

Frontiers in Catholic Feminist Theology. Edited by Susan Abraham and Elena Procaro-Foley. Fortress Press, 2009. \$29.00 255 pp.

Reviewed by Judith M. Slisz

The contributors to this introduction to contemporary Catholic feminist theology hold faculty positions in theology and religious studies as institutions of higher education. They stand “shoulder to shoulder” with the “feminist, womanist, and mujerista theologians” who have been pioneers in feminist theology. As a feminist with minimal background in theology, I gained an understanding of some of the history and current research and writing of a select group of leaders in the field. While sections of the book present challenges for the lay reader, much of it is compelling in its power to excite about this movement and give hope for the future.

Michele Saracino opens the first section on theological anthropology by focusing on the concept of hybridity—that we are all comprised of many “stories.” Jesus was a Jew, a man, a son, a teacher, a change-agent. The first woman was a hybrid being, created in the image of God from the rib of a man, thus serving as the prototype of contemporary woman who can be mother, professor, feminist. Saracino suggests that when we recognize the multiple dimensions of individuals, we open ourselves to “right relationships with God and others,” the goal of theological anthropology.

Theresa Delgado describes the injustice suffered by Latinas in a culture that reveres God who gave up his body to save mankind and idealizes a one-sided dimension of the Virgin Mary as someone who sacrifices herself for the good of others. Such submissive views of Jesus and Mary have led to Latinas to submit to abusive behavior by fathers, lovers, husbands; to put themselves at risk of HIV/AIDS, and to participate in prostitution and human trafficking to help support their families. Delgado challenges the presumption of obedience and encourages more emphasis on the second part of Jesus’ proclamation, “Do this in memory of me,” and on the need to remember that apart from submission to the will of God, Jesus was also radical, the challenger, and the iconoclast.

LaReine-Marie Mosely explains that “womanist” is a term adopted by black feminists redefining themselves from victims and commodities to women comfortable in their bodies and their sexuality and capable of living a life of grace. Black women, white women, Latinas all have multiple identities but are united in their commitment to living lives characterized by hope, dignity, justice, and love in relation to God and others.

The section on Christology continues the theme of humans in relationship to God and others. Historic images of Christ as breastfeeding mother suggest the limitless sacrifice of mothers for their children. Such unconditional love, the author suggests, is what is needed to sustain a world fractured by wars and religious strife. A focus on the mothering behavior of Jesus also provides a counterpoint to the “maleness” of God as a defining characteristic. Feminist theologians argue that the *magisterium*’s focus on the maleness of Christ has served to preserve male ecclesial power. Women cannot imitate Christ in his maleness but they can and do perform his life-giving and life-sustaining behaviors.

The final section on ecclesiology explores the various arguments for and against the ordination of women. Some are familiar to us, for example, that the disciples were all men. Prior to the 12th century *ordinatio* had the broader meaning of service to the community. Subsequently, the meaning of ordination has referred to a sacrament conferred only on men in the Roman Catholic Church with very few exceptions that were ultimately overturned. Vatican II raised some hopes for change, but in the decades following the council only Protestant sects ordained women. Yet the ordination of women continues to be a *quaestio disputata*. Many support the various interpretations of “*in persona Christi*” and affirm that they have seen the persona of Christ in the love of mothers and grandmothers, in Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa.

The feminist authors of this book support a “more capacious theological imagination” leading to the concept of *ekklesia*, the “radical equality that characterizes the already and not yet of religious community and democratic society,” that challenges the “kyriarchal” context in which religious and social communities currently operate. *Ekklesia* serves as an alternative to imperial forms of church and society; it “imagines society as a community of support and an alliance of equals.”

These very readable essays offer a wider understanding of church, not as institutional structure so much as active engagement in the world and in the work for justice. These feminist theologians make a compelling case for full participation in the church liberated from its oppressive structures. The church, the authors contend, is not a building but a people full of the ambiguity and hybridity or grace *and* sinfulness that marks us as human, and of the hope for justice that marks us as followers of Christ.