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Edited by Susan Frank Parsons
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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Feminist theology is a significant movement within contemporary theology. The aim of this *Cambridge Companion* is to give an outline of feminist theology through an analysis of its overall shape and its major themes, so that both its place in and its contributions to the present changing theological landscape may be discerned. The two sections of the volume are designed to provide a comprehensive and critical introduction to feminist theology which is authoritative and up to date. Written by some of the main figures in feminist theology, as well as by younger scholars who are considering their inheritance, it offers fresh insights into the nature of feminist theological work. The book as a whole is intended to present a challenge for future scholarship, since it engages critically with the assumptions of feminist theology, and seeks to open ways for women after feminism to enter into the vocation of theology.

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Amongst the more energetic and enthusiastic forms of theology that emerged during the latter half of the twentieth century, feminist theology took up its place to become one of the prominent ways in which women have found theological voice and have allowed the wisdom of faith to be rooted in their lives. While its provenance is located in the Western Christian tradition, its bearing formed by the philosophical assumptions and political ideals of the Enlightenment, feminist theology has become something of a common discourse entered into by women of other faith and intellectual inheritance. Its now universal vocabulary of the rights of women, of the dignity and value of women's lives, of the urgency for their economic and social liberation, and of the prospect for human fulfilment within creation, has become one of the primary means both of communication between women, and of assertion of their status in global politics and in the church. Feminist theology has thus grown up with modernity, and so likewise extends itself as a network of interconnected relationships that are to be ever more inclusive of diversities and adaptable to changing circumstances. Its special attentiveness to women's experiences, its reaching out to touch and to raise up women amid the daily business of life, its concern for the paths that women must walk, are characteristic features in which are expressed the desire of women to be faithful witnesses to the truth of the Gospel that sets us free, and signs of hope in the blessedness that is yet to come.

Feminist theology has developed, particularly since the 1970s, as a special field of inquiry within departments of theology and religious studies. With greater numbers of women entering higher education and preparing for a variety of ministries within the Christian churches at that time, it is not surprising that traditional disciplines of all kinds were being reshaped according to the new questions and concerns that then appeared. These were critical of the sources and methods employed among the various specialisms of theology, as they were also constructive in bringing insights from the experience and wisdom of women to bear on some of the major issues

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that had arisen within the discipline. In early days, women found perhaps the most congenial of doctrinal frameworks to be those of political theology or of liberation theology, for these were configured in the dialectical pattern that women also used to challenge the status quo, and to find alternative resources from women themselves for revisioning the theological task in the context of the wider society. Theology that is called 'feminist' may be understood in this light as theology that nurtures hopes for the liberation of humanity into a just and equitable political order in which our life together, as women and men, might be more happily realised. This twofold approach of critique and reconstruction will be evident in the chapters that follow, and examples of the particular issues women have addressed will be found.

In addition to this, the study of the phenomenon of religion itself, as well as of the texts and traditions of people of other faith, has been a growing area of academic inquiry. As knowledge of and interaction with peoples of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds was expanding in the late twentieth century, so opportunities for the development of intercultural and interfaith relationships became available. Ordinary women from all parts of the world began to know one another, to discover common problems, to be challenged by unfamiliar ways of life, of speaking, and of understanding, and to be returned to their own traditions with new questions. This has led to a scholarly interest in the place of women in religious practices, institutions, and beliefs, and in the impact of these things upon women's lives and welfare. Here the methods of the human and social sciences have been especially useful in exploring the patterns of social organisation and language, the cultural symbols and values, and the systems of belief that structure women's lives and self-understanding. Feminist theology in this light may be understood as theology that uses the analytical tool of gender to investigate the contexts and practices of religion and of religious bodies, and to suggest ways in which these might become more conducive to women's full participation as believers, and so more adequate as historical signs of divine goodness.

The contributors to this *Companion* have, in one way or another, been influenced by feminist theology in these forms. They have written some of its major texts; they have taught it in a variety of places; they have learned and been influenced by its ways of reasoning. The incisiveness of the gender critique and the proposed reconstruction of theology in a number of different areas are thus evident in these pages, as the contributors seek to describe what feminist theology has been about, and to assess the part it has played, and should continue to play, in shaping contemporary theological efforts as well as the life of the church.

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For some time, however, it has been recognised that feminist theology is a complex manifestation of both the promise and the problematic of modern thinking, and thus that its reception is marked by the intellectual turmoil that comes in modernity's wake. While many of its main ideas have swept through Western culture with great moral fervour, contributing not insignificantly to a theological kind of political correctness, it has also brought along with it the very provocations that are so troublesome to us as we bear this inheritance. The sign of this difficulty is not pluralism, for the diverse strands of feminist discourse, the often contradictory types of feminism that indicate it is no unified phenomenon, and the multiple voices with which it now speaks – these are all things that feminist theologians claim to value and to be able to accommodate within an ever-expandable relational web. What is thought-provoking for the theologian is the way in which feminist theology has represented, on behalf of women, the expectation of modern secular reforms that divine providence could legitimately be taken into human hands, and this, in the context of a universe believed to be without God. It has required, for this undertaking, a cluster of assumptions, regarding identity, agency, history, and nature to name but a few, that are themselves both unstable and philosophically questionable, and that have become more obviously and bewilderingly known to be so in the time called postmodernity. That feminist theologians have sought to provide a divine matrix to replace the absent God, and to hold back the tides that threaten this accomplishment by their presence in ecclesial and academic institutions, are poignant indications of tenacity, now rendered so very fragile.

This disturbance is also noticeable in the chapters that follow, for, insofar as the contributors are engaged in their own primary task of theological reflection, they are thereby responding anew to the questions of faith that appear in our present context. For each step that seems to be sure-footed and secure, firmly established on the solid ground of feminist theological orthodoxy, there is another that falters, tripped up by what is now being encountered and thrown back to begin again the patient work of seeking understanding. The intellectual and spiritual effort to be undertaken in observance of what is happening here, so that what lies in this problematic place may be prepared for the coming of faith, is the work to which those who associate with feminist theology are now called.

The chapters in this *Cambridge Companion* have been grouped into two sections. Following a chapter on its emergence, the first section considers the overall shape of feminist theology. The basic presuppositions, the frameworks of understanding, the methods, and some of the contentious issues

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of feminist theology are set out and analysed in order to disclose what kind of theology it is. Each contributor has written from within a specialism, and has investigated the ways in which feminist theologians address some of the important questions that arise there. They have been forthcoming also in making their own contributions to these debates and to drawing the reader's attention to the relevant resources. In the second section, the themes that have been of particular importance in Christian feminist theology are investigated. Organised according to a doctrinal scheme, these chapters bring the reader into the midst of a number of the substantive issues that engage the attention of theologians today, and show how it is that feminist theologians may approach these matters with the mind and heart of faith. Here, too, there is original thinking and an attempt to open windows onto the future direction of feminist theological work.

There are inevitably both subjects and perspectives that are missing from such a collection. The availability of people to write this kind of piece is normally unpredictable, but is surely intensified in this case by the enormous pressures under which women in academia are now working, and by the demands of daily survival upon women in places of risk in which such things as writing seem a luxury. This disparity so ill-fits the hopes in which feminist theology was born. Nevertheless, the feminist commitment to diversity, however that is to be construed, and to speaking for and so representing oneself in the public forum, are things that this *Companion* has sought in some modest way to respect. If it gives the reader an outline of feminist theology and a fair indication of its place in the present theological landscape, and if it offers companionship to those who would follow through what is beginning to be learned here, then it will have done its work well enough.

For there is an important sense in which, whatever personal responses one may make to feminist theology, and whether or not it is the popular theology of choice in the highly stylised culture of the postmodern university, women and men of faith will at some points encounter the questions it has worked through regarding our humanity, our place in the scheme of things, and the way of the divine presence in our midst. These matters remain, and the service of faithful women has been to keep them nurtured, to be angry at their disappearance under the accoutrements of cultural production, to prophesy concerning the loss of the church's own *raison d'être*, and to proclaim the coming of God wherever they find themselves with their very lives. The finest ministry of feminist theologians within modernity is to be understood in these terms, as a reminder of God's goodness in our creation and faithfulness in bringing us to our end.

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That we find ourselves in another situation, and that these matters require of us a new vocabulary, a critical reading of the texts from which we have learned, and again a costly discernment in which we also will be changed by what comes to be known – these things are cause for rejoicing that the well of wisdom ever deepens as we drink of it, and for hope that, after all, it is in us the divine is to be born. Such are the affirmations of Christian feminist theologians made in the light of the resurrection, in the early dawn as one approaches the point where a new thing is about to happen. In giving themselves over to the coming of the Lord, in letting their lives be taken up into the astonishment of what arrives from without, in this moment, there is that speechless joy which is to become the birthplace of the Gospel (Matthew 28^{1–10}, Mark 16^{1–8}, Luke 24^{1–12}, John 20^{11–18}). Here at the place of a meeting, women find themselves disclosed in the morning sun, their bodies poised expectantly over the line that divides darkness and light, their eyes receptive to the most tender turnings of one moment into another. It is a disclosure that beckons them into the journey of truth undertaken by all theologians, each in their own time, as God takes hold of their souls. For women today to be carried into such vocation anew is the desire in which this volume has been prepared and so is presented to you.

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Each *Companion* is so called because it is to accompany readers in their intellectual journey and thus to befriend them in the advent of truth. This is an appropriate occasion then to thank all of our companions who walk along with us, providing what is needful without our asking, sharing food and conversation that so nourishes the soul, and directing our notice to whatever awaits us. For their forbearance and charity, we have reason also to be grateful, for these are things that hold us in proper humility. So it is that faith knows companions to be signs of the tenderness of a good and loving God. To my own, and especially to Mark, a huge thank you.

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