

HER SHARE OF THE BLESSINGS

Ross Shepard Kraemer. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

EUNUCHS FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Uta Ranke-Heinemann. New York: Doubleday 1990.

ADAM, EVE, AND THE SERPENT

Elaine Pagels. New York: Random House, 1988.

A HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE WEST, VOLUME I. FROM ANCIENT GODDESSES TO CHRISTIAN SAINTS

Series eds. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot. Volume ed. Pauline Schmitt Pantel. Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard University Press 1992.

HYPATIA OF ALEXANDRIA

Maria Dzielska. Trans. F. Lyra. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

by Samuel Wagar

Levi said to Peter, "Peter, you have a constant inclination to anger and you are always ready to give way to it. And even now you are doing exactly that by questioning the woman as if you're her adversary. If the Saviour considered her to be worthy, who are you to disregard her? For he knew her completely and loved her devotedly."

—*Gospel of Mary 10:7–10 (The Complete Gospels, Annotated Scholar's Version 1992—Polebridge Press)*

Although great changes have come in Euro-American culture over the past hundred years and it is no longer completely correct to speak of it as a Christian culture, the roots of the culture lie in Christianity and a number of the dominant cultural facts stem from the Christian religion.

It is also true that the strongest organized resistance to the changes in the culture, in particular as regards the roles and possibilities of women and men, is presently coming from conservative Christian groups. In this the fundamentalists are acting in the great tradition of their religious forbears.

These debates, about the sacredness or profane "nature" of women, about sexual expression and repression, about the role of the family, about leadership and hierarchy as they impact on male dominance, have come up before. In fact they came up very early in the development of our culture—at the time of the organization of the orthodox Christian religion out of the swirl of religious and philosophical discussion, Mystery religions and Jewish heretical movements in the later part of the Roman Empire.

With the adoption of Christianity by Emperor Constantine in 325 CE (Common Era, same as AD) and the subsequent repression of the non-Christian religions and unorthodox variations on Christianity, the question of an equal role for women in church and culture was substantially settled.

Women lost a chance at equality that time, but the loss was not foreordained. Debate and argument and a rearguard action which continued inside Christianity for hundreds of years until finally crushed in the First Crusade and the Witchburnings—these are also part of the suppressed history of the origins of our culture. I should declare my own bias here—I'm not a Christian. I'm a Witch and a priest of the Great Mother and Her Consort. I'm also a product of a Christian-based society, more influenced by that than I am likely aware.

A number of recent books deal

with the transition to Christian domination of the Roman Empire. Although I have no interest in resurrecting the society of Greece or Rome as it was 2000 years ago, I'm finding that period very interesting. As we end this age and enter into the next one there seems to be a religious re-evaluation going on in the English-speaking world that reminds me very much of that time.

In *Her Share of the Blessings*, Kraemer deals with women in various Pagan religious movements: in Judaism of both the rabbinic tradition (which was developing alongside Christianity inside Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE) and in reality; and in the Christian movements both orthodox and heretical (and in some cases the heresies seemed to have just consisted of the stronger roles accorded women) in the Greco-Roman world of the first two centuries of the common era.

Some of the book's more interesting points are:

1) Though the Greeks had strong Goddesses they treated women very badly, with purdah the ideal, whereas the Christians with their All-Father monotheism treated women who renounced sex not badly.

2) Women had recognized priestly roles in early Christianity—both orthodox and heretical—but it was strongly argued against and eventually written out of the Bible and the church policies. Jewish communities in practice had strong women leaders but the rabbinic tradition developed and gradually erased their history and contribution. Women were also priestesses in Pagan religions but nobody was at all concerned about it.

3) There were ambiguous links between the emancipation of women and the new sexual code that the Christians introduced—the strong valuing of virginity, the disallowing of remarriage by widows, and the rest of it, freed women to some extent from direct male control.

Kraemer's discussion of the likely authorship of various texts in the Bible is quite interesting as well. In particular I'd cite the thorough con-

sideration of 1 Timothy and the variety of anti-woman messages therein, as well as the exciting discussion of internal contradictions in 1 Corinthians. The marks of the power struggle between those who wished to suppress women in leadership positions and those who were able to support some leadership from women Christians are clear in the texts.

There are a few problems with Kraemer's fine book: its theoretical framework is too obvious; there are areas where fuller ritual and liturgic examples are called for (the lack of texts is a real problem, I know); and the conclusions about women's religions today tend to be weak and tentative (with the current very strong wave of feminist reinterpretation sweeping through even relatively conservative areas of Christianity and Judaism, not to mention Wicca and the purely female Goddess-centred explorations, that need for analysis cries out).

Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven is a first-rate piece of scholarship, exhaustively (and exhaustingly) thorough. Ranke-Heinemann documents the development of each of the anti-women and anti-sexuality attitudes of Christianity in general and the Roman Catholic Church in particular, from the original texts in the Bible through various misogynistic "fathers of the Church" to the present.

She argues from a committed Christian perspective and adheres very strongly for supporting arguments to the texts in the orthodox canon of the Bible. So her arguments against celibacy and forced virginity, the Virgin Birth, the all-male priesthood, and the current positions of the Catholic Church against abortion and birth control are extremely potent in Christian terms, though less so for those who don't accept the sacredness of the Bible.

The history of the development of these oppressive notions and positions as she presents it is fascinating and rather depressing. It is no wonder that Ranke-Heinemann was fired from her job as a theology professor at a German Catholic university!

Adam, Eve, and the Serpent is a very interesting study of the evolution of Christian ideas of the Eve story. It originally was seen as a story about free will and ethical autonomy and it was not until Augustine's notion of "Original Sin" came along in c. 400 that the still-current view of it as reflecting the utterly contaminated nature of the world and the introduction of death and sex through sin was loosed on the world.

Pagels gives us the main theological players and some of the controversies around sex and marriage that played through the turbulent first couple of centuries of Christianity.

Her argument that the anti-sexual and anti-family bias of Christianity is the original stance and practice of Paul and the first-century Patriarchs is very interesting. The most radical rejection of the norms of the day—rejection of marriage and of sexuality, rejection of private property—are all Pauline positions.

It was only when Christianity began to recruit wealthy and influential people and later when it became the official religion of the Empire that an accommodation with the powers that be was needed, and the deutero-Pauline Epistles were composed that suppressed women and excused marriage (both in tune with Pagan practice). The same impulse of accommodation prompted acceptance of Augustine's reinterpretation of the basic stories to de-emphasize freedom and choice and re-incorporate the fatalistic and pessimistic tone of Greek Paganism.

Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979) was also an essential work surveying some of the alternative Christian movement texts circulating in the first couple of centuries after Christ. Several of these are of interest to students of women's history, in particular the *Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)* and the *Gospel of Thomas*.

A number of these non-canonical texts have become available in translation recently. The best collection which I have yet found is from the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars who have been meeting for a number

of years to discuss the historical Jesus and the early churches. They have prepared a complete new translation of the canonical Gospels; the hypothetical "Q" Gospel, which is a sayings document believed to have predated Mark and the synoptic Gospels based on it; and *Thomas, Mary, The Secret Gospel of Mark*, and various other Gospel texts and fragments. Their compilation is *The Complete Gospels* (1992, 1994).

A very interesting gospel in this collection is *The Infancy Gospel of James*, whose main emphasis is on the story of Mary, Jesus' mother. It centres on proofs of her virginity and purity and worthiness to be his mother—an indication that the Immaculate Conception idea and the belief in Mary's continued physical virginity after Jesus' birth dates back to roughly 150 CE; this undercuts Ranke-Heinemann's argument that these notions are a later distortion of Christian doctrine.

Pantel's *History of Women in the West* is a fine reference book, wonderfully provocative. It contains a number of essays by different historians dealing with aspects of the cultural images and lives of women in the classical Greek and Roman periods.

Though strong structuralist influences are found in some of the essays collected herein, with a perhaps undue emphasis on representation and what is said *about* women or the "ideal woman," the poverty of direct source material and the legitimate concern about the creation of "woman" in a situation of gross inequality makes this an effective technique. A number of the authors also deal purely with the nuts and bolts of history—the legal codes of Rome and Greece, illustrations on vases and elsewhere of the activities of women, funeral inscriptions, and the popular culture of plays and philosophy.

There is a great deal of useful material here. I confess that I found the essays on the division of the sexes in Roman law, artistic representation of women on Greek vases, marriage in ancient Greece, just too detailed and too specialized to hold my interest.

Nicole Loraux' essay "What is a Goddess?" which places the feminine aspect of a Goddess in the context of her divine aspect and talks about how the divine overwhelms the feminine as a category is very interesting. Louise Zaidman's "Pandora's Daughters..." is a fine summary of the secondary and complementary but essential role which women played in the religion of the Greek cities. John Scheid's essay on "The Religious Roles of Roman Women" is also valuable.

The outstanding essay for me is "Creating a Myth of Matriarchy" by Stella Georgoudi. She argues that there is no historical support for the idea that there ever existed a Matriarchy, certainly not in the Mediterranean world, and that the myth of the Matriarchy was created by Jacob Bachofen and elaborated upon by various Marxist and Jungian philosophers, to be taken up by some modern feminists.

Hypatia of Alexandria is worth reading because of the legend which has grown around its subject.

In 415 Hypatia, a brilliant mathematician, astronomer, and Platonist philosopher, was murdered and dismembered by a Christian mob in the streets of Alexandria on the orders of Saint Cyril. Her death was the beginning of a legend that still lingers—a legend of a young and beautiful woman, a great Pagan philosopher influential in fighting against Christianity whose murder was an act against both the power of women and Paganism.

Surprisingly, this is the first serious historical biography of Hypatia. Dzielska looks at the legend first and briefly surveys the wide range of serious and fictional treatments of Hypatia which have gone into forming it; she then looks at the contemporary material, primarily letters from Hypatia's student Synesius to her, and puts her life into context.

A very interesting woman emerges—an elitist teacher with students only from the wealthy and well-connected families (including a number of Christians, at least two of whom were to become bishops),

practicing a form of Platonism which had nothing to do with the Pagan Goddesses and Gods. Hypatia was well-connected and influential in the city of Alexandria and more broadly, and allied herself with the civil authorities and a moderate faction in the Christian community against the intolerant and fanatical Cyril.

This worthy biography illuminates a corner of the chaotic period in which orthodox Christian hegemony was established in the West. And it's good to see that this legend is based somewhat on fact.

We can look forward to a great increase in the amount of material on the history of women in this era and others, as the realization of what has been left out of history continues to grow among suppressed groups. Unless we know what has happened before how can we change the world?

FEMINISM AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Susan Frank Parsons. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

by Eva C. Karpinski

The theologian Susan Frank Parsons explores in her book the relationship of feminism, both secular and Christian, to Christian ethics, making us aware of the diversity of positions within these two traditions. Yet she rejects as too facile the assumption of their apparent incompatibility, of the conflict between the secular *versus* religious outlook, and especially of the patriarchal bias of Christianity. Instead, she sets out to examine common concerns shared by feminists and Christian ethicists, to demonstrate mutual benefits of the possible collaboration and dialogue between both groups which have been similarly engaged in the critique and challenge of the traditional moral project.

The book is logically organized around three general paradigms of moral thought, from which the author derives three common themes suggesting the areas in which feminism and Christian ethics can work together. Since most of her points are worked out in triads, her argument may occasionally seem to suffer from excessive structuring (one wonders if the author's obsessive reliance on triads has anything to do with her theological background). The three paradigms elaborated in the first part of the book are identified as liberalism, social constructionism, and naturalism. They correspond roughly to the tensions among individualism, structuralism, and biology that, according to Parsons, characterize moral reasoning within both feminism and Christian ethics. The discussion of each of these paradigms is followed by an extensive critique of its central tenets.

The liberal paradigm, illustrated by the work of such feminists as Simone de Beauvoir or Janet Radcliffe Richards, is based on Enlightenment assumptions including rationalism, moralism, and individualism. Among feminist theologians who have made use of this paradigm, Parsons concentrates on the early writings of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Letty Russell. The strength of these theological appropriations of the liberal paradigm consists in the possibility of cultural critique, a belief in a common humanity as the basis for a moral code to live by, and the recognition of individual autonomy.

By contrast, the social constructionist paradigm, which Parsons derives from the work of Harriet Martineau, focuses on oppressive institutions that shape women's lives. This approach assumes that the social precedes the individual and determines moral knowledge, behaviour, and decisions. The critique of patriarchy and dedication to social change that characterize this paradigm can be seen in Juliet Mitchell's early work, as well as in the work of Rosalind Coward and bell hooks, or such feminist theologians as Dorothee Sölle,