

Rebecca Moore. *Women in Christian Traditions*. New York: New York University Press, 2015. 224 pages. \$17.

“Women have kept the faith alive” (17). This bold declaration stands at the center of Rebecca Moore’s text, in which she details the historical contributions of women to the development of the Christian religion, both as agents within a shared trajectory of the Christian church, and also as creators of unique histories. The author gives attention to women as individuals and as members of communities, who shape the Christian tradition in both major and less acknowledged ways.

Moore acknowledges the challenge of contributing to the body of extant studies of women in Christian history. She writes appreciatively of previous literature while also adding a distinct perspective to it that is almost entirely informed by feminist scholarship, though not entirely adoptive of its presuppositions (1). Moore’s study of women throughout the history of Christianity also draws from the Gospels and Paul, as well as Tertullian, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and other major Christian thinkers up to the twenty-first century. Moore not only re-narrates with attention to women; concurrently, she reexamines historiographies that are exclusive of women. Moore’s integration of Protestant and Roman Catholic thought throughout her analysis is especially notable. And while her focus is upon Western Protestant Christianity, and primarily within the United States, she also analyzes global historical trajectories. Her method draws from contemporary sociological, anthropological, and archaeological groundings in order to best “[unearth] the story of women” (15).

Eve—the construction of the mythical first woman of the Garden of Eden and interpretations of her actions over time—serves as an entrée into Christian women’s history as Moore identifies her as foundational to both Christian soteriology and Christian subordination of women. Moore reclaims the pivotal leadership of women in the gospels and in the early church, and retells women’s modes of Christian resistance and faithfulness through martyrdom in the pre-Constantinian church, and later through ascetic practices. With the increasing institutionalization of the church, Moore shows how women’s exclusion from leadership led to the development of various communities and orders, including the Beguines (exclusively women) and the Lollards (both men and women). She points to how the Reformation shifted Christian conceptions of the ideal woman from the chaste virgin to the wife, an occurrence that feminist theologians considered more harmful than good. Attention is given to how this period in western Christianity was marred by the persecution of women engaging the supernatural, or who were suspected of such activities labeled as evil. Moore argues that during the nineteenth century, western Christianity’s shift to an emphasis on the Holy Spirit led to women’s return to prominent roles in the church, through increased sectarian movements, as well as local and global missions. This section of the book does particularly well in centering lesser known figures such as the first Native American saint, Kateri Tekakwitha, and African-American missionary Maria Fearing. Moore ends her text by providing insights into the contemporary roles and status of women in the church, with attention to how feminist activism has played a part in institutional advancement of women religious and how Christian feminist theorists are challenging Christianity through their analysis of an increasing globalized and economically disparate society (150). She notes that women continue to have quite a way to go in their incorporation into the full life of the church. Yet, within the academy, and various forms of activism and movements for peace, women leaders have emerged on an international scale.

Her sociological analysis of the influence of women within the church is of particular interest. She explains how admission to the Middle Ages' monasteries—products of “elite religion” (65, 75)—became for nuns a way of disowning their privileged class. Drawing from sociologist Rodney Stark, she also points out how Christian women who married pagan men played a particularly poignant role in the expansion of Christianity as they did not participate in infanticide as a non-Christian might. These women decenter the “chastity of wealthy women,” many of whom are saints and mystics often venerated in the Christian tradition. Moore re-inscribes “the marriage and motherhood of ordinary women” as pivotal for the Christianity’s proliferation (65).

Moore highlights both the notable strides and shortcomings of women in their historical journeys of Christian faithfulness. Her contribution stands out in the recovery of lesser-known histories that would be of particular value to readers who desire not only an overarching look into Christian histories, but a probing one as well. Preaching students interested in feminist theology and/or the vast accomplishments women in Christianity would appreciate this read.

Elyse Ambrose Minson, Drew University, The Theological School, Madison, NJ