to avoid reading these continuities in only modern feminist terms given the lived experiences of late medieval and early modern women. It cannot be denied that, in general, late medieval and early modern Christian church doctrine generally held that women were secondary, subordinate, and morally inferior beings, thus causing religion on a structural level to operate often as an instrument of patriarchal oppression via the “clerical elite.”²¹ Who can forget, for example, R. Howard Bloch’s proclamation that in the medieval period, religious and secular writings on women customarily presented them as “secondary, derivative, supervenient, and supplemental” beings and thus “inferior, debased, scandalous, and perverse.”²² Similar conclusions have been drawn in many books and articles on Renaissance misogyny. Bloch’s focus on what was said about women rather than about how they lived in medieval Europe has led, however, to an ongoing debate on “the interplay of what was said about women with women’s own experience,” which Susan Mosher Stuard explained in 2006, “has not been resolved in two decades of debate,” and a definitive resolution has still not been reached.²³

Nevertheless, the desire to understand the relation of the interplay, in the context of feminism and religion, between official Catholic and Protestant positions on women propagated in late medieval and early modern churches and the daily lived religious experiences of women continues. It has most recently been theorized by Sara Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo in *Lived Religion and Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. In this study, the authors stress the importance of “lived religion” (or *la religion vécue*)

20 Wiesner-Hanks, “The Early Modern World,” 98.

21 Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo, *Lived Religion and Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2021), 3.

22 R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 25.

23 Susan Mosher Stuard, “History, Medieval Women’s,” in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Margaret C. Schaus (New York: Routledge, 2006), 373.

as a “conceptual tool” when exploring feminism and faith since religion should not be simply viewed as “a superstructure of culture bestowed from above,” but rather as “formed at the core of communal life, where ideas and religious concepts are experienced” in embodied existence.²⁴ This emphasis on “lived religion” calls to mind Liise Lehtsalu, Sarah Moran, and Silvia Evangelisti’s emphasis on “*activity* as a useful category of analysis” when “consider[ing] Catholic and Protestant women in Europe and the Americas in the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries,” underscoring female agency in Catholic “monastic communities” as well as in Protestant “confessional communities.”²⁵

Although the agentic or activity-based view of women in relation to religion is often contrasted with the negative depiction of women in late medieval and early modern religious works, the religious textual tradition itself is far more complex. Three representative cases illuminate this discursive complexity. In fourteenth-century Italy, the Dominican Raymond of Capua was appointed the spiritual director of Catherine of Siena, the mystic and member of the Third Order of St. Dominic. Soon their roles, Daniel Bornstein explains, were reversed, and he started to spread Catherine’s “teaching[s], encouraged her pastoral activities, defended her against her detractors, both male and female, and presented her to the world as a model of sanctity” in a hagiographic work.²⁶ In *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, Raymond insists that Catherine’s spiritual gifts are far above his own, writing, “And here I feel compelled by the love I bear her to say that when she spoke she communicated something by which in a way beyond all description the minds of those who heard her were so strongly drawn to good and took such delight in God that every trace of unhappiness disappeared from their hearts,” later declaring that he was “unworthy” to hear her profound revelations, despite his role as her spiritual director.²⁷ In the anti-intellectual climate of affective devotion in late medieval Europe, women such as Catherine appeared more naturally disposed to mystical spirituality and, thereby, to a form of religious authority.²⁸

24 Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo, *Lived Religion and Gender*, 2, 3.

25 Liise Lehtsalu, Sarah Moran, and Silvia Evangelisti, “Introduction: Perspectives on Women’s Religious Activities in Early Modern Europe and the Americas,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 22, nos. 1–2 (2018): 1.

26 Daniel Bornstein, “Women and Religion in Late Medieval Italy: History and Historiography,” in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi, trans. Margaret J. Schneider (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 5.

27 Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, ed. and trans. George Lamb (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1960), 24, 26.

28 We should add, however, that in some cases, those deemed fraudulent mystics risked ignominy, interrogation, excommunication, and even death, as Stephen Haliczzer explains

In late seventeenth-century France, François Poulain de la Barre, a student of theology and soon-to-be-priest, published (albeit anonymously) *De l'égalité des deux sexes, discours physique et moral, où l'on voit l'importance de se défaire des préjugés* (1673), in which he argued for the equality – spiritual and otherwise – of the sexes:

What we observe daily should convince us that women are no less Christian than men. They accept the Gospel with humility and simplicity. They implement its maxims in an exemplary way. Their respect for everything that pertains to religion has always been so great that they are accepted without challenge as more pious and devout than us. ... It is God who unites the mind with the body of a woman as with that of a man, and who unites them by means of the same laws ... and since the mind acts in the same way in both sexes, it is equally capable of the same things in both of them.²⁹

Poulain claims that his opponents misinterpret Scripture when they argue for the inequality of the sexes: “[A]ll the objections that are derived from Scripture are only the sophistries of prejudice, by which passages are understood sometimes as if they applied to all women when they refer only to some specific individuals or, at other times, something is attributed to nature that results only from education or custom or from what the sacred authors say about the customs of their own times.”³⁰ Poulain took this view with him into his role as curate in La Flamengrie and Versigny in the 1680s, before eventually converting to Calvinism.³¹

About twenty years after the publication of *De l'égalité des deux sexes*, the New England minister Rev. Cotton Mather published *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (1692) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in which he wrote, “so still there are far more *Godly Women* in the World, than there are *Godly Men*, and our *Church Communion*s give us a Little Demonstration of it. I have seen it without going a Mile from home.”³² This he writes in response to “Froward and

in *Between Exaltation and Infamy: Female Mystics in the Golden Age of Spain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

29 *The Equality of the Sexes: Three Feminist Texts of the Seventeenth Century: Marie le Jars de Gourney, Anna Maria van Schurman, François Poulain de la Barre*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 142, 158.

30 *The Equality of the Sexes*, ed. Clarke, 200.

31 Martina Reuter, “François Poulain de la Barre,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Winter 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/francois-barre>.

32 Cotton Mather, *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* (Cambridge, MA: Printed by S. G. & B. G. for Samuel Phillips, 1692), 44.

Morose Men,” “unnatural Authors,” who “have sometimes treated the *Female Sex* with very great Indignities.”³³ Mather thereby uses religious discourse and lived experience to challenge one strand of a misogynist textual tradition.

These three cases not only speak to the complex ways in which women were viewed and written about by male representatives of religion in the period under study, but also underline the importance of nuanced readings of women’s local experience of the religious life, which did not always manifest, as argued by Elizabeth A. Castelli and expanded upon by Mian, “only as a form of constraint both ideologically and institutionally” since such a view is “an ironic holdover from feminism’s own Enlightenment inheritance” that negates that which it deems irrational.³⁴ As Sarah Apetrei puts it, we need to avoid only imagining pre- and early modern women attempting to “transcend, negotiate, manipulate and exploit religion” with an “agenda.”³⁵ Apetrei is responding to claims espoused by the likes of Bornstein that “[b]y carefully exploiting the institutional church and by astutely manipulating religious precepts ... [late medieval] women were able to carve out for themselves broad areas of influence.”³⁶ Apetrei’s theory is more in line with the research of Silvia Evangelisti who writes of our “greater awareness of the range of opportunities for female agency” offered, for example, “by religious life, which moved beyond the strictly devotional sphere, reaching the social, cultural, and political arenas,” without the former being manipulated purely for the sake of the latter.³⁷ As with Apetrei, the contributors to this volume, therefore, resist the notion that late medieval and early modern European or American women view religion as nothing more than “a vehicle for self-expression and public visibility, as a pretext for the real business of personal growth and advancement” or social, political, or economic gain.³⁸

However, we also believe that it is crucial to consider the extent to which these writers are compelled to re-imagine or re-interpret orthodox religion

33 Mather, *Ornaments*, 43.

34 Elizabeth A. Castelli, introduction to *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli with the assistance of Rosamond C. Rodman (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 5. Mian’s need to return to and expand upon Castelli’s argument more than twenty years after she made it suggests that “feminism’s negative view of religion” remains relatively potent in the West (“Religion,” 501).

35 Sarah Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 27.

36 Bornstein, “Women and Religion in Late Medieval Italy,” 2.

37 Silvia Evangelisti, “Spaces for Agency: The View from Early Modern Female Religious Communities,” in *Attending to Early Modern Women and Men: Conflict and Concord* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013), 117.

38 Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion*, 27, 28.

in order to experience it as female-affirming, empowering, and liberating, and to reflect on whether some of these women operate within religious discourse mainly out of necessity given existing power structures rather than out of spiritual conviction. Such a study requires close attention to the intersecting and sometimes competing forces that exist in the lives of late medieval and early modern women, causing religion to function at certain moments as a source of liberation and at others as a force of oppression.

Intersectional feminism, as it has evolved over time, has introduced approaches such as intra-categorical analysis as defined by Leslie McCall to conceptualize the ways in which a group of women operate within multiple identities and social structures in flexible ways given that “social life is ... overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures.”³⁹ Intersectional feminism was initially formulated by “feminists of color to understand the differential but interlocking relation of gendered, racialized, sexualized, and economic forms of domination,” and in these terms, some forms of religion have been viewed simply as another vehicle through which patriarchy dominates women.⁴⁰ Alberta Giorgi suggests that this is why many “Global North feminisms” are inclined to “oppos[e] religion” in principle. However, she and others point to “[c]ontemporary feminist intersectional movements” that offer an alternative approach by “articulat[ing] the role of religion in feminist emancipatory practice” and challenge “the implicit nexus between religion and women’s subordination” in a significant body of feminist scholarship.⁴¹ They suggest we attempt to study women’s positionality within religious institutions or communities in relation to their expression of feminist ideas and enactment of feminist practices.

In this volume, the contributors take a similar approach but from a historical perspective, examining the works of European or, in one case

39 On intra-categorical, inter-categorical, and anti-categorical modes of analysis in an intersectional study of “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations,” see Leslie McCall’s seminal article, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1771.

40 See “intersectionality,” in *The Concise Oxford Companion to American Literature*, ed. James D. Hart, Wendy Martin, and Danielle Hinrichs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), <https://www.oxfordreference.com>.

41 Intersectional feminist analysis historically considered lived experience of women of colour “at neglected points of intersection – ones that tended to reflect multiple subordinate locations” (McCall, “Complexity,” 1774). While the intersection of gender and religion in the lives and writings of women across race or ethnicity has not been “neglected,” it is being revisited and sometimes re-theorized given new developments in the field.

American, women's writing between the late medieval period and the first few years of the nineteenth century.⁴² We adopt this approach to determine the multifaceted ways in which these Western women authors situate themselves in relation to religion and gender and to theorize the significance of such positionality in their era and in ours. At various times throughout the collection, we explore the ways in which class, ethnicity, dis/ability, historical circumstance, geographic location, confessional stance, institutional affiliation, social role, and the like complicate the nexus of religion and gender in women's lives and works. In our intra-categorical analysis, we undertake a series of case studies through which to understand the "broader structural dynamics that are present in the lives" of these women as expressed in their cultural artifacts.⁴³

The objective of this volume demands conceptual clarity, particularly regarding our understanding of the terms feminism and religion. In the case of feminism, this is more difficult given that we are applying the word and related concepts to texts written well before the coining of the word and the emergence of the modern feminist movement. On the one hand, we are inclined to align our view with the feminist philosopher Eileen O'Neill's three "core components" of feminism, which she believes can be traced back to works from the late medieval period onward. These are the (1) denunciation of "misogyny and male supremacy," (2) the belief "that women's condition" can be improved because it "is not an immutable fact of nature," and (3) the expression of "a sense of gender group identity ... usually aiming to enlarge the sphere of action open to women."⁴⁴ Some of the historical works under study in this collection do contain one or more of these key elements as we strive to demonstrate.

However, on the other hand, as suggested earlier, we contend that early seeds of feminism are often more subtle or coded in the works of the late medieval and early modern women under study given the historical and cultural conditions in which they live and write. Therefore, early forms of feminism do not always involve individuals "self-consciously combatting constrictive social institutions and regulations" in as visible and vocal a way

42 For the purpose of this volume, we consider the late medieval and early modern women writers who are at once feminist and religious as a distinct category of writers, taking the work of each as a case study that illuminates the category as a whole. However, we recognize that all acts of categorization involve, as McCall notes, "simplifying social fictions" ("Complexity," 1773).

43 McCall, "Complexity," 1783.

44 Eileen O'Neill, introduction to *Feminist History of Philosophy: The Recovery and Evaluation of Women's Philosophical Thought*, ed. Eileen O'Neill and Marcy P. Lascano (Cham: Springer, 2019), 6.



or with a “gender group identity” so clearly in mind.⁴⁵ Instead, we see feminist efforts at work even when female authors of the period gesture towards “women’s full and equivalent humanity.”⁴⁶ We view them in such cases, to borrow Karen Dempsey’s agricultural metaphor, as “sowing the seeds of feminist thought,” understanding that it is possible, as Lehtsalu, Moran, and Evangelisti write, that some late medieval and early modern women writers “neither submi[t] to the institutions and structures of their Catholic or Protestant faiths, nor ... seek to subvert these institutions or structures,” but instead operate “within and through their religious communities” in ways that we should still classify as feminist in orientation.⁴⁷

By embracing this broader definition of feminism offered by Ruether – which subsumes O’Neill’s “core component” approach to historical women’s writing in late medieval and early modern writing – we can include both women’s acts of transparent cultural resistance as well as subtle creative forms of reimagining the self and culture that are less readily visible to modern readers, thereby avoiding only “evaluating past societies in relation to” our own “social norms, gender assumptions, and hierarchical ideas.”⁴⁸ For example, contributors consider how reading and interpreting authoritative Western religious texts allowed women of the period to “be numbered among influential agents of religious and political change,”⁴⁹ or how an early modern woman author could make visible and culturally significant “women’s grief, women’s domestic work, and women’s communities of mourning and consolation” even though she “appear[s] to have capitulated to patriarchal demands.”⁵⁰ We therefore consider less pronounced or micro forms of subversion of patriarchal norms in the “textual interventions” of late medieval and early modern women that are equally worthy of note when tracing feminism in pre-modern works even if the line of descent from these authors to modern feminists is more meandering or rhizomatic than direct.

The more expansive definition of feminism in the volume also allows some contributors to explore the “queering” of the feminine and masculine, as

45 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “proto-feminist” *adj.* and *n.*; no formal definition is provided, but this quotation is taken by way of example from an article by Mary S. Hartman in *Feminist Studies* 2, no. 1 (1974): 53.

46 Ruether, “The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology,” 18.

47 Lehtsalu, Moran, and Evangelisti, “Introduction,” 7.

48 Ahuvia and Lauer, “The Premodern World,” 85.

49 Femke Molekamp, *Women and the Bible in Early Modern England: Religious Reading and Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

50 See Nicole Garret’s chapter, “Grief, Commemoration, and the Poetics of Disruption in the Works of Frances Norton,” in this volume.

well as gendered relations, in the religious sphere, exposing the fluid rather than static nature of such categories in medieval and early modern texts. This subject is thematized most directly in this collection by Megan Cole who argues in her chapter on Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* that "Astell constructs religion as a queer relationship between women and God capable of supplanting relationships with men, both providing the ultimate pleasure for women and in the process undermining the structures and systems of heteropatriarchy." However, the ways in which religion and gender are queered in works of late medieval and early modern women writers are evident elsewhere in this volume, hardly surprising given the fluidity of femininity and masculinity in many secular and religious texts of the time, from Chaucer's Pardoner, who has been read of late as a medieval "trans figure," and works of bridal mysticism in which male mystics and the Church as a whole conceive of themselves as the female bride of the male bridegroom Christ, to the pietist Count of Zinzendorf, Bishop of the Moravian Church in eighteenth-century Saxony, who "thought ... that Adam was androgynous before the fall and that men had to recover the feminine part of their soul in order to be saved," as Merry E. Wiesner explains.⁵¹

Defining the category of religion for the purposes of this volume is less difficult given that the writers under study operate within a Western Christian framework of some sort and belong to earlier iterations of religious organizations or institutions that still exist today, chiefly the Catholic church and various Protestant churches. However, when authors of the chapters in this collection employ the term religion, they do so in a series of specific ways, referring to major religious institutions (e.g., the Catholic Church or the Church of England); to certain religious congregations, convents, or communities (e.g., Port-Royal-de-Paris in France or the New Marlborough congregational church in Massachusetts); or to a set of doctrines, beliefs, practices, rituals, traditions, or experiences associated with a given religion (e.g., Catholicism, Islam), though these may or may not manifest in an ecclesiastical setting. The term religion may also, more generally, refer to a governing worldview through

51 Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 249. For a discussion of the perceived "Moravian threat" in early America because the denomination "violated gender boundaries," see Aaron Spencer Fogleman, *Jesus is Female: Moravians and Radical Religion in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 215. For recent scholarship in the area of gender, sexuality, and religion, see, for example, Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Religiosities: An Introduction to Queer and Transgender Studies in Religion* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021) and *The Bloomsbury Reader in Religion, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Donald L. Boisvert and Carly Daniel-Hughes (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).



which late medieval and early modern women perceive and make sense of their lived experience in the world.⁵² We operate within this more expansive understanding of religion in order to explore the multifaceted ways in which religion and gender intersect in the works of late medieval and early modern women on the ground, hoping “to intervene in the academic study of religion” to draw “attention to the complicated role that religion has played in identity formations, social relations, and power structures,” which Castelli believes is the benefit of applying feminist scholarship in particular to the woman and religion question.⁵³ We hope that in broadening the traditionally understood categories of both feminism and religion, we will generate more nuanced knowledge.⁵⁴

Our contributors work to achieve this end by building on foundational studies of the complex nature of the interface of feminism and religion, primarily Christianity, in the works of late medieval and early modern women writers, many of which we have cited earlier in this introduction or listed in the footnote below.⁵⁵ The contributors’ findings do not only illuminate the ways

52 In *Religion and the Meaning of Life: An Existential Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), Clifford Williams expands the term “religion” even further to refer to a “belief in God” and how this belief “may be relevant to life’s meaning,” merging, perhaps, the definitions of spirituality and religion (1). Regardless, the impossibility of trying to produce a single definition of religion, and the limits of any definition produced, is explored in Jan G. Platvoet and Arie L. Molendijk, *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

53 Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Women, Gender, Religion: Troubling Categories and Transforming Knowledge,” introduction to *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, 5.

54 Castelli, introduction to “Women, Gender, Religion,” 1.

55 Helpful studies for researching religion and feminism in the period (excluding those already cited) include Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England, 1500–1720* (London: Routledge, 1993); Margaret A. Hannay, *Silent But for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1985); Darlene M. Juschka, ed., *Feminism in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Continuum, 2001); Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor, eds., *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Roberta L. Krueger, “Toward Feminism: Christine de Pizan, Female Advocacy, and Women’s Textual Communities in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 590–605; Femke Molekamp, *Women and the Bible in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Robin Runia, ed., *The Future of Feminist Eighteenth-Century Scholarship: Beyond Recovery* (London: Routledge, 2018); and Ulrike Strasser, “Early Modern Nuns and the Feminist Politics of Religion,” *The Journal of Religion* 84, no. 4 (2004): 529–54. Additional sources on feminism and religion more generally include Pamela Sue Anderson and Beverley Clack, eds., *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings* (London: Routledge, 2004); Margo Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (London: OneWorld Publications, 2009); Ann Braude, “Faith, Feminism, and History,” in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, ed. Catherine A. Brekus (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Nancy Frankenberry, “Feminist Philosophy of Religion,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/>

in which late medieval and early modern women living in Europe or America were constrained and / or liberated by religion, but, we hope, they also bring into focus how feminism can help to address the complex identities, needs, and desires of twenty-first-century women across the globe, the vast majority of whom identify as religious. It should, at the same time, assist in comparative studies of the manifestation and evolution of feminist impulses in different religious contexts and cultures across time and space. The contributors, therefore, share Mian's optimism that "religious traditions and texts," historical and contemporary, "might provide useful intellectual and spiritual resources for reimagining gender relations from a feminist perspective."⁵⁶

III

The chapters of the collection are divided by theme to highlight the different ways in which religion plays into the expression of women's equality, autonomy, agency, and / or authority, or more generally to "women's full and equivalent humanity," and to underscore the different strategies used by women to make themselves heard on religious matters.⁵⁷ These thematic categories are fluid rather than fixed, and readers are encouraged to read across the divide when considering the interface of medieval and early modern religion and feminism in this volume. We begin with essays on the works of three women authors who underscore the role of scriptural exegesis and the sisterhood of believers in feminist thought. While biblical interpretation might seem a rather conservative act, to the contrary, it had revolutionary potential given Scripture's cultural role in medieval and early modern Christendom. After all, the Bible was, at this time, "the authoritative word" that "demand[ed] that we acknowledge it" as such.⁵⁸ In assuming

entries/feminist-religion; Majella Franzmann, *Women and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Rita M. Gross, *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Lynn Japinga, *Feminism and Christianity: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999); Alison Jasper, "Feminism and Religion," in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (1998; London: Routledge, 2001); Michele A. Paludi and J. Harold Ellens, eds., *Feminism and Religion: How Faiths View Women and Their Rights* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016); and Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

56 Mian, "Religion," 501.

57 Ruether, "The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology," 18.

58 M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 342.



the role of biblical exegete, late medieval and early modern women could therefore claim ownership of the meaning(s) of the “authorized word.”⁵⁹ Such exegetical authority was possible in women’s oral and written texts, even though it was excluded from most public ecclesiastical contexts. Shared feminist interpretive praxis helped to forge a strong sisterhood of believers across time and space.

This section opens with Gladys Robalino’s examination of the feminism of the Spanish late medieval mystic and nun Teresa de Cartagena (fl. ca. 1420–1465), who was ethnically Jewish. In “Teresa de Cartagena’s Feminist Rhetoric and Theology,” Robalino argues that Teresa draws on her faith to create a “feminized” religious text – *Admiración operum Dey* (*Wonder at the Works of God*) – through which she defends women’s spiritual wisdom, intellectual capacity, and “right to write.” A woman writer who was also deaf, Teresa faced much opposition, primarily from male critics, many of whom accused her of plagiarizing her first treatise, *Grove of the Infirm*. Robalino argues that *Wonder* is not only Teresa’s defence of her own writing, but also of “women’s ability to attain a superior level of intellectual and spiritual understanding of God.” Robalino outlines the range of rhetorical strategies employed by Teresa to “empower female speech” and to craft a “female-centred” religious text, highlighting that Teresa legitimizes her apparent bodily weakness by portraying herself as a “special beneficiary of God’s grace” because of her dis/ability, not in spite of it, since the condition “allow[s] her to attain deeper contemplation and closeness to God.” In fashioning herself as God’s unique instrument, Teresa further suggests that the men who doubt her work offend the divine and are thus “enemies of God.” Teresa also confronts and challenges the contemporary patriarchal interpretation of women’s weakness and subjection as a feminist exegete of biblical passages. However, Robalino stresses that Teresa not only draws on her interpretation of Scripture to defend women’s education and authority to publicly express themselves on religious subject matter, but she also relies on female predecessors, such as Christine de Pizan (1364–ca. 1430), replicating and adapting their feminist tactics and arguments. Robalino concludes that Teresa stands as an early example of a woman writer whose religious faith informed, infused, and reinforced, rather than restricted, her feminism.

Turning from Medieval Spain to Renaissance Italy, Clara Stella, in “Feminism and Italian Sacred Writings: A Growing Space for Female Authorship, 1500–1600,” narrows her focus to the relationship between religion in sixteenth-century Italy and feminist thought in the works of two early

59 Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 342.



modern Italian women writers: Vittoria Colonna of Pescara (1492–1547) and Chiara Matraini (1515–1604). She initially situates their work against the backdrop of the writings of the Brescian scholar and first “feminist” of Italian literature Laura Cereta (1469–1499), who was also the first Italian female poet to publish poetry under her own name. In discussing the feminist aspects of the religious visions of Colonna and Matraini, Stella considers how their poetry and prose, like those of Teresa de Cartagena, draw on, reflect, and adjust as necessary the spiritual teachings and theologies of two influential female predecessors: medieval mystics Catherine of Siena and Birgitta of Sweden. Stella proposes that for Cereta, Colonna, and Matraini, the religious sphere enabled them to take on leading roles as teachers and distinguished interpreters of the distinct spiritual, social, and cultural changes through which they lived.

Stella initially produces a brief overview of the prose of Cereta to illustrate how she makes use of Christian teachings, biblical exempla, and prophetic tradition to accomplish her feminist aims, which include the defence of female learning, authorship, and prophetic powers. Stella finds that in Cereta’s letters there is a willingness to adapt the Christian teaching of “knowing oneself in God” and to embrace a reformist stance reflective of both Catherine and Birgitta. In closely examining the poetry of Colonna, Stella reveals a woman who is not only influenced by Christian sentiments, but who also defines her authorial voice and agency in relation to Christ. Stella claims that through both the Pauline theology of the cross and the influence of Catherine of Siena (who also inspired Teresa de Cartagena), Colonna links Christ’s body to her own identity; Christ’s passion is her inspiration and her “voice is inspired by God’s grace.” Building on Cereta’s defence of female learning, Matraini turns to classical, medieval, and early modern texts, with an emphasis on the writings of Catherine and Birgitta, to undergird her “early feminist agenda,” namely, women’s right to an education and to teach, according to Stella. The work of these Italian writers suggests that religion and the female prophetic tradition could inspire and enable women’s voices in this time and space.

This section concludes with Michael Behrens’s “Shaftesbury, Women Writers, and Deism,” which explores the religious feminism of Mary Astell (1666–1731), but in direct response to the deism of Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), and alongside the works of Sarah Fielding (1710–1768) and Jane Collier (1714–1755). Through the contextual lens of eighteenth-century secular moral philosophy, specifically Shaftesbury’s deistic attack on revealed Christianity, Behrens considers how Astell, Fielding, and Collier depend on religion to frame and defend their “feminist

positions.” Behrens argues that all three women viewed Shaftesbury’s deism and satirical challenges to Christianity and the Bible as a threat to the lives of eighteenth-century women. In her final work, *Bart’lemy Fair*, Astell responds to Shaftesbury’s “flippant irreligion” by claiming that the Bible and Anglican ideology protect women’s interests “against the misogynist presumptions of English culture.” In doing so, Behrens suggests Astell “rhetorically presents herself as the defender of Christianity.” He also considers how, in their co-authored experimental prose work *The Cry: A New Dramatic Fable* (1754), Fielding and Collier similarly critique Shaftesbury’s “irreligious philosophies” by suggesting that the Bible, rather than secular reason and masculine culture, “provides the greatest support to English women.” Behrens determines that all three women writers actively deploy Scripture to oppose “irreligious masculine intrusion” and to “rescue Christianity for women,” confirming “how crucial” an early modern woman’s faith was to her own feminism.

The second section of the collection narrows its focus to the ways in which females of the period paradoxically find freedom and agency through religious enclosure, recognizing that there are significant variations in practices (notably the strictness) of enclosure in different regions and time periods. There has always been a pronounced tension in scholarly responses to the religious cloistering of women in the period under study. For some, late medieval or early modern women enclosed in convents, or other separatist religious communities, are imprisoned within a patriarchal system that prevents them from fully participating as authorized agents in the public sphere, the only place, they suggest, where anything worthwhile occurs. For others, such enclosure frees women to focus on the life of the mind and spirit alongside, and directed by, likeminded women, freed from constraints of life in the patriarchal family unit. Contributions to this volume lean toward the latter view, while recognizing the complexities of enclosure as a vehicle of female empowerment, beginning with Natasha Duquette’s “Mère Angélique Arnauld and the Paradoxes of Women’s Enclosure.” In her chapter, Duquette considers female religious communities in sixteenth-century Spain and seventeenth-century France, focusing primarily on the life and work of a young Cistercian abbess, Mère Angélique Arnauld (1591–1661). Duquette takes up the question of how early modern women’s faith could be both empowering and restrictive, or, more specifically, how a group of early modern nuns, could be, paradoxically, empowered *through* restriction. Following the precedent of St. Teresa of Ávila, Mère Angélique instituted reforms of strict enclosure and privacy within her seventeenth-century Cistercian community in Port Royal, France, despite the resistance

of male secular authorities who considered such restrictions “overly zealous.” Duquette highlights “the feminist nature” of Mère Angélique’s reforms and suggests that enclosure empowered the Port Royal women to embrace self-governance and generate ideas and writings that would circulate far beyond seventeenth-century France. Duquette examines Mère Angélique’s reforms alongside a nineteenth-century account of her life, in *Select Memoirs of Port Royal*, written by the British anti-slavery activist Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck (1778–1856). Duquette’s parallel reading reveals that Mère Angélique’s faith and work reflect a commitment to feminist aims, namely women’s free will, right to education, and bold resistance to male authorities. Mère Angélique’s dedication to reform and, as Schimmelpenninck notes, her “heroic” and “masculine energy,” not only provided her community of women the freedom to study and learn, but also inspired future monastic communities to embrace a “rigorous commitment to female education.” Duquette’s examination of Mère Angélique’s paradoxical commitment to female autonomy and enclosure continues to nuance our study of how early modern women’s faith may be intertwined with both restriction and “heroic” feminist reform.

In “Nothing but a Union with God: Queer Religiosity in Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*,” Megan Cole reflects on how one early modern Protestant woman writer employed the medium of print to make public her spiritually-instructive ideas, but which ironically, in this case, required women to withdraw from the public eye and traditional social order. Cole examines the vision of Mary Astell for a separatist community of women with religion as its “impetus, method, and defence.” Echoing Mère Angélique’s commitment to female autonomy through restriction, Astell envisions a “retreat” of women set apart from the traditional spheres of gender, economics, and reproduction, allowing them to focus instead on education, friendships with women, and a relationship with the Divine. Cole asserts that Astell’s writing and ideology are rooted in a “religious feminism” best understood through the lens of “queer religiosity.” Astell’s theology is “queer” in the sense that she proposes that women replace a heterosexual relationship with a ‘hedonistic’ relationship with God, thus simultaneously “providing the ultimate pleasure for women and ... undermining the structures and systems of heteropatriarchy.” In her analysis of *A Serious Proposal*, Cole asserts that Astell firmly critiques seventeenth-century patriarchal society, particularly heterosexual secular culture, for its oppression, restriction, and miseducation of women. Astell’s “alternative culture” not only replaces the values of the “heteronormative marriage market,” but also allows women the freedom to focus on spiritual education, intellectual pursuits, and charity.

While Astell's "feminine retreat" was never actualized, Cole reminds us that Astell's "religious feminism" was extended through her charity school for women and her intellectual influence is reflected in "the germination of feminist utopian thought over the course of the eighteenth-century." Cole's study of Astell renders visible the centrality of religion among early feminists and cautions against sidestepping the "role of religious women writers in the emergence of feminist ideology."

In the third section of the volume, we turn to chapters that examine how gender equality is negotiated through the language of faith. The two chapters in this section address the ways in which early modern women interweave biblical tropes and allusions, or spiritual references more generally, throughout their texts to figure, in the first case, both sexes as equally worthy offshoots of the divine Being and, in the second, to argue that women are equally gifted healthcare professionals who, like their male counterparts, ensure the physical and spiritual well-being of subjects in a Protestant nation. In these chapters, it is clear that assertions of equal worth or professional skill do not require early modern women to challenge the patriarchal order directly, but rather to claim that such equality is already inherent in the Christian faith and tradition. In "A Plant in God's House": Botanical Metaphors in Early Modern Women's Poetry," Felicity Sheehy maintains that early modern women writers rely on religious language to envision the female body and spirit flourishing in ways that put them on "equal footing" with men. Sheehy narrows her focus to the operation of biblically inflected botanical metaphors in poetic works by early modern women to demonstrate that they find autonomy and empowerment through tropes viewed by modern readers as restrictive. Sheehy contends that scholars of early modern literature often argue that "botanical language both enacts and exemplifies female submission." However, Sheehy proposes that such readings fail to take into account the rich complexity of the literary treatment of gender and plants in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. For early modern female authors, scripturally-informed botanical imagery does not necessarily limit or objectify women, according to Sheehy; rather, it grants them "power of growth, generation, and verdancy." Early modern women's portrayal of their bodies and spirits through botanical language is firmly linked to religious language which, Sheehy laments, many critics read as part of a "patriarchal vision of womanhood." By drawing on the writings of Mary Carey (ca. 1609–ca. 1680), Thomas Philipot (d. 1682), Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673), Aemilia Lanyer (1569–1645), and Hester Pulter (1605–1678), Sheehy challenges the "problematic" and restrictive readings of seventeenth-century plant imagery, gender, and religion, especially

since early modern women writers represented both men and women as potentially fertile, fruit bearing, and generative. Sheehy concludes that through the language of plants, women writers of the period linked women's bodies to the divine, signalling that to be fruitful, changeable, and plant-like is "at last to be like Christ."

In "The Christian Housewife and Midwife: Healthcare and Women's Authority in Early Modern Almanacs and Manuals," Melissa Kleinschmidt considers how early modern women's commitment to knowledge acquisition and application – in this case the knowledge of the physical and spiritual health of family or community members – is linked to the language of faith and female agency. Kleinschmidt examines the intersection of religious discourse and gender identity in the dispensing of public instruction and advice on health and well-being in the almanacs and manuals of three early modern women writers: Sarah Jinner (fl. 1658–1664), Jane Sharp (fl. 1641–1671), and Elizabeth Jocelin (1596–1622). In their works, Kleinschmidt finds that all three early modern women contribute to "the process of codifying the principles of good Protestant Englishness," displaying the public agency and authority typically reserved for men while remaining committed to Protestant beliefs about, and discourses on, the structure of the household. For example, in her almanacs, Jinner represents herself as "an authorized medical spokeswoman," emphasizing the importance of equipping women to maintain the physical and spiritual health of her family "within a traditional Christian framework that privileges a ... virtuous wife." In her manuals, Sharp draws on biblical language to argue that the midwife's role is ordained by God and, therefore, women, like men, have the "divine authority" to publicly serve both God and their community. Similarly, in her posthumously published mother's manual, Jocelin makes use of humoral and biblical language to help (even in her absence) to form a child with "a wise and Religious heart." Jocelin hopes that her instructive discourse will not only ensure her daughter's salvation, but also inspire her to behave ethically in the public sphere. Kleinschmidt concludes that Jinner, Sharp, and Jocelin all draw on their faith and knowledge of health, broadly defined, to express "their own ... agency" as professionals or experts, thereby contributing to the bodily and spiritual well-being of their family and, by extension, the nation as a whole.

The fourth section of the volume addresses feminist indirection and disruption in the religious sphere. While the works of the early modern women examined in this section more firmly push the boundaries of women's religious role in the public sphere, their tactics are deliberately hard to pin down. Their acts of misdirection and disruption are performed in such a



way as to make their interventions in the religious sphere appear harmless or benign; therefore, they paradoxically unsettle the religious doxa at the very moment they claim to conform to it. The section begins with Holly Faith Nelson and Sharon Alker's "The Rhetoric and Aesthetic of Indirection: Women, Religion, and Power in the Works of Margaret Cavendish," which reveals that unlike many of her female contemporaries, Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, worked hard to persuade her readers that she did *not* write on religion at all. Nelson and Alker demonstrate, through an analysis of Cavendish's prose non-fiction, closet drama *The Convent of Pleasure*, and prose romance / (proto)novel *The Blazing World*, that she does, in fact, often share her ideas on religious topics and frequently with two feminist objectives in mind: "to grant herself, a female intellectual, a potent voice on matters of religion and to fantasize about how women could achieve agency and authority in reimagined religious institutions." Nelson and Alker contend that such objectives are only attainable for Cavendish through the tactical and creative deployment of a rhetoric and aesthetic of indirection.

The following chapter takes up the work of another female author from the upper echelons of English society, though one who presents as more conventional: Lady Frances Norton (1644–1731). In "Grief, Commemoration, and the Poetics of Disruption in the Works of Frances Norton," Nicole Garret examines Norton's assumption of the role of spiritual authority on the art of dying (and grieving) well via the religiously informed culture of mourning and memorialization in early modern Britain. An orthodox Anglican, Norton memorialized her daughter, the essayist Grace Gethin, through prose, needlework verse, poetry, and embroidered furniture that circulated among friends and family in mourning and, in some cases, made its way into print. Garret proposes that Norton's commemorative project – which establishes Gethin as a pious woman and learned writer – self-assuredly "transgresses aesthetic categories" and disrupts "psychological repose" as she makes public "women's private griefs, domestic labour and ministerial work." Garret concludes that it is because of Norton's religious orthodoxy that she can so readily ease "memorials to women's lives and work" into public view despite their disruptive nature.

The fifth section of this collection explores the feminist potential in, and the parameters or limitations of, religious belief, suggesting that the very beliefs that enable feminist thought might also, paradoxically, limit the extent to which it can be expressed. Its two chapters demonstrate that Christian theology granted early modern women writers (both Catholics and Protestants from across the socio-economic spectrum) a way to envision

women as authors of their own identities and destinies. Their Christian faith becomes a means of empowerment, allowing them to give voice to female experience in the private and public spheres. However, both chapters also reveal the constraints of orthodox Christian belief in the late medieval and early modern periods, which at times cut women writers off at the pass, preventing them from demanding or enjoying true liberty.

In “Anne Dowriche and Elizabeth Cary as Writers of Early Modern History,” Rachel M. De Smith Roberts engages in a comparative analysis of the historical writing of two early modern Englishwomen, Anne Dowriche (1516–1613), a staunch low-church Protestant poet and historian, and Elizabeth Cary (1585–1639), a committed Catholic dramatist. Roberts’s comparative study considers whether particular confessional stances are more likely to generate or restrict feminist beliefs and texts. Roberts compares the prefaces, female characters, and narrative voices in Dowriche’s historical poem *The French Historie* to those in Cary’s *The Historie of Edward II* to determine whether, as the dominant (if distorted) narrative suggests, Dowriche’s Protestant beliefs more than Cary’s Catholicism led her to embrace feminism more fully.

Roberts finds that Dowriche, who, like Matraini, confidently presents herself as an “autrice,” emphasizes her authorship and authority by adding her signature to every section of her prefatory material. Though Cary is less bold in her preface, Roberts unearths features in the body of both Dowriche’s and Cary’s works that reflect early modern feminist concerns, emphasized through firm, didactic narrative voices and prominent, public-facing female characters: Dowriche’s Queen Mother of France, Catherine de’ Medici, and Cary’s Queen Isabel of England. In producing works on historical events in which women’s public role and voices are foregrounded, both writers offer instruction on matters related to gender and morality. Yet, Roberts cautions that Dowriche’s and Cary’s female characters are also “ultimately flawed” – conforming in some measure to antifeminist stereotypes – and though both writers’ narrative voices are seemingly feminist, they are also constrained and opaque. She therefore concludes that the authors’ religious beliefs “are equally empowering and disenfranchising.” The works of Dowriche and Cary thus point to a complicated, and at times inconsistent, relationship between women’s faith and feminism in the early modern period. Nevertheless, Roberts reminds us that early modern women’s “writing, female identity, feminism, and faith cannot be meaningfully separated.”

Steve Van-Hagen also explores the ambivalent relationship between religion and feminism in “Both Enabling and Limiting: Religion as a Sponsor of Feminism in the Eighteenth-Century Labouring-Class Verses of Collier, Leapor, and Yearsley.” Though Van-Hagen suggests that the call for liberty

and equality voiced by early modern working-class women was enabled and informed by their faith, he recognizes that the nature of their religious beliefs also hindered more radical efforts. Van-Hagen proposes that labouring-class women poets of the eighteenth century invoked teachings of the New Testament to advance a more egalitarian gender politics. He closely examines how three labouring-class poets, Mary Collier (1688–1762), Mary Leapor (1722–1746), and Ann Yearsley (1753–1806), employ this “significant and sustained” strategy to enable them to articulate a progressive politics. However, he then explains that their reliance on the values and teachings ascribed to Christ involves a “double movement,” one that prevents advocacy of “revolutionary” change. For example, Van-Hagen examines how the poetry of Collier draws on the Protestant Apocrypha to suggest “that whereas men were conventionally respected for their strength, it was women, against the stereotype, who merited such praise.” Leapor’s neglected religious poems, he claims, represent “a means of peaceful agitation for power” by warning that those who hold authority on earth will face consequences if they do not behave with greater mercy and respect toward the weaker. And Yearsley boldly relies on New Testament values to address a “tyrannical abuse of male privilege.” Yet, the emphasis on “meekness, mildness, mercy, and kindness” in the New Testament made it difficult for these authors to move from the page to the street, since “violent protest or resistance” does not accord with these values. However, while Van-Hagen does not deny that religious beliefs can and did limit feminist efforts by eighteenth-century working-class women, he reveals that Scripture and religious doctrine also provided the basis for their foundational feminist condemnation of the unjust treatment of women, which often implied the need for social change.

The final section of the collection gestures toward the ways in which the language of religion is deployed by early modern women authors – writing beyond Europe’s borders – to critique Christian institutions and promote female liberty while still maintaining their faith. In its two chapters, early modern women are seen to exhibit and privilege their well-informed understanding of the impact of religious institutions on women’s lives, publicly censuring how they can and do, at times, impede God-given female agency. In both cases, the women writers discussed make use of theological or ecclesiastical principles to defend women’s rightful place as full and free members of the Christian church, arguing their case against the backdrop of the Ottoman Empire or the Early American Republic. In “Freer than Any Ladys in the Universe’: Theologies of Liberty and Legalism in the Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu,” Jordan Hall claims that religion is triangulated in *The Turkish Embassy Letters* of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

(1689–1762) in her account of female liberty. In her *Turkish Embassy Letters*, Montagu outlines her travels in the Ottoman Empire and her views of Islamic beliefs and practices, particularly with respect to women's liberties. Hall theorizes that Montagu critiques what she views as the "religious legalism" of Catholicism in the *Letters* by associating women's freedom with both Islam and Protestantism. Hall notes that although scholars have traditionally considered Montagu's defence of the veil as a means to subvert certain religious and patriarchal norms, this does not mean that she rejects religion per se. Rather, Hall claims that Montagu's Protestant faith "fundamentally shapes" her "defences of Islam and the veiling of women," "challeng[ing] the notion that religious belief and practice" necessarily "impede[s] women's liberties." For Montagu, Hall contends, it is not religion, Islam, or the veil that renders women powerless, but rather legalism, particularly within the Catholic Church, that subjects and oppresses women. In her *Letters*, Montagu suggests, in fact, that the veil does not restrict women, but actually grants "them the freedom to do whatever they wish" without the risk of detection. The veiled woman, therefore, has the freedom of a "protective cloak" that allows her to make moral decisions without fear of judgement. As Hall concludes, Montagu believes that in both Islam and Protestantism, women are driven by spiritual desire and afforded religious liberty, which stands in stark contrast to subjugated women "cloistered" in legalistic Catholic nunneries. Hall's study of Montagu again suggests that early modern women's claims for freedom were often undergirded by foundational religious beliefs. However, it also reveals a woman of the period actively and openly negotiating the complexities of comparative religion by conversing with a Muslim scribe in an effort to reach her own cogent conclusions about the liberty or constraints that women experience under Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam.

S. Spencer Wells's concluding chapter, "I Find No Curse in the Gospel of Christ: Private Judgment and the Gendering of Church Discipline in the Early American Republic," takes us across the Atlantic to America. Wells explores the question of how early modern American women relied on their faith to advance egalitarian ecclesiastical discipline at the turn of the nineteenth century. Through his case study of Elizabeth Warner, an excommunicated member of a congregational church in New Marlborough, Massachusetts, Wells demonstrates that disagreements over church government and practices led some early modern American women to form feminist ideals and reshape "their relationship with the church and with scriptural texts which they believed undermined their equality before God." After her excommunication, Warner turned to the "media," publishing a rebuttal in the form



of a tract, a document Wells suggests “illuminates strategies feminists could employ” in an attempt to claim their “rightful liberties” as a church member. Wells also examines how Warner’s desire to be included in and bound by the responsibilities of church membership was also intertwined with two scriptural references commonly used against women to constrain them: the call for their complete silence and their subjection to their husbands. Warner’s tract, Wells insists, presents feminist arguments in response to both restrictions. Though Warner did not directly challenge women’s place within the ecclesiastical system, Wells argues that she fought to be seen “as a true ‘sister’ in Christ, with the disciplinary ‘privilege[s]’ of membership this entailed.” Wells’s study of Warner’s interaction with church polity confirms that early modern women in America, as in Europe, could find in their religious beliefs a means to call for inclusion, agency, and liberty even if those beliefs did not ignite radical or revolutionary efforts to transform the church or state.

About the Authors

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