

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

Books surveying the history of Christianity have been traditionally “his stories”—describing the flaws and celebrating the achievements of great theologians, eloquent preachers, and powerful administrators. *Her Story* makes one contribution toward redressing the balance by illuminating in broad terms the forgotten history of over half of the Christian community. This survey brings historical knowledge and debates about women in the Christian past before a wide audience of students and members of communities of faith by asking probing questions: What roles did women play in leadership structures, in religious ceremonies, and in the creation of a theological tradition? What roles did they find for themselves outside “official” institutional churches or the formalities of worship? How were females and the feminine (characteristics assigned by cultural traditions to women) regarded in devotional and theological writing?

Her Story first appeared in 1986 and depended upon feminist historical and theological scholarship that was still in its early stages. Published several years later, the accompanying text, *Readings in Her Story*, used primary sources to illustrate and expand upon the conclusions of the first book. Both of the books covered biblical history, the early church, the western medieval past, and the Protestant Reformation. To make the contents of these surveys more

manageable in size, the last five chapters of each text focused on women in the context of American religion.

Her Story and *Readings in Her Story* have been influenced and shaped by the way scholarship on women and religion had evolved by the early 1980s. The books depend upon historians who collected facts about women in Christian history both as individuals and as a group in an effort to make known what was previously unknown or ignored. They also reflect a new approach to the past that frankly recognizes that Christian tradition and the biblical text have often served to support patriarchy and functioned to oppress and degrade women. Rather than claiming that the Christian past and the Bible should be discarded, however, *Her Story* and *Readings in Her Story* go on to support Eleanor McLaughlin's statement that "Christian faith and institutions have been at certain times and under certain conditions radically supportive of women and informed by women's experience."¹ Finding evidence to support this latter claim has led in some unexpected directions. Readers are taken outside the culturally dominant Catholic and Protestant groups to movements such as Shakerism and Gnosticism. They are also forced to consider the personal expressions of faith found in letters, diaries, and devotional writings alongside of theological works and sermons on which Christian history has traditionally depended.

In preparing material to accompany a CD-ROM edition of the original texts in 2002, it became apparent that a massive amount of significant new scholarship on the topics covered in them had appeared and needed to be incorporated. A new edition of *Her Story*, therefore, was begun in 2003. While the general contours of this historical landscape remain the same across the two editions, many of the details of that landscape have been filled in and refined. What is different about this second edition? The readings from primary sources are now combined with the main text into one book. It also incorporates new directions in interpreting existing historical data. Women in the early church, for example, were able to claim power and opportunities for themselves in the first decades of Christian history only to see that power eroded. The first edition of *Her Story* examines reasons for this; the new edition provides an even fuller explanation by taking into account, for example, Karen Torjesen's argument that the honor/shame code of the ancient world and the building of Christian basilicas are relevant here. The second edition also qualifies some of the claims originally made in the early years of feminist historical studies. Thus, Jesus and the Gospels are no longer seen as radical exceptions to the views of the entire Jewish establishment on women, but rather representative of a strand of Judaism that was more open to women.

This new edition also includes some new topics such as the status of Mormon women and the emergence of womanist theology. And it offers more nuanced and developed interpretations of events and personalities (such as the Reformation advocate Argula von Grumbach) that are given brief attention in the first edition. Finally, this new text attempts to clarify material in the first edition in light of over fifteen years of classroom use.

As with all brief surveys of long periods of history, this one has inevitably omitted material that some readers may have wished to explore. In the post-Reformation period the focus is on the United States. The history of women in modern European Christianity is both well developed and important, and this text can only suggest that it be examined through such tools as Dale Johnson's *Women and Religion in Britain and Ireland*.² This new edition also does not include a separate chapter on women and the Bible and does not attempt to explore the history of women in ancient Israel. Rather, it is interested in how the Bible has been interpreted throughout Christian history to oppress women and to empower them. As part of this interpretive history, *Her Story* considers the principles of feminist biblical interpretation and applies some of them to the New Testament as a way to more fully understand the situation of women in the early church. The spotlight, therefore, is always on women in the Christian tradition; and the Bible, like that tradition, is examined as both a source of patriarchy and liberation.

In an effort to make the history accessible and effective for use by colleges, seminaries, and church study groups, this edition has some additional new features. The bibliography has been updated; it is by no means exhaustive but does contain many newer books, essays, and articles that have informed the writing of the second edition. A Web site has been developed to provide access to questions for discussion, additional primary source readings, a glossary, Web links to aid in further study, and a research guide for writing in the history of women and Christian tradition. The Web site name is www.herstorytext.com.

As mentioned, a number of selected primary source readings illustrating important themes have been included directly after each chapter of *Her Story*. In these readings you will encounter the voices of men and women who argue persuasively with words of reason and beauty, who shout angrily with words of protest and condemnation, and who even question the way we use words. Here you will recover some of the voices of women who have been silent for so long. I have often chosen readings that are discussed directly in the main text, while other readings have been authored by men and women similarly highlighted. All the additional readings illustrate important themes and

issues in the story of women in Christian history and serve to remind readers that the tradition has both patriarchal and feminist threads running through it. Readers might find it helpful to consult the entire text from which these excerpts have been taken in order to understand fully the development of important arguments.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to many people who have made both editions of *Her Story* and the publication of accompanying readings possible. Marietta College, where I have taught since 1983, offered computer facilities for the first edition, grant money (with help from the Lilly Foundation) for the original collection of readings, and, most recently, a sabbatical year and a research award to enable me to write a second edition. In particular, the staff of Dawes Library at the College has never tired of securing interlibrary loans and tracking down obscure journal articles. The original publications were made possible by the work of Phyllis Zoerckler; this new edition was only brought to a successful completion with the help of Mary Zimmer, Susan Dyer, Paula Lewis, and student Brandon Donelson-Sims. Kate Skrebutenas, dear friend and reference librarian at Princeton Theological Seminary, made my weeks there happy and productive ones, and Union Theological Seminary in Richmond welcomed me on campus for four weeks of research during my sabbatical year. I continue to enjoy working with the editorial staff at Fortress Press; names have changed but their enthusiasm for these books has not. In the early 1980s Thelma McGill-Cobbler saw the first text through publication. Michael West supported and improved the 1992 book of readings, the CD-ROM, and this second edition, and Zan Ceeley is a new but much valued editorial partner. I have over the years continued to be grateful to Martin E. Marty, Robert T. Handy, Freda Gardner, Elizabeth Howell Verdesi, Kathleen Cannon, and Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford for their work on the original manuscript of *Her Story*. I have tried in this new edition to incorporate some of their suggestions that could not be accommodated in the 1986 text. One thing that has not changed over the past twenty years is the affection and appreciation I have for the three people to whom *Her Story* is dedicated.