Review of Gina Messina-Dysert & Rosemary Radford Ruether (eds.), *Feminism and Religion in the 21st Century: Technology, Dialogue, and Expanding Borders*, New York & Abingdon: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2015, viii + 218 pp, ISBN 978-0-415-83193-2

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This collection of essays by a variety of contributors (all from the United States) explores the impact and significance of new communication technologies – such as blogging, the internet, social media platforms and the Worldwide Web – on feminism and on religious feminism in particular. After a brief introduction by Ruether, summarizing its contents and lauding the pioneering nature of the text, the book consists of three unequal parts. Part 1, the largest, consists of essays on blogging and particular religious feminist blogs, the use of social media for feminist campaigning and activism, a discussion of how new technologies are changing feminist scholarship and methodology, and case studies from Mary Hunt on the history of how WATER (Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual) moved 'from typewriters to social networking', and Carol Christ on the use of the internet to access spiritual ancestors. Part 2, somewhat briefer, focuses on the creation of feminist and alternative communities via social technologies, with a number of case studies including Muslim feminist community, 'liquid Catholicism', the Mormon 'Ordain Women' movement, various virtual churches and synagogues, and one essay examining the use of new technologies within feminist pedagogy. Part 3, consisting of only 2 essays, explores issues around embodiment and technology, examining the use of video gaming and cyber feminism.

Like any edited collection of essays, this one is of variable content and quality. There seems to be an assumption in the majority of the essays that new technologies are benign and have had a universally positive impact on women and on religious feminism. This is the tenor of Ruether's introduction, which emphasizes the dominance of women in blogs and social media use and the

new opportunities afforded by social media for women to interrelate. Whereas women have historically been (and still in some contexts remain) excluded from full participation in religious communities – particularly from theological articulation and debate – and from leadership positions, the web and social media offer a free, democratic, non-hierarchical space in which participants may enjoy equal access and authority. Women have been enabled to develop new forms of on-line ministry ‘created by mutual recognition, not by hierarchical authority’ (p. 2). Social activism has been promulgated online in ways which would have been previously unthinkable. In all of these ways, it is claimed, the web, internet and social media have broken down boundaries, challenged patriarchal hierarchy and control, created global feminist communities, enabled new forms of theology, ministry and liturgy to flourish and had an empowering effect on women’s lives (as well as others marginalized by sexuality or gender). Messina-Dysert speaks of an ‘online feminist revolution’ (p. 9) and regards online technology itself as inherently ‘feminist in nature’ (p. 9), since ‘it eliminates hierarchies, is based largely on personal experience, and provides women with the ability to connect with other women’ (p. 10). Feminist blogs are the consciousness raising groups of the 21st century (p. 11). ‘Online technology has changed the way the feminist movement functions and online feminism has intersected with religion to expand borders, build new frontiers and uplift women’s roles within their traditions’ (p. 17).

This optimistic view of social media is shared by many of the contributors, sometimes combined with a rather historically uninformed, naïve version of feminism. Some of the earlier essays in particular – for example those by Messina-Dysert, Monica A. Coleman with C. Yvonne Augustine, and Caroline Kline – which appear to identify with third or fourth wave feminism, write as if ignorant of first and second wave feminism, and seem to operate with an uncritical notion of religious liberalism and gender equality that do not take into account the limitations of notions of equal access, democracy, free participation and so on. It is naïve to assume that all have equal access to social media and new technologies, or that oppressive power dynamics cannot continue to function via social media, or that issues of control, hierarchy and legitimization do not continue to operate, albeit in different and perhaps more hidden (and therefore potentially more dangerous) ways. The need for ethical safeguards and the difficulties of effectively ‘policing’ the internet are recognized by only a few writers. The ubiquity of new technologies, their intrusion into every arena of life, and the ways in which they are changing human interaction and relationship are by no means neutral, and not all feminists embrace these changes unambiguously. The replacement of face-to-face encounter by screen-to-screen interaction, with the loss of opportunities for human touch as well as the deep human gaze; the reduction of a three-dimensional to a two-dimensional exchange; the erasure of time and space constraints – all of these are profoundly changing the nature of human interaction in ways which should not simply be assumed to be benign.

A few essays stand out for me in their more critical, nuanced treatment of new technologies and their impact on religious feminism. Hoover’s discussion of new forms of ‘liquid Catholic’ online churches recognizes the ambivalence of social media, and offers some genuinely theological analysis of the phenomenon. He acknowledges critiques of virtual communities such as those made by Kam Ming Wong and Gary A. Mann, which suggest that these may be superficial and marked by a ‘tech-gnosticism’, which promotes a disembodied and

technical reason. He offers a range of criteria for assessing the theological life of virtual churches, including sacramentality (that is, giving full recognition to the embodiment of ecclesial experience) and what Hoover describes as 'richness' and 'fullness', aesthetic criteria which evaluate the extent to which virtual church experience is able 'to evoke the broadness, ambiguity, and mystery of human experience of God' (p. 124). Ott's theological analysis of open source technologies draws on the work of Heidi A. Campbell, who stresses the need for the spiritual, moral and theological shaping of technological developments. Ott affirms: 'one cannot view technology as a morally neutral tool, but rather as an interactive, mutually constitutive relationship' (p. 142). There is thus a need to analyse the ways in which technologies may reinforce but also disrupt, as well as transform, communities and individuals interacting with them (p. 142).

Despite the prevailing tone of an uncritical optimism about social media represented by this volume, taken as a whole the essays do raise a wide range of significant issues for exploration. There is no denying the rapidly changing nature of human forms of communication and relationship via new technologies. This volume can play a useful part in enabling constructive and critical moral and theological conversation about the significance of this for feminism and religion in the 21st century, not least by articulating a range of views on new technologies which make for a useful classroom resource.