

## Book Reviews

**Satoko Yamaguchi, *Mary and Martha: Women in the World of Jesus*.  
Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2002, pp xi + 204.  
ISBN 1570754012.**

At the outset of *Mary and Martha: Women in the World of Jesus* Satoko Yamaguchi expresses her motivation for writing this book. "My hope is to encourage women of all colors in their diverse contexts to become familiar with the results of feminist scholarship and to participate in the global feminist endeavor of re-visioning our Christian past and Christian identities"(1). Yamaguchi writes in a style that is accessible to all her readers, including those just beginning the journey into feminist biblical interpretation. Excellent endnotes provide expansion on various areas and suggestions for further reading should the reader seek more detail, while a bibliography of nearly four hundred texts gives testimony to the comprehensive nature of her research.

The book consists of two parts. The major section, Part One, is entitled "Searching for a New Historical Imagination" and it presents an overview of feminist scholarship on the first-century Greco-Roman world. In Part Two, "Hearing the Story of Martha and Mary With New Ears," Yamaguchi uses the insights of critical feminist scholarship to explore the Martha and Mary stories in the Johannine Gospel from a Japanese feminist perspective.

Yamaguchi argues that in order to understand the messages which stories might communicate to their original audiences it is important to have a picture of the world from which these stories emerged. Hence, in Part One she sets out to present her readers with the information they will need to compose a picture of the first-century Greco-Roman world. Her multi-disciplinary approach presents information from such areas as historiography, archaeology, sociology, anthropology and linguistics. However, the insights from these disciplines are not accepted uncritically. It is recognised, for instance, that most ancient literature reflects an elite male perspective and may not present an accurate picture of the activities of ordinary women and men of that world. Caution is also exercised with regard to cultural anthropological theories. Yamaguchi stresses, "we should be cautious and continually ask questions. For example, how relevant were the dualistic concepts of male/female, public/private, and honor/shame for ordinary women in that world?" (11).

Proceeding with due caution, the author uses the scholarly information to expand her readers' "historical imagination" of the first century. Yamaguchi explores the daily lives of Jewish women and men of that time, religious leadership and prophecy, healing, story-telling and patriarchalisation. The picture which she paints is one in which diversity is a prominent theme. While she reinforces that the patriarchal social system would have given some power and privilege to men over women, she also notes that class plays an important role in

determining how women lived their lives. Elite women, for instance, had a certain amount of autonomy from their husbands and could wield power over men and women of lower classes (23-25). Observance of purity laws also varied amongst different classes of women. Many poorer women had to keep working in order to survive and so could not observe the purity laws as strictly as other women did. Similarly, while they had primary responsibility for the household, many women were required by economic necessity to work outside their homes. Hence, Yamaguchi argues that the perception of the outside as the male domain was not reflected in the reality of ordinary women's lives.

Yamaguchi uses evidence from archaeological artefacts, ancient inscriptions and literature to show that some Jewish women in the first century practised leadership roles in their synagogues (44-45). This understanding challenges some earlier scholarship in this area. As she does throughout Part One, Yamaguchi clearly sets out the latest feminist scholarship and as a result may challenge some readers' preconceived ideas. Thus, readers are enabled to broaden their understanding of the first century Greco-Roman world. In particular, the lives of ordinary women within that world begin to emerge more clearly in the overall picture.

While Part One is therefore of great value, it is in Part Two that Yamaguchi's major contribution to biblical scholarship is made. Here she uses the insights from critical feminist biblical interpretation to explore some Johannine texts, focussing on the Martha and Mary stories in the Johannine Gospel. The author pays attention to the characterisation and the gaps and contradictions in the text in an attempt to re-vision the Johannine women in their historical context.

The Johannine women are shown to have leadership roles in the way they model discipleship and make confessions of faith. Each is portrayed as a woman of action. Moreover, with regard to the overall presentation of women characters within the Fourth Gospel, Yamaguchi makes an insightful comment:

*Martha and Mary engage in collaborative co-ministries. Nowhere in the Johannine gospel are there women pitted against each other, competing against each other, or divided by class or ethnic differences. Nor do they serve patriarchal values through acting against their own interests. Furthermore, women are not the passive objects of men's help but are always active and vocal on their own behalf (140).*

At the same time, however, Yamaguchi notes that some aspects of the Johannine women's prophetic and ministerial leadership have been downplayed, perhaps as a result of internal conflicts within the communities regarding the leadership of women. She argues that, while not denying women's leadership, the author and/or editor of the Gospel obscures the significance of this leadership so that the Gospel, in effect, gives a contradictory message regarding women (128-129). In her reading of the Martha and Mary stories, Yamaguchi draws attention to examples of this phenomenon and counters them by highlighting the significance of the women's actions. In this way, we are empowered to hear these stories with new ears and re-vision these women and their messages.

Thus, Yamaguchi has produced an important new reading of the Martha and Mary stories in the Johannine text. The clarity and accessibility of her writing style suggest that she will reach a wide audience with this book. She deserves to do just that.

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**Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady and Judith L. Poxon (eds) *French Feminists on Religion - A Reader With a forward by Catherine Clément, Routledge 2002, pp 291+ ISBN 0415215374***

This book is a long overdue collection of essays from five major French feminists on the themes of religion, theology and gender. Editors Joy, O'Grady and Poxon present keynote essays from the writings of Irigaray, Kristeva, Clément, Cixous and Wittig. This is a text that can be accessed easily by readers who are new to French feminism and its central concerns, as well as by readers who are familiar with the texts but have longed for a particular book on French feminisms engagement with religious themes.

In the clearly written introduction the editors provide a very helpful history to both the uses of the linguistic term 'French feminism', and the ways in which such feminisms have been "packaged" for North American English speaking feminist audiences. This is clearly a problematic relationship and while the editors describe some of the issues at stake they do not get bogged down in the politics of trying to mediate questions of appropriation and cultural interpretation. Instead, they acknowledge the problem [and the irony of bringing to the anglo world another translation] and move on to the more productive aspects of the work of the book – situating religion in French feminist theories of sexual difference and in particular in the Psych et Po traditions of French feminism which can be characterized by a commitment to unveiling 'the psychosexual dynamic central to women's oppression that the liberal rhetoric of egalitarian feminism was not able to encompass' (5). Psychoanalysis, deconstruction, theories of language and linguistics and the writings of Freud, Lacan, Derrida and Levi-Strauss, provide fertile ground for extolling the particularities of patriarchies, women's modes of entry to patriarchal symbolic and material structurations, and the relationship of the feminine to the divine.

It was clearly a difficult task to decide which essays and which writers to include and on that score no doubt everyone will have their own preferences. However, given that this is the first publication in English that brings together these feminists on the topic of religion, it is no doubt essential to include the most well known essays as well as some of the more recent essays. For example, included is Irigaray's oft quoted essay on 'Divine Women' as well as her more recent work on yoga and breath. While the editors have deliberately chosen essays

that deal with religious themes, it also becomes apparent as one reads through the book, that for the authors themselves, questions of religion are completely inter-related with questions of sexual difference and subjectivity. Religion has been an on-going and longstanding area of interest for French feminism for a variety of reasons, which places French feminism in a different position from the more secularized accounts of feminine subjectivity that characterizes Anglo-feminist writing. Hence a number of the essays are not explicitly about religious themes but questions of religion emerge through the treatment of other themes.

Each theorist is introduced by the editors via a very brief biography and a history of central themes and writings on religion. A forthcoming anthology of critical essays (Routledge) which will follow this book will no doubt be a more interpretive text on religious themes in the work of French feminists. But for this volume, the editorial introductions to each feminist writer and to each essay are carefully and respectfully written to provide an historical context and initial clues to reading the essays. I found the brief introductions to be very helpful and very clear. And I found particularly interesting the connections and relationships that can be easily forged between the varying accounts of religion and feminism, although the editors themselves do not attempt these comparisons. However, reading such a compilation, one cannot escape the comparative mode and I found such work rewarding and insightful. The essays themselves are challenging – both in style and content - so it is a book that one can return to for further meditation.

This collection makes it clear that the condition of 'woman' is not separate from the questions that religion raises – indeed they are intimately related. They are related in two ways: through a critique of women's consistent marginalization in world religions, where the majority of religions can be clearly seen as pre-eminent forms of patriarchy in their on-going forms of control and punishment of women's bodies and souls. But as well, meditating on religious questions and themes constitutes a productive contribution to new feminist imaginaries or symbolic economies, which these writers want to constitute outside patriarchal reality. Religion then is broadly defined but not to the extent of losing the central signifiers of religious meaning. The sacred is tied to the ordinary, the infinite to God, the self to Other, and then they are un-tied and reconstituted in a feminine symbolic. While the five writers move between extensive critiques of patriarchal cultural forms to imaginative visions of a new humanity, religious themes multiply and transform and act as the transport to new ways of being 'woman'.

The writers deliberate over the possibilities that symbolic economies offer which as the editors state, lends one implicitly to religious imaginings. But while religion is a theme, it cannot be separated (or hidden) from the multiple conditions in which women live and where we struggle to find authentic subjectivity, to 'speak' and to 'become'. All of the authors have been long involved in political movements for change and this informs their work explicitly. For some readers, this might represent a re-casting of the relationship between religion and politics.

Read together the essays emphasize both the differences between the writers as well as the commonalities of their questions and concerns. The divisive impact of secularism and its relegation of religion to the margins of analysis are not

evident here, though of course the debate between materialist and symbolic feminisms is. However, from both the editors and the authors, comes a very clear statement that resistance to symbolic economies of patriarchy and an emergent partial feminine are vital to women's future and a subjectivity that is not mediated through the masculine.

The numbers of religious themes that are reflected upon in the essays is substantial and include: re-reading myths and stories of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament; the meaning of God; women mystics; the feminine and the sacred, women and sacrifice; the person of Jesus. These themes were closely bound up with meditations on love, death, loss, body, maternity, eroticism, angels and grace. The landscape of interiority, the realms of symbolic imaginaries, economies of exchange and the meaning of the gift, the contours of sexual difference sit side by side with the writer's religious heritage. French Catholicism and its' centering of the mysterious and mystical realms of faith aligned so closely with the patriarchal family structure is particularly evident in the work of Kristeva. For Clément and Cixous, Jewish heritages were also experiences of belonging to minority groups (particularly in postwar Europe). Their writings provide important insight into the transformation of the legacy of childhood faith to new and different appreciations of the realms of the infinite, without reverting to either apologism or rejectionism, a state that has beleaguered western feminist theology.

Such a close examination of religious themes in one collection made me wonder whether these five women are themselves feminist mystics, exploring interior landscapes through their soulful writing on the condition of being 'woman'. They speak of themselves and of the life of women as one that involves ecstasy, pain, suffering, and loss of self; dissolution of all and everything, emptiness and love. The struggle to understand self and Other, to reach for a place that does not define one sex at the expense of the other, that re-imagines humanity as embedded in sexual difference, becomes in this volume a work of religious significance. Where a materialist feminism, rooted in particular kinds of rationality, with agendas of equality and justice is able to imagine the future without religion, these essays suggest another future, where the symbolic realms are as important as the materialist in smashing patriarchal structures, re-situating feminine subjectivity on its own terrain, promoting economies of difference, denouncing sameness, achieving an understanding of God as the moment of meeting the Other, either in oneself or externally. For the reader, there is the possibility that in engaging with these writings one might be taken to another place, outside the contours of self and safety, to radically new understandings of the feminine and the sacred. And in this, the reader might experience significant discomfort and anxiety. This I think expresses the radical potential of theologizing – to explore the landscape of God outside the traditional [patriarchal] signifiers of the sacred, the feminine, and the Other. Each writer journeys - in her own way - to this landscape in order to explore and map the traces of the infinite. And in communicating something of this landscape, there is an expression of an heretical saintliness: to give generously without requiring increase or as Cixous says to give a 'gift which circulates endlessly' (213).

A book such as this should be able to put to rest the question: does religion matter? It clearly does - and matters a lot. In Australia, the religious rights of women continue to be violated and denied. Aboriginal women's secret knowledge is flaunted in the media, degraded in Parliament and exploited through the Courts. Catholic women's continued requests for participation and transformation of hierarchical practices are conciliated by promises of consultation which turns quickly to pretence and rejection. Australian Islamic women are stereotyped by the media and continually presented as oppressed. More and more women turn to New Age practices for individualized spiritual 'service station' 'comfort. There is a long struggle ahead over access to symbolic economies and as Catherine Clément states '...the confrontation of women with the religion has only just begun' (xi).

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