Review of Rebecca Moore, *Women in Christian Traditions* (Women in Religions Series), New York: New York University Press 2015, 209 pp., ISBN 976-1-4798-2175-4

BY JANET ECCLES, INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER, GRANGE-OVER-SANDS, UK

Women in Christian Traditions offers a concise and accessible examination of the roles women have played in the construction and practice of Christian traditions, revealing the enormous debt that this major world religion owes to its female followers. So runs the book's promotional blurb. Professor of Religious Studies at San Diego State University, author Rebecca Moore admits that covering such a long historical period while remaining concise is quite a challenge. Moreover, other such tomes have appeared in the past, so why this one? Its claim to originality lies in its feminist theological approach which looks at 'saints, seers and scholars', recovering forgotten and obscured moments in history so that a fuller interpretation of the history of women in the Christian tradition may be realised. The author combines history with historiography, as well as using sociological and anthropological methods to examine people and their behaviours.

Divided into seven chapters, the book begins with a discussion of Eve in the Hebrew bible and ends with that of women's roles in the contemporary church. Eve's story sets the paradigm by which Christians have understood gender relations for many centuries. Moore believes that, although male theologians could have argued for women's equality, they have generally 'gravitated toward the position of sex polarity largely because of social and cultural norms' (p. 23), thus justifying patriarchy and uneven relations of power. In the gospel accounts, Jesus may make little mention of Eve, but she becomes very important to his successors (p. 26), both as scapegoat for much that is wrong with society but also as the one whose original transgression led to salvation through Christ.

The biblical mother Mary and Mary Magdalene are considered in Chapter two. Here, Moore draws attention to the centuries of Catholic Marian devotions and the visions which have inspired the faithful but also wants to hold up Mary Magdalene as an icon for feminist Christians. Based on various so-called Gnostic gospels materials, Moore draws attention to the possibility of her being

the wife of Jesus and a leader of the early church, standing her ground as the opponent of Peter, representative par excellence of the Roman Catholic Church.

The numerous female Christian saints, martyrs, patrons, sponsors, widows and virgin followers in the first centuries CE and the consequent spread of Christianity through the Roman Empire and beyond are the subject of chapter three. It seems to have been women rather than men who were drawn to the faith, possibly because it had validated women in leadership roles and practised a countercultural universal ethic of care.

Chapter four charts the medieval period, with the division into (Roman) Western Christianity and its Eastern base in Constantinople. Women in the East led a secluded existence, nonetheless, they are known to have been sponsors and manufacturers of icons, often used in their private devotions, while the East also saw the birth of coenobitic monasticism: a fifth of monasteries in Constantinople being for women.

A more intellectual form of Christian women's devotion developed in the West, with nuns copying manuscripts, composing sermons, hymns, poetry, devotional works, in the face of increasing hostility from the male hierarchy. Women often presided over double monasteries in the early medieval period, later suppressed by the Catholic church. Heloise, Hildegard of Bingen, Clare of Assisi, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mechthild of Magdeburg, the self-determining and self-supporting Beguines, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Joan of Arc, all form part of a long list making significant contributions to the life of the church throughout this long period.

Chapter five enters a darker period: the schisms and struggles of the reformations (Moore mentions five), when Protestant man may have been freer to commune with his God without priestly intervention, but Protestant woman became wedded to *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (children, kitchen, church). The advent of Quakerism allowed women some freedom to speak in their own name but 'witches' were ruthlessly hunted down and persecuted by Protestant and Catholic alike. The two Catholic saints, Teresa of Avila and Angela Merici, continue in the tradition of women Religious, that is, women who have become nuns, of previous centuries. The end of the 18th century saw free-thinking Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* which has been hailed as a seminal feminist text but, as Moore points, Christine de Pisan (and others) had been trailblazers in earlier centuries.

Moore labels chapter six 'Spirit-filled women in the 19th century', describing women who, prompted by the Holy Spirit, felt impelled to challenge previous societal female norms by speaking at camp meetings during periods of religious revival and openly advocating the pursuit of holiness as they promoted Wesleyan Methodism. Prominent among the missionary women of this period was Maria Fearing, an African American who worked for many years in the Congo Presbyterian Mission. I was surprised, however, to see no mention of the African American Christian campaigner for Black women's rights, Sojourner Truth. (Chapter seven gives some space to Black women's struggles for recognition and their achievements both in USA and further afield.)

Although Ann Lee founded the Shakers in the 18th century, it was her successor Lucy Wright who developed the movement in the next. Mary Baker Eddy of the Christian Scientists figures as another prominent female pioneer, as Lee and Wright, of the idea of the motherhood as well as fatherhood of God. Ellen G White co-founded the Seventh Day Adventists during this period while it is

African American Lucy Farrow who should be credited with introducing the leadership of the Pentecostal movement to glossolalia.

Chapter seven covers the last hundred years or so and charts women's involvement in the social gospel in the first part of the 20th century and their struggles for ordination in the second, still not achieved in the Roman Catholic or Orthodox church and only at the end of the 20th century in UK. Mention is made of the order of deaconesses maintained both in the early church until the high Middle Ages in the Eastern tradition and its revival in Orthodox Christianity in the nineteenth century. Attention is paid briefly to Christian women activists in the global south, including Indonesian female seminarians, a feminist religious order in the Philippines and women peace-making activists in Liberia.

The concluding epilogue posits that today's Christian woman might be Martha, the bustling woman who is busy with mundane and domestic chores and who berates her sister Mary, when Jesus comes to visit, for not helping her. She is, however, as likely to be Mary, the intellectual who sits at the feet of Jesus to listen to what he has to say (Luke's Gospel, Chapter ten). There has been considerable emphasis in much history of the Christian traditions on women being physically active in caring for church buildings and the people in them. There has been less until more recent times on the women intellectuals. The author contends that the church has always had – and still needs – both and this book attempts to take a historical perspective of both.

While there may not be a huge amount in this book that is completely new, particularly in the earlier chapters, it is most certainly accessible and does fulfil its aim in revealing the enormous debt that Christianity owes to its female followers. However, the main emphasis, I would argue, is on the Western traditions and more could possibly have been made of women in the global south, where the majority of today's Christians reside. It would, inevitably, have made the book longer. Moore is attempting to respond to the challenge of covering this vast sweep of Christian women's history while also remaining concise. With the caveats noted above, then, this will be a really useful book for students new to this area, regardless of their gender. One is left with a profound sense of admiration for what women through the ages, despite so much opposition from the (male-dominated) church, have achieved in the name of their particular Christian traditions.