Spirit, Faith and Church

Spirit, Faith and Church: Women's Experiences in the English-Speaking World, 17th-21st Centuries

Edited by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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List of Abbreviations

AND	Archives départementales du Nord, Lille
AWD	Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home*. New York: J. B Ford & Co., 1869.
BCM	Baltimore Carmel, Maryland
LDS Church	Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints
WHE	Eliza Farnham, *Woman and Her Era*, 2 vols. New York: A. J. Davis & Co., 1864.

INTRODUCTION

SUSPICIOUS SAINTS: THE SPIRITUAL PARADOX OF THE DAUGHTERS OF EVE

LAURENCE LUX-STERRITT AND CLAIRE SORIN

The history of women and religion in the English-speaking world has been shaped by startling paradoxes which characterize both the conceptions of woman's nature and her position within religious institutions. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, women have been associated to the all-encompassing, yet antithetical archetypes of Eve and Mary. Moreover, although women have long constituted the bulk of Church membership, they have traditionally been –and still are, in some denominations– excluded from Church leadership. One might surmise that, despite evidence of vibrant female participation in the piety and pastoral life of Christian congregations, the archetypal representation of women as the daughters of Eve serves as a constant reminder of their sinful potential and, by the same token, partly explains their historical exclusion from the pulpit. Conversely, these remarks point to a major contradiction inherent to the subject of *men* and religion: if men constitute a minority of Church members, why do they represent an overwhelming majority of Church leaders? Several studies highlight this striking paradox: in 2006, the Australian National Church Life Survey revealed that men accounted for only 39% of all churchgoers.[1] In 2007, the Tearfund report on churchgoing trends in the United Kingdom noted that women accounted for 65% of churchgoers. It also remarked that although male attendance had been dropping sharply since the 1980s, men still occupied the great majority of positions of leadership in Catholic, Anglican, Methodist or Baptist churches.[2]

The complex effects of the dual biblical representation of woman's nature as well as the question of power and gender within religious institutions obviously deserve nuanced and contextualized analyses,

especially when they apply to a variety of geographical and historical backgrounds. Yet the field of gender studies which emerged in the wake of the second feminist wave undoubtedly provides a useful and unifying conceptual framework for understanding how women's history globally relates to religious history. The movement of historical revision which the feminists of the western world launched with renewed vigour in the 1960s and 1970s was initially meant as a reaction against women's absence from male-written history. It was an attempt to give a name and a face to the anonymous protagonists of history. Back in 1975, Gerda Lerner noted that the invisibility of women not only had to be remedied through "compensation" and "contribution" narratives but that it should, above all, lead to a global rewriting of traditional history using new conceptual tools. One stage of this rewriting process includes the addition of new categories (such as sexuality, role indoctrination, sexual values and myths, female consciousness) analysed through the prisms of "race, class, ethnicity, and possibly, religion […]".[3] Lerner's somewhat tentative inclusion of religion seems odd, given her awareness of the tremendous impact of religion in shaping women's history and consciousness and, we must add, in shaping religious history as well. As American scholar Ann Braude points out:

> […] we cannot expect to understand the history of religion in America until we know at least as much about the women who have formed the majority of participants as we do about the male minority who have stood in the pulpit.[4]

Braude's emphasis on religious women as a majority echoes Lerner's claim that women constituted the majority of humankind and that "history, as written and perceived up to now, is the history of a minority, who may well turn out to be the 'sub-group'".[5] In her groundbreaking 1997 essay entitled "Women's History IS American Religious History", Braude actually proposed to shift the focus and re-examine three major concepts which scholars have traditionally used to characterize American religious history. The decline of religion in the colonial period, its feminization in the Victorian era and secularization in the 20th century, Braude argues, are but the fictional narratives of the minority which "incorporate assumptions about women's powerlessness or invisibility derived from the value system of American Protestantism".[6] In fact, the gender lens reveals that

> [t]he cultural transitions referred to as declension, feminization and secularization might be seen as positive developments in American Protestantism: the colonial period saw an increase in the spiritual status and role of women; the nineteenth century saw a vast increase in the

> activities and influence of the female laity; and the twentieth century […] has witnessed the rise of female clergy and a reorientation of liturgy and theology based on women's experience.[7]

Since the 1970s, an amazing amount of research has documented this "majority of participants" Braude considers to be the main characters of religious history. Female religious leaders, women's religious activism and spiritual experiences have been the objects of many studies which have made "women and religion" a visible category in colleges and universities. Yet, as Catherine Brekus remarks, "women's history has not yet gained full acceptance within the fields of either religion or history" and a pattern of exclusion globally continues to characterize women's religious history, both in academic and textbook publications on religion.[8] According to Brekus, this exclusion is first due to the persistence of androcentric prejudices which inform the minds of historians of both sexes and present man as the universal subject, relegating woman to the status of the "other".[9] The difficulty in decentring maleness is paralleled by a reluctance to shift the focus and purpose of religious history. Women's historians have raised issues that encompass the traditional questions of the relationship between religion, national culture and democracy, but they have asked other types of questions which challenge the neutrality of knowledge and the hierarchical classification of points of view. Inspired by and contributing to the "social history" which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and the "cultural history" of the 1980s, they contested an elitist version of history and focused on the voices of ordinary people. This attempt at recovering women's individual and collective experiences has fragmented and complexified the traditional grand narrative but it has failed, ultimately, to provide a coherent explanation of structural transformations. For Brekus, this failure to propose a coherent whole also explains why women's history has not been yet integrated into mainstream religious history.[10]

Conversely, the integration of religion into women's history has been somewhat problematical. Women's history has mainly been written by feminists who viewed religion as an oppressive and conservative force. This negative reading of religion as a force of ideological and institutional constraint owes much to feminism's own debt to the Enlightenment; as reason became the guiding precept of intellectual thought, the spiritual was devalued as irrational, and dogma or religion became associated with "false consciousness", or socially-imposed and artificial values.[11] In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft's ground-breaking and seminal *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* emerged from the Enlightenment debate on the concepts of freedom and equality. Wollstonecraft focused upon female physical,

intellectual and temperamental attributes but did not touch upon their spiritual aptitudes. As she turned her attention increasingly to issues relating to the body, her 1798 *Maria, or the Wrong of Woman* heralded centuries of feminist struggle towards the acceptance of women's sexuality. In such a context, issues of religion and particularly the power of religious institutions seemed antithetical with the fight for women's sexual and political equality. Thus, when the two pioneers of the women's rights movement in the United States, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, wrote a history of feminism (*The History of Woman Suffrage*, 1881–86), their anticlerical stance unsurprisingly failed to present the Church as a space where efficient feminist struggles took place.[12]

This bias was reproduced by the subsequent generations of historians of feminism who tended to disregard the roles that prominent religious women like Frances Willard or Helen Barrett Montgomery played in the movement.[13] Australian feminist Germaine Greer typically left out issues of faith and religion from her infamous 1970 *Female Eunuch*.[14] Although more attention was paid to religion in the early phase of the second wave after the mid-1980s, many women's historians have neglected religious issues, probably because the conservative backlash of the period increasingly associated religious values to antifeminist ones. Yet it seems that over the last decade, inspired by the research on African American women and religion, more scholars have begun seriously to consider questions of religion.[15] It is to be hoped that this trend will continue for, just as the neglect of women's presence and agency blurs the understanding of religious history, the failure to include religion obviously impoverishes the complex reality of women's history. Only a sustained and mutual integration of those topics will contribute to the writing of the "truly universal history" which Gerda Lerner evoked 36 years ago.[16]

The following essays are an attempt to shed further light on the field of women's religious history which, in spite of the abundant research that has developed over the last four decades, still needs exploration, especially in a transnational perspective. Inspired by gender and religious studies, they address the broad question of how women from the English-speaking world have related to spirit, faith and Church since the 17th century. The case studies concern mainly white, English-speaking middle-class women brought up in the Christian tradition, a group which has often been pointed out as having received extensive coverage, compared to other racial, social and religious categories. In the same way feminist historians have become aware of the overrepresentation of white middle-class Protestant women, religious scholars of the English-speaking world have acknowledged the need to explore women's religious diversity beyond the white Protestant

mainstream. While we share this concern, our broad geographical and chronological scope required a set of common questions around which to centre the discussion. The essays therefore relate to women and Christianity, leaving aside otherwise fascinating religious traditions such as Judaism, Islam, Buddhism or pre-Columbian religions. Our case studies offer insight into women's embodied experiences of their faith in North America, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, from the 17th century to nowadays.

The chapters do reflect religious and spiritual plurality within the Christian tradition. Out of nine essays, four specifically focus on Protestant women while two deal with Catholic nuns in different geographical and historical contexts and another with Mormon women in the United States. Finally, two chapters escape the boundaries of denominational religion and concentrate on the larger field of spirituality. Thus, Hélène Palma's work examines freemason spirituality and Beth Robertson's is about spiritualism. Each chapter has tried to recover women's stories and voices in order to confront them with the religious or spiritual ideology in which they emerged. Ideology, as Nancy Theriot reminds us, is not simply a set of discourses and practices imposed on passive subjects:

> […] ideology (sexual or otherwise) is not the creation of a ruling class or ruling sex, but is a collective creation of individual human beings acting on the material conditions of their lives in an attempt to make their experience meaningful. This does not mean that all groups have equal input into one ideology but that there are competing ideologies with the hegemonic group influencing but not determining the beliefs and world views of the various 'out' groups by exerting power over the material conditions of these groups' existence […] This view of sexual ideology allows us to see women as neither victims nor all-powerful actors, but as people constantly responding to and interpreting their life situations within unchosen constraints.[17]

To a large extent, this book explores religious women's responses and interpretations of their spirituality in a set of "unchosen constraints". The case studies were oriented by three interrelated issues: the first was to explore how women have internalized, contested or negotiated their places and their identities in a wide array of religious contexts sharing a patriarchal background, and how their presence and agency have contributed to shaping this background. The second was to get a more precise understanding of how women perceived and described the nature of their religious roles and spiritual journeys. How did gender influence their relation to, and their conception of, the divine? Thirdly, most authors

explore the complex and central issue of the female body in relation to women's spirituality and to their membership of religious institutions.

Gendered Spiritualities: A Female Bond to the Divine?

Historical sources such as diaries, letters, autobiographies and memoirs allowed Michèle Lardy and Rachel Cope to delve into the language used by 17th-century English Protestant ladies and 19th-century American evangelical women. Lardy's study confirms that the parameters of female piety in England were remarkably consistent with those in colonial New England. Going to church, attending and commenting upon the sermons, praying, reading, writing and catechizing the children and servants were activities that the institution and the community expected from virtuous wives and mothers. Most women accepted their subordinate status within the Church and submitted to the authority of their husbands and ministers. This may have been because they did not question the inferior status accorded woman in the Scripture and because their lower position did not reflect in the spiritual sphere. Indeed, the Reformation defended the idea that all believers should have a direct access to the Bible and most Protestant and Puritan churchmen recognized and even valued women's potential for godliness.[18] Also, as Michèle Lardy shows, religion was a source of comfort but also of empowerment for women: while traditionally recognized as legitimate as teachers in the domestic sphere, women also found in the emerging Protestant ethics a new entitlement to express their views on political issues which were closely dependent on religious ones. Thus, the English Civil Wars (1642–51) and the period of the Interregnum (1649–60) provided women with new opportunities for religious and public fulfilment.[19]

This empowerment could embolden some women into voicing their opinions in more or less radical ways. The lives of dissenters like Anne Askew, Anne Hutchinson or Mary Dyer tell stories of open defiance resulting in death and banishment but, on a daily basis and in less dramatic ways, other women also made their voices heard through their writings.[20] The stories of many such women, spurred on by their own models of spirituality, remain to be discovered and studied. Marylin Westerkamp suggests that New England Puritan women's participation in the life of their congregations has not yet been fully assessed and that shifting the focus on the "hidden ones", as Cotton Mather called the female congregants, significantly deepens the understanding of Puritan culture. She also points out that giving female authors like Anne Bradstreet (1612–

72) the central place they deserve would reveal that women had a distinctive way of expressing their spiritual journeys:

> What Bradstreet provides for the historian is her incorporation of family life into her theology along with the spiritual significance of the hardships, irritations and small blessings of daily life. The point is not that only women had homes and families, but that men, who shared those experiences, generally did not reconstruct their own spiritual journeys in such terms. Diarists such as Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewall […] wrote about their children; John Winthrop enjoyed intimately spiritual correspondence with his wife, Margaret; yet men's personal spiritual sagas seemed apart from such details.[21]

Michèle Lardy intimated that, already in the 17th century, English ladies' diaries testified to a relationship with the divine which was intrinsically female and intensely personal.

The same appropriation of an intimate and personal relationship with the divine and with one's own practice of spirituality emerges from Laurence Lux-Sterritt's analysis of early modern English nuns. In their devotional writings, women religious showed how their lives revolved around the search for divine union, and they described their languorous longing for the loving embrace of their bridegroom. Yet as in the case of Lardy's Protestant laywomen, the spiritual quest of these Catholic nuns was both helped and hindered by contemporaneous views of females as weaker, less complete beings. On the one hand, their perceived imperfection justified the imposition of the strictest clerical guidelines upon nuns; but on the other hand, their debility was believed to make them closer to God, without whose grace such weak creatures could not function. Thus, the spiritual journey of English nuns was defined by the very fact that they were women.

Likewise, Rachel Cope's study of 19th-century American women's spiritual journals during the Second Great Awakening reveals that their versions of conversion are different from those spread by male preachers. While ministers like Charles Grandison Finney often used fire metaphors and described conversion as a sudden, dramatic event, female participants relied on water and seed imagery and considered spiritual rebirth as a long process that did not begin or end with revival attendance. Once again, the androcentric focus has largely oriented the understanding of this period of religious history but if the female component of that history had fully been taken into account, phrases like "burned over" district, which refers to early 19th-century New York and echoes Finney's fire imagery, may not have been so popular among scholars since the mid 20th century. In a way,

Finney and the male preachers perpetuated what their Puritan forefathers had done with the conversion experiences of women: "by forcing the narrative into a mold, pastors and elders transmuted what may have been diverse human-divine encounters into homogeneous, well-trodden tales of terror and redemption."[22] Cope's insight into different narratives of spiritual experiences confirms Barbara Epstein's comparison of male and female conversions which underlines that men were involved in a less personal and less emotional relationship to God.[23] Cope's analysis of women's diaries also highlights the importance of religious memories in the construction of their spiritual journeys and notes that many believers referred to childhood recollections. The prominent role played by mothers in transmitting religious instruction and culture questions the extent to which a transgenerational script of female piety may have developed, shaped by a blend of gender constraints and opportunities, as well as by individual responses to religion.

The new circumstances of the emerging industrial society contributed to reinforcing the male/female diverging perceptions and expressions of spirituality, with the further idealization of domesticity in the 19th century. While the growing body of middle-class women was identified with the domestic sphere, men were busy building a competitive and materialistic society which, according to ministers and reformers, needed much moral and spiritual guidance. On both sides of the Atlantic, women, from the idealized sanctuary of the home, were believed fit to exercise a redemptive influence over men and the nation, a mission which many housewives took to heart and which contributed to a process of feminization of religion and culture.[24] It is central to notice that women's increased religious participation and moral influence significantly questioned the male potential for spiritual virtues as they established a sort of natural, inherent female piety. Claire Sorin analyses two discourses on womanhood and domesticity in Victorian America which not only extolled this natural piety but sought, each in its own specific way, to rationalize it by resorting to the language and rhetoric of science. Through her advocacy of "domestic science" and her relentless crusade for women's health, Catharine E. Beecher meant to turn the Christian home and the body of its "chief minister" into inspiring models of Christianity. Her scientific systematization of housekeeping made mothers heaven-appointed professionals in charge of the minds and bodies of the nation's citizens. From a different standpoint, Eliza Farnham used the scientific knowledge available at the time to bring what she believed to be a rational demonstration of woman's divine nature. While their idealization of domesticity made them critical of the emerging feminist movement, both

reformers imported into the domestic realm the prestige and efficiency of science to provide utopian visions of virtuous democracies where male values were despised and men's roles secondary.

Empowered by Powerlessness? Female Body and Female Spirit

Still, while Victorian middle-class culture glorified the figure of the "angel in the house" and celebrated its almost supernatural piety, women were persistently portrayed as physically and intellectually inferior to men. The 19th century added science to prejudice as the new fields of phrenology, craniology and gynaecology "proved" women's natural subordinate status. In fact, the religious dominance of women, despite enlarging their sphere of influence, not only failed to bring an egalitarian vision of the sexes; it partly justified the opposite for woman's force, ultimately, lay in her power to pray and submit. This paradoxical status was already illustrated during the 18th-century Enlightenment which theoretically insisted on the same essential nature of men and women and practically perpetuated a patriarchal bias. In 18th-century American colonies, the revolutionary rhetoric inspired by the Enlightenment and expressed in the Declaration of Independence excluded women –along with poor and coloured people– from the egalitarian ideal of the young republic; and despite the concept of republican motherhood which entrusted females with the mission of bearing and rearing virtuous citizens, women remained excluded from the political sphere.

The inequality of men and women pervaded religious institutions as well as political ones. As Hélène Palma points out in her survey of women and freemasonry, the egalitarian ideal inspired by the Enlightenment was, in practice, hardly applied. This was due to the Christian and patriarchal roots of freemasonic spirituality and to the persistence of sexist prejudices which stressed women's intellectual weakness. It appears that even enlightened minds continued to believe with St Augustine that, if man was made in God's image, woman emphatically was not.[25] She was, in the terms of St Thomas Aquinas, a "misbegotten male". As a result, most lodges excluded women whom they associated with bondsmen and poor people. However, Palma, whose chapter focuses on the mixed lodges in The Hague and in France, adopts an optimistic stance, arguing that the exceptional cases of admission did support, rather than contradict, a commitment to the Enlightenment ideals.

This contradictory status, marked by power and powerlessness, endured in the 19th century and found one of its most intriguing expressions in the

spiritualist medium. Spiritualism, which emerged in the United States in the late 1840s as a new unconventional religion,[26] rapidly spread in Canada, Europe and Australia where thousands of men and women enthusiastically embraced its tenet that the living could communicate with the dead. In the 21st century, the general assumption is that the supernatural sphere tends to be disproved by science, or at least that the two spheres are unrelated. On the contrary, 19th-century spiritualism tried to conflate both realms, proving the very existence of supernatural phenomena through scientific means. Spiritualist séances meant to prove empirically that spirits did exist, that there was a tangible form of spiritual activity in the world beyond. Laurence Moore's analysis of the place of women in American séances has since been consolidated by Alex Owen's study of English spiritualism. In accordance with Moore's findings, Owen remarks that, "[English] Victorian spiritualists held that women were particularly gifted as the mediums of this communication".[27] In fact, women were considered fit for mediumship because of their supposedly more spiritual and more passive nature, which was believed to facilitate the spirit's possession of the female body. Victorian assumptions about the weaker nature of females paradoxically empowered some women to become privileged "empty vessels"; in this way, Victorian spiritualism replicated the medieval mind frame which assumed that women's inner hollowness allowed them to be filled entirely by the divine spirit. Female mystics were able to gain direct conversation with God: they heard him, spoke with him, bonded with him in perfect mystical union. Such direct access to the divine was paradoxically denied men, whose mental strength and rationality rendered them less receptive to such spiritual influences. In the same way as medieval and early modern mystics were the *loci* of divine manifestations, 19th-century women also became bridges between the earthly and heavenly worlds in the confined space of the séance room.

On both sides of the Atlantic, spiritualism developed in parallel with the women's rights movement and was particularly supportive of the feminist cause. Spiritualism endowed women with a special leadership and contained a potential for subversion which enabled many to test and contest the rigid 19th-century class and gender norms, despite accepting one of those norms –female passivity– paradoxically to legitimize the female medium's power. Beth Robertson's essay provides an insightful analysis of the complex identities of the woman medium as active agent and passive subject in the context of the séances organized by Dr T. G. Hamilton, a Canadian scientist who tried to photograph the spirits of the dead in the early 20th century. Robertson's description of those séances, which no longer occurred in a darkened room but in a male-managed

laboratory, clearly presents the female bodies of the mediums as objects probed, manipulated and controlled by the doctor as well as by the male and female spirits. Still, she shows that those bodies were also subjects whose blurred identities and gender contained a potential of aggressive, erotic and subversive power.

Troublesome Sex: Women in Religious Institutions

The ambiguous status of the female body as well as its ambivalent ties with spirituality are given a particular focus in the last three chapters of the book which analyze contemporary cases of women struggling against male-defined church institutions. These essays demonstrate the astonishing endurance of patriarchal forces which, in some religious denominations, obstruct women's access to leadership, impose gender-based norms and restrict the worshipping of female divine figures. History is peppered with cases of extraordinary women who, despite being spiritually enabled, yet remained constrained by religious institutions. The history of Catholicism is rife with examples of women, religious or lay, whose active and vocal involvement in the Catholic life of their times put them on a collision path with Church authorities which deemed their endeavours unacceptable. Such women were condemned (and sometimes branded heretics or burned at the stake) despite their professing absolute devotion to a Church whose tenets they only intended to further in their own ways. For instance, during the wave of medieval mysticism which swept 14th-century Europe, *The Mirror of Simple Annihilated Souls* aimed to provide spiritual steps towards perfection; yet in writing it, Marguerite Porete was deemed to have violated the preserve of male preaching. She was burned at the stake in Paris in 1310. Three centuries later, at the height of the Catholic Reformation, when the Church launched a mission to re-Catholicize areas lost to Protestantism, Mary Ward founded a female congregation modelled on the Society of Jesus, to take part in the English mission. Her initiative was perceived by the Church as a violation of its strict definition of gendered roles: Mary Ward was condemned as a heretic in 1631.[28] The history of Protestantism also shows that a gender bias emphasized women's deviant potential as testify Anne Hutchinson's banishment from Massachusetts Bay and the Salem witchcraft trials that took place in 17th-century Puritan New England.

Generally-speaking, such women provoked the anger of religious institutions not because of what they *did*, but because of what they *were*: women, daring to impinge upon male spiritual preserves. Based on interviews and testimonies gathered through personal interviews and

internet blogs, the last three essays of this volume highlight the voices of women who test Church authority. Eglantine Jamet-Moreau shows that the ancestral belief in the female body's impurity and defiling power still plays a role in the non ordination or reluctant acceptation of women priests in the Anglican Church. The new vision of inner piety and maternal tenderness that emerged in the early 18th century did not completely erase the deeply-rooted fear of female bodily corruption. This fear was initially expressed through the public punishments of women of colour and lower social classes[29] and at the dawn of the 21st century, it is still perceptible in the rejection of female uncleanness.

Since the 1980s, the Anglican Church has suffered great internal turmoil around the issue of the ordination of women; the subject had first been discussed by the Lambeth conference in 1948, but remained contained for many years. The year 1975 saw some significant advances when the General Synod proposed a ground-breaking motion: "that this Synod considers that there are no fundamental objections to the ordination of women to the priesthood". The vote was tight, with interesting variations between the three Houses. Whereas the House of Laity returned 117 Ayes for 74 Noes, the House of Clergy returned 110 Ayes for 96 Noes, and the House of Bishops 28 Ayes for 10 Noes.[30] It appears that, at this time, the laity felt readier than clerics to accept women priests. This is confirmed by the votes returned on the second motion: "that this Synod, in view of the significant division of opinion reflected in the diocesan voting, considers that it would not be right at present to remove the legal and other barriers to the ordination of women". When faced with the decision to postpone ordination, the House of Laity returned 80 Ayes for 96 Noes, voicing its desire to move forward immediately. The House of Clergy, on the other hand, expressed its relief and returned 127 Ayes for 74 Noes. The House of Bishops returned 19 Ayes for 14 Noes.[31] Between 1988 and 1998, the numbers of bishops attending the Lambeth conference grew from 518 to 800 over a period of ten years. As the ecclesiastical ranks of the Anglican Church became increasingly concerned with the issue of female ordination, so did their lay communities, and the subject was far from consensual.[32]

The very unity of the Church of England has been severely tested, and many amongst both laity and clergy defected over this issue. Eglantine Jamet-Moreau's study shows that the everyday experience of female ministers of the Church is not one of peaceful endorsement. Churchgoers often voice their outright opposition to female ministry, and amongst those who do not, there sometimes remains a latent discomfort with the fact that the sacred functions of the ministry should be incarnated in female bodies.

Modern mentalities appear to echo St Jerome's position on female sexuality; as Jamet-Moreau's interviews evoke parishioners' reactions to the real or imagined figure of a pregnant or menstruating minister, they testify that a woman's reproductive power, linked to her sexuality, represent the main obstacle to her performance of the sacred rites of the Anglican tradition.

The Roman Catholic Church, by comparison, is even more wary of the female within its ranks. When the Anglican Church was in the process of discussing the delicate issue of the ordination of women, the Catholic Church voiced its disagreement in plain terms. Pope Paul VI wrote to Archbishop Coggan in November 1975, arguing that "the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church".[33] Of course, tradition weighs heavily upon such considerations: to justify its stance, the Church presents it as a decision to honour Christ's own intentions when he chose only men for his apostles. Yet the continued exclusion of women from the priesthood goes beyond this avowed desire to honour tradition; its roots run deep within the collective psyche which, since the Middle Ages, has associated womanhood with change, fluctuation, irrationality, uncleanness and sin. For Jerome, only the virgins who dedicated themselves entirely to Christ were freed from their natural blemish, and became honorary men:

> As long as a woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman, and will be called a man.[34]

The cult of Mary paradoxically justifies an incompatible relation between priesthood and motherhood. Indeed, Mary stands "alone of all her sex", an incarnation both of physical purity and spiritual perfection never to be achieved by other women.[35] Even the most theoretically pure and spiritually fecund women who wish to become part of the fabric of the Church remain subject to limitations: although nuns enjoy recognition as Christ's spiritual spouses, they can never hope to become the ordained dispensers of his blood and body. Moreover, clerical expectations of the ideal nun set stringently high standards for those who take the veil, demanding that women religious should cease to be embodied women to become pure beings, untouched by sin and entirely devoted to lives of chastity, poverty, charity and obedience.

In her study of Australian and New-Zealander nuns, Megan Brock, herself a sister, reveals a surprisingly intense dissonance between nuns' self perceptions and Church expectations. While official discourses define the nun as a woman apart, whose power resides in her chastity, docility,

devotion and freedom from emotional ties, real sisters see themselves as ordinary, relational and even sexual persons who need human experiences to nurture their maturation process. This gap generates in many nuns a conflicting state of emotions and a sense of uneasiness which appears to be cross-confessional. Indeed, Sonya Sharma highlights similar feelings when discussing young Canadian women who are lay members of various Protestants denominations. In her sample study, she notices that the rapport between women's bodies and their faith is especially complex, particularly when confronted to the male-defined norm of what women are supposed to feel or how they should behave in order to be "good" Christians. Sharma asks the thorny question: "What happens when a young woman's identities as Christian and as an embodied sexual woman collide?"[36]

This echoes the difficulties expressed not only by Megan Brock's Catholic nuns in Australia and New Zealand, but also those encountered by Margaret Toscano's Mormon women, thereby testifying to the universality of the internalized conflict between womanhood and Church rules. Whilst women underpin the very institutions of most religious groups, their assimilation of male-defined institutional norms often is the source of painful feelings of alienation from their very gendered beings. Emotions, such as shame or guilt, may even cause women to leave such Churches in order to find solace in alternative avenues of spirituality which they can more easily reconcile with their sexuality. As Sharma puts it: "a conflict between Christian and sexual identities contributes to women leaving the church and moving towards other forms of spiritual practice […]".[37]

Yet it is not only their sexuality in the narrow sense which is problematic for female believers. It seems that in 21st-century Christianity, women often continue to be stigmatized as Tertullian's "devil's gateway", the embodiment of rebelliousness, of un-Godliness, and of spiritual death. Simply by *being* women, they are instantly put in an untenable position when they belong to Churches whose spiritualities are defined in male terms, and for which concepts associated with the feminine are so dangerous. Although Mormon theology initially conceived God as an embodied male and female, in 1991, the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, desirous of gaining respectability as a mainstream Christian religion, established a ban on praying the Heavenly Mother; this ban has triggered an intense debate, especially among the Mormon feminists, with whom Margaret Toscano identifies. Her academic research about the Mother God eventually led to her excommunication in 2000, a decree that has concerned some of her counterparts since the early 1990s. The chapter proposes an

analysis of the visionary experiences of the Heavenly Mother (not necessarily reported by feminists) which present the Divine Female as a helpful figure sometimes appearing spontaneously in times of painful crisis. For Toscano, these visions are "a crucial site for understanding the way these women attempt to develop a personal and empowered spirituality while negotiating a place for themselves within the highly patriarchal structure of the LDS Church".

Quite obviously, they also raise the question of the gendering of the divine and the relations between female embodiment and female deity, questions of particular resonance in Mormon theology. Toscano's fight for the rehabilitation of the Heavenly Mother echoes some feminist theologians' recovery of the Divine Feminine and confirms that feminism and religion are not necessarily antithetical and that, indeed, they have always been tightly linked.

Paralleling the secular and anti-clerical stance of some women's rights activists, a rich and complex network of interactions has led feminism and religion to cooperate and evolve, leading many religious men and women to support women's fight for equality and feminists to redefine women's positions within the church, as well as woman's place in theology.[38] While many feminists managed to reconcile their convictions and their traditional faith, others turned to alternative religions or spiritual movements more congenial to women such as spiritualism, Shakerism, Christian Science, theosophy or New Thought. In the 20th century, the atmosphere of the women's liberation movement favoured the rebirth of pagan witchcraft and the religion of the Goddess. Spurred on in the late 1970s by the influential works of theologians like Mary Daly and Carol Christ, or self-taught thinkers like Z Budapest, a feminist spirituality movement was born in the United States and it quickly spread in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, becoming one "among the few living religions worldwide created and led by women".[39] In Goddess theology, the original sin is rejected, the female body with its menstrual cycles is glorified, and the whole patriarchal script is nullified. The popularity of the movement of the Goddess testifies to women's need for a divinity in their own image, a need that the Mormon women interviewed by Toscano also experience.

Ultimately, the book traces the various forms of female spirituality in the liminal spaces of diaries, spiritual journals, Masonic lodges, séance rooms, private interviews and internet forums. Such inquiries, beyond the institutional sphere, are necessary to get a deeper understanding of (women's) religious history and Janet Moore Lindman's remark on Protestant spirituality in early America could indeed apply to a variety of cultural backgrounds and religious denominations:

> Looking beyond the meetinghouse expands our understanding of American religious history to more than just an institutional or theological enterprise. Consideration of women's religious experience provides a wide-angle view to include myriad spiritual expressions and enactments –embodied spirituality, religious narrative, lay activism, and gender identity– as primary components of American religious history.[40]

While many of the voices studied here do not radically challenge or alter the institution, they do belong to those "primary components" of history which add to the ever-changing mosaic of the gender and religious landscape. Besides, read together, the chapters offer a web of stories which gives an extraordinarily complex vision of the female body and spirit in their relation to the Church and the divine. It is not only that religious authorities have stressed purity or impurity, strength or weakness, innocence or sin differently over the years; what is striking, in the last resort, is to notice that the female body has never escaped a Manichean representation which in fact hides a third figure. The ambivalent and contradictory images that one finds in the male-shaped discourses on womanhood and in women's self perceptions, show that the scriptural models of Eve and Mary have merged into an invisible archetype of female religiosity that cannot be defined by an "or" but an "and" logic: woman, ultimately, has always been perceived as sin *and* innocence, force *and* weakness, purity *and* pollution, threat *and* redemption. Since the 17th century, one has witnessed a distinct de-emphasis of woman's potential for corruption. Yet, this potential is far from having disappeared: this is particularly perceptible in the conflicting responses to motherhood which, with its capacity to inscribe and erase original sin, continues both to elevate and downgrade Christian women. This is also visible in the emphasis on chastity and the rejection of the divine female that some denominations operate. To a certain extent, most women brought up in the biblical tradition have been the daughters of this third pervasive figure blending vice and virtue and arousing suspicion and admiration. Double, dual and possibly divisive –like the fallen angel– women have also a distinct aptitude for spirituality and leadership. The enduring sense of guilt and particular feelings of empowerment that many females, within and without the church, experience in their spiritual journeys may be related, in part, to the irreconcilable yet indissociable forces which linger on as the legacy of Eve and Mary. While some have tried to write an alternative script obliterating guilt entirely, the task of scholars in religious and women's studies remains to bring to the surface the many tales and faces of the hidden ones.

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