Introduction

Why Study Women in Christian Traditions?

Any book that offers itself as a history of a subject that scores—if not hundreds—of books have already considered must negotiate two seemingly contradictory challenges. First, it must differentiate itself from previous works. Second, it must recognize, respect, and incorporate what they have taught us. These tasks are even more important when the subject itself is somewhat controversial or misunderstood, as is the case with women’s contributions to the development of a major world religion such as Christianity. Thus, this volume approaches the topic of women in Christian traditions by respecting the past but also facing the future.

This book interprets a vast body of scholarly studies in an accessible and relatively brief way. It gives a broad overview of the complete sweep of history rather than focusing on a particular moment, issue, or individual. It relies almost exclusively on feminist scholarship of the last several decades, yet also departs from some of the assumptions of that scholarship. It raises questions that challenge our thinking about how women shaped beliefs and practices during two thousand years of church history. For example, did the emphasis on virginity in the early church empower Christian women? Did the emphasis on marriage during the Reformations of the sixteenth century improve their status?

These questions and others have important implications for women in Christianity in particular and women in religion in general, since they go to the heart of the human condition. Who are we and how are we to live? Societies and cultures provide their own answers with which various religious groups may agree or disagree. When we consider the
history of Christianity, we find moments when believers clashed with prevailing cultural views and behaviors, and other times when they supported societal values and prejudices. In various epochs we find women taking both conservative steps backward and revolutionary leaps forward. While some of the women discussed in this book might have seen themselves as self-conscious radicals, most of them merely believed they were being true to their faith in God and to their understanding of Jesus Christ. At the same time, their answers to the questions posed above diverged dramatically.

A traditional study of Christianity might begin with an examination of its biblical roots, or with the cultural context of first-century Judea under Roman occupation. But since this book takes a feminist approach to the subject, it needs to preface a rereading of the conventional history by starting with a discussion of leading theories and scholars. This introduction to contemporary feminist theology will inform our understanding of what follows.

Introducing Feminist Theologies

Feminism is sometimes called the other f-word. It makes both women and men uncomfortable as they think about the gender roles they have accepted. Misunderstanding as well as misogyny masks what most feminists mean when they use the word “feminism.” In the late twentieth century fewer young women identified themselves as feminists than had their mothers, believing that such women were man-hating, bra-burning radicals. A movement called postfeminism arose in part as a backlash against women’s efforts to achieve social equality.

According to the bumper sticker definition, “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.” This quote has been attributed to several women, including the British journalist Rebecca West, the African American novelist Gloria Naylor, and two American professors of women’s studies, Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler. The fact that so many women might have said it suggests the larger proposition that
many women do say it. Even if they do not identify themselves as feminists, most women believe in social equality, unbiased job opportunities, and a level playing field for advancement in all realms of society. By this definition, men can be feminists too.

A more formal definition of feminism is “the political and social efforts of women and men directed toward ending sexist domination—with all that the latter may imply in terms of racial, economic and other patterns of stratification.”¹ By this definition, feminism is a political movement of women and men who are working to eliminate structures of authority based on gender discrimination. The pattern in which men hold the power and women are disenfranchised or excluded from power is called patriarchy. Patriarchy may even dominate other men, especially those of ethnic, racial, or sexual minorities. Although patriarchy can also simply be defined as a male-headed household, its use here indicates a social hierarchy that governs all human relations.

Related to patriarchy is androcentrism, that is, the belief that the male or masculine view is normative. Androcentrism is so constitutive a part of many human cultures, including those of Western Europe and North America, that we are often not even aware of it. Yet it dictates our ideas about what is normal and natural, and until the twentieth century it has generally controlled scholarship by deciding what is important and worth studying, and what is trivial and not worth considering.

Feminist theology, a branch within the larger discipline of feminist studies, reflects upon the structure of patriarchy and androcentrism within a particular religious tradition, in this particular book, Christianity. It recovers the hidden and suppressed past; it constructs a vision that provides for human flourishing by including women from start to finish; it advocates for change; and it creates structures that enable change to occur. In other words, it is not only a theoretical endeavor, it involves practice or action as well.

Historically, feminist theologians adopted three main approaches toward the assessment of Christianity.² The reformist school, primarily Evangelical in orientation, believes that gender equality can be achieved
in the churches without a complete overhaul of existing structures. Reformist theologians such as Letha Scanzoni (b. 1935) and Nancy Hardesty (1941–2011), cofounders of the Evangelical Women’s Caucus (now the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women’s Caucus), argue that the message of the Bible, and especially of Jesus, has been distorted, but that it can be reclaimed through a biblical hermeneutics—that is, principles of interpretation of scripture—that sees Jesus as a countercultural feminist.³

The reconstructionist school believes that Christian institutions need radical change, not just reform, in order to ameliorate deep structural flaws. These feminist theologians see the recovery of a suppressed Christian tradition that includes women—along with the development of a hermeneutics that rereads the Bible through the lenses of women’s experience—as essential for liberating Christianity from patriarchy and androcentrism. Letty M. Russell (1929–2007), an ordained Presbyterian minister and faculty member at Yale University, was a pioneer reconstructionist. Like the reformists, she emphasized scripture and the liberating attitudes of Jesus, but went further to develop a theology of partnership that called for changes in church life and ministry.⁴ Another reconstructionist, Delores Williams, professor emerita at Union Theological Seminary in New York, criticizes some of the African American denominational churches for their failure to address a number of issues crucial to the flourishing of all African Americans. She advances a Christology, or conception of Christ, that emphasizes his ministerial vision, rather than a Christology that sees him as a scapegoat or surrogate for others, which she finds destructive of African American female personhood.⁵

Reformist and reconstructionist feminists regard themselves as faithful Christians who wish to remain in a transformed church. In contrast, the final group, revolutionary feminists, who are also called rejectionists, believe that the patriarchal nature of Christianity, grounded in a male deity and a male savior, and controlled throughout history by males who want to maintain their power, can never advance the position of women, either in heaven or on earth. They may call themselves post-Christian
feminists, and some turn to Goddess religions as more emancipating for women than Christianity ever could be.

An important revolutionary feminist was Mary Daly (1928–2010), who began her academic career as a Catholic theologian and philosopher and ended it as a post-Christian radical. In her first book, The Church and the Second Sex (1968), she examined the French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir’s attack on Christianity. While she acknowledged the truth of de Beauvoir’s criticisms, Daly nonetheless retained hope that the Roman Catholic Church could be redeemed. But by the time she wrote Beyond God the Father, five years later, she had abandoned Christianity. “Under the conditions of patriarchy the role of liberating the human race from the original sin of sexism would seem to be precisely the role that a male symbol cannot perform.” Jesus could never be a beneficial model for women, she wrote, since the very qualities that he exemplified—self-sacrifice, humility, meekness, passivity—were the exact characteristics that kept women oppressed. While eventually falling outside Christian theology, Daly’s revolutionary feminism is nonetheless foundational for understanding all succeeding feminist considerations of Christian thought and history.

The outpouring of feminist scholarship on women in Christianity and the development of a feminist theology in the last third of the twentieth century can be divided into three distinct periods. The classical period ran from 1968 through 1977 and is characterized primarily by its critique of patriarchy and misogyny. A good example of this type of literature is Religion and Sexism, which asked the question, “To what extent did Judaism and Christianity contribute directly to and promote this heritage of misogyny?” Edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether (b. 1936), visiting professor of feminist theology at Claremont Graduate University, the volume provided detailed answers in ten essays and a parable. The second period, extending from 1978 through 1985, included defining works of historical recovery. The suppressed history of women in Christianity became visible in such works as In Memory of Her, by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (b. 1938), professor of divinity
at Harvard Divinity School. “The attempt to ‘write women back into early Christian history’ should not only restore early Christian history to women,” she observed, “but also lead to a richer and more accurate perception of early Christian beginnings.”

The third period in the development of feminist theology encompassed 1986 through the late 1990s, and focused on theological reconstruction, that is, “recasting of Christian themes and symbolizations along the lines of explicitly feminist ethical and feminist theological emphases.” Feminist theologians reconsidered Christian teachings about the Trinity, Christ, salvation, anthropology (that is, the theology of humanity, as opposed to the academic discipline), and other dogmas that seemed to circumscribe women’s full participation in Christianity. For example, the Roman Catholic theologian and woman religious Elizabeth A. Johnson (b. 1941) and the Protestant theologian Sallie McFague (b. 1933) both created visions of the divine that utilized inclusive language for God. They agreed that speech about God is metaphorical and analogous to human life. Johnson adopted the language “Holy Wisdom” to describe the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and the Creator Mother, while McFague proposed the language of mother, lover, and friend to describe the relationships one might have with the divine. By getting at the underlying nature of God, both writers constructed a new theology in order to avoid the effects of an exclusively male deity upon the expression of full human equality.

A backlash to reconstructions like these arose, with some writers wondering whether feminist theology could even be called Christian. Kathryn Greene-McCreight, an Episcopal priest in New Haven, Connecticut, differentiated between biblical feminists, who read the Bible as the inspired witness to God’s grace, and feminist theologians, who view the Bible primarily as a tool for advancing patriarchy. Although Greene-McCreight admitted that the critique of patriarchy is legitimate, she found that the method some feminists use takes Christians outside the biblical tradition. Moreover, she argued that feminist theology “reinscribes totalizing assumptions about ‘women’ and reinforces
stereotypes about women’s submissiveness rather than overcoming and subverting them.”

In the twenty-first century, a new wave of feminist theologians is building upon the foundations laid by their foresisters, yet addressing some of the concerns expressed by Greene-McCreight. They are providing “bold reinterpretations of Christianity that seek to renew the life of the church and its witness to the world,” according to Joy Ann McDougall, professor of systematics at Candler School of Theology. She notes three features these newer theologians share. First, they are including women’s lived experiences as sources of embodied knowledge. Just as men’s experiences once served as the primary means by which Christians understood church teachings, women’s experiences are indispensable for developing theology today. Second, they are “directing their energies toward the church’s central doctrines and practices.” Rather than abandon the struggle to make sense of Christian tradition for modern churchwomen, they are engaged in the same process of theological reflection that has engrossed male theologians for two millennia. Finally, they are utilizing the insights of feminist theory to confront contemporary issues that threaten to overwhelm all of humanity, not just Christians or women. McDougall believes that these new theologians are engaged in “saving work” by offering fresh readings of Christianity.

What became evident in the first feminist theological writings was the failure to account for or to include the experiences of nonwhite women in the new theology. If “living realities are the takeoff point for theological elaboration,” as the Brazilian feminist Ivone Gebara asserted, it was clear that the experiences of white North American women did not encompass those of African American, Asian, or African women, nor of South American women as well as North American Latinas. Women of color have had to face discrimination not only on the basis of gender but also on the basis of race and class. For these reasons, a variety of alternative feminist theologies began to emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

“Judging by what is written in the historic black denominations the black woman is invisible,” Theressa Hoover (b. 1925), the former associ-
ate general secretary of the Women’s Division of the United Methodist Church, wrote in 1974. Given the fact that African American women were the backbone of the black church, making up three-quarters of its membership, their invisibility was troubling. In reaction to the silence of male African American theologians and the neglect by white feminist theologians, a womanist theology arose. “Womanist theology begins with the experiences of Black women as its point of departure,” according to Jacquelyn Grant (b. 1948), an ordained minister and professor at the Interdenominational Theological Center. “This experience includes not only Black women’s activities in the larger society but also in the churches and reveals that Black women have often rejected the oppressive structure in the church as well.”

While African American churchwomen tend to work within the Protestant church, Latina churchwomen tend to work within Roman Catholic Christianity. Mujerista theology, articulated by Ada María Isasi-Díaz (1943–2012), a theologian at Drew University, is “a theology from the perspective of Latinas that is an intrinsic element of Hispanic/Latino theology in the USA.” In contrast, the theology of women living in Central and South America comes out of the political and religious struggle for liberation in Latin America. A major exponent of this theology is María Pilar Aquino (b. 1956), a woman religious and professor of theology at the University of San Diego. Her book Our Cry for Life (Nuestro clamor por la vida) presented a systematic analysis of the state of the question of women and theology before providing a constructive methodology for feminist theology in Latin America. Isasi-Díaz and Aquino agreed that the starting point for feminist theology is the centrality of daily life, which is linked to the problems of “division of labor by sexes; the split between the public and private spheres; and the creation of the sex-gender system, which affirms male superiority.” Isasi-Díaz called this lo cotidiano (the everyday), that is, the daily experience of Hispanic women.

Latin America was missionized in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries primarily by male Catholic friars and priests from Spain,
Portugal, and France: Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, and others. Africa and Asia, in contrast, were missionized primarily in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by English and American Protestants, both men and women, although there are exceptions to these generalizations. Missionary work gave some women a limited amount of control, especially in the proselytizing and control of other women. While we cannot say that women missionaries were necessarily feminist in outlook, their presence nonetheless revealed the subjugation that their sisters abroad were experiencing. “Their daily exposures to some of the oppression Asian women faced, such as arranged marriage, bonded labour, and female infanticide, made them more aware of their own subordination and the harmful effects of sexual exploitation,” according to Kwook Pui-lan, a professor at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.25

Asia is an enormous continent, with diverse nations and peoples. As a result, the feminist theologies that have arisen there are quite varied, reflecting the particular churches, denominations, and cultural contexts from which they have grown. In the 1970s, women began to develop feminist theology in South Korea—a highly Christianized Asian nation, with half of the population professing Christianity today—in response to an androcentric church that controlled access to biblical interpretation.26 Virginia Fabella, a Maryknoll sister and Catholic theologian, said that feminists in the Philippines, another Asian nation with a large Christian population, have done the same. “For too long, what we are to believe about Jesus Christ and what he is to mean for us have been imposed on us by our colonizers, by the Western world, by a patriarchal church, and by male scholars and spiritual advisers.”27 Asian feminists identified the effects of oppression through economic and religious colonization as serious problems rarely addressed by indigenous male or non-Asian theologians.

The situation was similar in African nations, where Christianity served as both a liberating and an oppressing force for women. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (b. 1934) argued that it is a myth that the church brought
liberation to African women: what it brought instead were European, middle-class values. “Faced with the vastly complicated, hydra-headed challenges of living in today’s world,” she wrote, “Africa finds little sustenance in the continuing importation of uncritical forms of Christianity with answers that were neatly packaged in another part of the world.”

The director of the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity Theological Seminary in Ghana, Oduyoye today contends that Christianity has fueled the cultural sexism that already existed in Africa and notes that some of the strongest African religious women have left historic Christianity to establish independent churches. She argues for the affirmation of African traditions within Christianity and for the full participation of women in the life of churches: in leadership, in ritual, and in religious language.

All of these feminist theologies and more—such as ecofeminism, queer theology, and feminist spirituality, which comes from women’s lived experiences rather than from normative masculinized practices—fall within the larger rubric of liberation theology. Arising in the 1960s primarily within the Roman Catholic Church, liberation theology, broadly conceived, asserts that God has a “special option” for the poor and the marginalized. “God opts for the poor to overthrow unjust relationships,” writes Ruether. “This makes the poor the preferential locus for understanding who and where the Church actually is.”

Salvation occurs in the concrete reality of human history, not in a far-distant afterlife. Previous theologies that neglected the poor or postponed salvation, failed to rightly speak the Word of God. According to the liberationists, theology must be tested in the crucible of practice: If theology does not lift up humanity in the here and now, if it does not make justice an imperative, it is inadequate if not inauthentic.

Feminist theologians operate within the paradigm of liberation theology but emphasize the retrieval of the full humanity of women. They provide new readings of ancient texts; they expose theologies that justify the subservience of women; they highlight women as significant fore-sisters whose life and work had fallen into obscurity. All of this activ-
ity occurs within the idea that praxis confirms or denies the validity of theology. Another way to say this is with the adage “The proof is in the pudding”—that is, we can ascertain the quality or truth of an idea only by putting it into practice.

BF: Before Feminism

What did people know about women in Christianity prior to the rise of feminist scholarship? Christians always appreciated the great women of the Hebrew Bible, where stories abound about strong matriarchs like Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel; women warriors like Miriam, Deborah, and Jael; and schemers and plotters like Tamar, Ruth, Delilah, and Jezebel. The Old Testament narratives provide glimpses of women who think and act and who affect the outcome of salvation history. As Edith Deen asserted in All of the Women of the Bible, “Here in this Bible portrait gallery—the greatest in all literature—are women of our common humanity.” Deen, the editor of the women’s section of a daily newspaper, whose interest in biblical women began with a short series of portraits she published in the paper, created an encyclopedic work in 1955. Feminist biblical scholarship, especially Women in Scripture, has superseded Deen’s faith-based chronicle, but for its time, the book was a breakthrough.

The New Testament, a much shorter collection of books, also contains narratives about women, beginning with the four Gospels. Throughout the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which present theological reflections on the life, teachings, and death of Jesus of Nazareth, we catch sight of women interacting with him or serving as illustrations in the parables with which he instructs the crowds. Feminist biblical scholars have pointed out that women in the Gospels make up a large part of the story of Jesus and the early church. The Acts of the Apostles—an adventure story after the fashion of a Greek novel—continues the narrative begun in the Gospels and describes a number of early female converts to Christianity.
This book could not have been written if it had not been for the rise of the feminist movements—sometimes called women’s liberation—of the 1960s and 1970s. It took a new generation of women scholars to earn their doctorates in the 1960s and to begin to write and publish in the fields of Christian theology, ethics, and biblical studies beginning in the 1970s. The contribution of these founding foresisters to our current understanding of women in Christianity is inestimable. A brief glance at the catalogs from several university libraries in the metropolitan area in which I live gives an excellent example of the stark contrast between “before” and “after” feminist scholarship.

My home university has seventy-eight titles on the subject “women in Christianity.” Nine of them predate Mary Daly’s book *The Church and the Second Sex*, originally published in 1968. Of those, only a single work—*Women in the World of Religion*, published in 1967 by Elsie Thomas Culver—comes from the twentieth century. The remaining volumes are e-books reprinting essays from the seventeenth century. When we look at the consortium of area university libraries—which includes three public universities and one private Catholic university—we find a total of 148 titles, with only 37 books predating *The Church and the Second Sex*. A book from 1966 titled *Woman Is the Glory of Man* justified the “distinction in missions” between men and women, who are equal in dignity but have complementary domains of responsibility. *Christ and Womankind*, written thirty-one years earlier, made the argument that under Christ, women are exactly on the same level as that of man: “As moral personalities man and woman are not subordinated but co-ordinated.” By “co-ordinated,” the German theologian Peter Ketter meant that each gender has its own duties, and that the task of women is to serve in love. “It is in accordance with feminine nature and with the explicitly revealed will of God that woman should be the servant of humanity, but not the slave of the man,” he wrote. “She shall develop her individual personality in personal freedom while serving as companion and helpmate.”
A Feminist Approach

This book’s particular feminist account of Christianity considers previous ways the story of Christianity has been told and identifies patterns of domination within the religion. The most obvious example of this has been the use of the Bible and religious authority to justify patriarchal institutions and the oppression of women. Just as important as providing information about Christianity’s sexist past, however, is illuminating the ways women have developed a global and diverse religious movement. We might subtitle this volume “Triumph and Tragedy” or “Promise and Pathos” to indicate the dual vision that it contains. Nevertheless, the overarching purpose is to highlight women and their efforts to shape the beliefs and practices of Christianity over a period of two thousand years. It recovers forgotten and obscured moments in history so that a richer and fuller interpretation may be realized: an interpretation that includes women as well as men.

A better subtitle would be “Saints, Seers, and Scholars” to indicate the various responsibilities women have undertaken throughout Christian history. “Saints” refers to the missionaries and martyrs who have braved danger and death in order to witness to their faith. The category “Seers” includes prophets and mystics, those women throughout the centuries whose reputed openness to the divine has given them unique messages to communicate to the rest of us. Finally, “Scholars” refers to women whose intellectual pursuits seem noteworthy. They wrote, or dictated, their view of theology, current events, or church controversies. We find saints, seers, and scholars in every age.

The temptation immediately faced in such a project is replacing a theory of great men in Christianity with a theory of great women in Christianity. This is especially problematic given the fact that, until recently, most of the reports of great women in the past were written by men. These narratives generally served to promote a patriarchal agenda by limiting women to particular gender behaviors. A notable exception was Edith Deen’s *Great Women of the Christian Faith* (1959), which she wrote
to accompany *All of the Women of the Bible* (1955). Deen discussed women who were important in their own right, as well as those who were wives and mothers of famous men. By examining themes, movements, and events in their historical contexts, and by locating outstanding women within the broader developments that shape Christianity, an author may avoid the “great woman” pitfall. Weaving the story of two New Testament disciples—Martha and Mary—throughout the narrative also dodges this trap. They exemplify two different—and modest—ways women have been Christians through the centuries.

This book also combines history with historiography, which means providing a recitation of past events and, at the same time, examining how history is written. In addition, it uses contemporary sociological and anthropological methods that look at groups of people and their behaviors. Traditional historical and theological methods focused on individuals and ideas by reading texts of the past. These texts tell us a great deal, both explicitly by what they include, and implicitly by what they leave out. Sociology, anthropology, archaeology, and other disciplines look at additional types of evidence: physical items, human interactions, and cultural artifacts, such as music, paintings, and sculpture. This volume utilizes all of these tools, and more, because unearthing the story of women in Christianity requires diverse tactics. This process is similar to what is known as triangulation at sea: In order to determine the exact whereabouts of the ship, the captain must locate it at the intersection of three geographical points. In navigating our way through history, we need to adopt the same method, using multiple sources of data to arrive at a rough reconstruction of what happened and why.

As noted, texts do not tell the whole story of women in Christianity. Catholic and Orthodox Christians have the advantage of enjoying an extensive tradition of female saints. At baptism, if not before, Catholic girls are given a saint’s name. Until rather recently, both Catholic and Orthodox Christians grew up hearing about important women in church history: monastic leaders, martyrs, mystics, and missionaries. “What I
wanted most in the world was to be a saint,” writes the San Diego State University women’s studies professor emerita Oliva Espín:

The saints who stimulated my imagination most were women. The intricacies of these women’s lives have stayed with me: their courage as well as their weakness, their childishness as well as their maturity, their loves and fears, and above all, their focus on doing what they believed God wanted from them regardless of the opinions of others, including the male authorities of Church and family.  

Feast days mark the comings and goings of these famous women: Saint Monica, the mother of the famous Christian theologian Saint Augustine, whom she instructed in the fundamentals of Christianity (May 4); Saint Catherine of Alexandria, who was brutally tortured and martyred for her Christian beliefs (November 25); Saint Clare, who served the poor with Francis of Assisi (August 12); and hundreds of other interesting and important saints. This historical perspective enriches Catholic and Orthodox appreciation of the work women have done in the past.

In addition, Catholics, especially Catholic girls, benefit from the real-life models of nuns. While media portrayals are not always accurate or fair, they often present nuns and sisters as clear religious leaders: strong, spunky, and at times scary. Women religious also wear a uniform that sets them apart, at least until recently, and some orders of nuns continue to dress in a distinctive habit. Even Protestant girls can aspire to the strength they see in the sisterhood: from the world-weary, chain-smoking mother superior played by Anne Bancroft in Agnes of God, to the fallible, romantic, and beautiful Deborah Kerr in Black Narcissus, to the unworldly but socially active nuns in the Whoopi Goldberg hit movie Sister Act.

Protestant Christians, in contrast, have the advantage of ordaining women to the ministry. Many Protestants, though not all, can hear women preach, see women administer the sacraments, lead the liturgy,
and serve as pastors to their congregations. Some Protestant denominations, like their Catholic and Orthodox counterparts, deny women the rite of ordination, but those that do allow it enrich appreciation of women's ministerial service in the church today.

Organization of the Book

Chapter 1 examines the biblical figure of Eve and the impact that subsequent interpretations of her status and her sin have had on theology. Chapter 2 presents the historical context of the Jesus movement, and the countercultural attitude that Jesus adopted in his day by ministering to women and by including women disciples. It compares and contrasts Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Chapter 3 describes the ministries women had in the early church. These forms of service were gradually restricted and replaced by a theology of asceticism and martyrdom that narrowed the options women had for being faithful Christians.

In the Middle Ages, however, which chapter 4 covers, women saw expanded opportunities for leadership both as professed religious and as lay sisters. They labored as missionaries, teachers, copyists, nurses, and in other fields of endeavor, despite conflicts with church authorities regarding their work outside the cloister. Chapter 5 details the radical shifts that occurred during the Reformations of the sixteenth century, with the elevation of marriage as a valued vocation for females. Many of those who were not married were demonized and persecuted as witches, and executed by the thousands, if not millions. At the same time, some women took advantage of the new spirit of reform to evangelize in public and function as ministers in Protestant churches and as missionaries in Catholic churches.

This enlargement of women's visibility in the public sphere is seen in chapter 6, which focuses on the nineteenth century. Women founded Christian denominations, influenced Christian men in reform movements, and traveled the world as missionaries. Chapter 7 discusses the
effect of this enlargement upon global Christianity. It considers how women have challenged traditional theological constructs and how Christianity has changed as a result, especially in regard to the ordination of women.

Readers seeking a treatment of specific Christian dogmas concerning Christology, soteriology, theology, anthropology, eschatology (the theology of Endtimes or Last Things), sacramentology, and ecclesiology (doctrines about the nature of the church) will find these discussed throughout the volume. Each chapter addresses one of these areas, and sometimes more than one. At the same time, it is important to remember that this book concentrates on women in Christian traditions; thus doctrinal issues are treated primarily as they pertain to women in the church.

An examination of the way that women have determined the construction and practice of Christian traditions reveals that this major world religion owes an enormous debt to its female followers. From the earliest disciples to the latest theologians, from the missionaries to the martyrs, women have kept the faith alive. This book helps to show how they have done that.
Figure 1.1. Painting of Adam and Eve inside Abreha and Atsbeha Church, Ethiopia. Photo by Bernard Gagnon. Reproduced under Creative Commons License.