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Editors' Introduction

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The contributions to this dynamic and variegated issue focus for the most part on issues in feminist political analysis and practice. They explore how the political shapes feminist scholarship and women's position in religion. The first three articles investigate in different ways how the political and the quest for power have an effect on women's position and work in different religious contexts: Judaism, Hinduism, and Christian Roman Catholic biblical scholarship. These three articles are followed by a review essay, "The Christian Right's Discourse on Gender and the Bible," which analyzes the political strategies of the Christian Right in the United States. The different responses to the lead-in article of the roundtable discussion titled "Feminist Studies in Religion and The*logy In-Between Nationalism and Globalization" focus on how the political discourse of nationalism affects and influences feminist theological work in different social-geographical locations. We conclude the issue with a Living It Out article that critically reflects on the author's experience and work to bring about political change. These essays, which explore the power play between politics and religion, are deepened in the section In a Different Voice by a rich range of poetry that continues to sound the same melody of struggle, gender, and power. We are grateful to all contributors for this rich intellectual fare.

In "The Political Transformation of Gender Traditions at the Western Wall in Jerusalem," Stuart Charmé presents a feminist historical analysis of the conflicts and contention regarding women's ritual roles at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. He argues that the "imposition of stricter rules for women's behavior at the Western Wall" has been affected by two different struggles for power. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Arabs and the British controlled the area of the Wall and Temple Mount. Hence, a struggle ensued between Jewish and non-Jewish men over the power of control; whereas in the period after 1967, when Israel gained control, the power struggle over this sacred spot involved Orthodox and liberal Jews. Charmé argues that in both instances "the assertion of Jewish power took the form of enhanced expressions of Jewish masculinity and the increasing marginalization of Jewish women."

Dianne Jenett's essay, "A Million *Shaktis* Rising: Pongala, a Women's Festival in Kerala, India," does not address the political struggle over masculine power but details a ritual traditionally performed by Dalit wo/men (i.e., sup-

pressed and exploited people) in Kerala, South India. Her research “attempts to place women ‘center stage’” and to record the voices of some women who speak about their own ritual experiences of empowerment in and through their ritual participation. Jenett concludes:

Many streams of Devi worship come together at Attukal. The fierce Goddess of justice who protects the poor and oppressed, the metaphysically sophisticated and encompassing Goddess of the upper castes, the agricultural Goddess of the land who menstruates, the Bhagavati who has been the center of family life for generations, the Amma who listens and cares for her children regardless of their caste, religion, or creed—all are contained in the iconography, traditions, and rituals of Attukal Temple.

In his contribution, “Jane Schaberg, Raymond E. Brown, and the Problem of the Illegitimacy of Jesus,” Frank Reilly details a quite different struggle over power: the struggle over the power of scholarly definition, which has far-reaching political and religious implications. The struggle over the power of naming on which Reilly reports took place between the Roman Catholic Christian Testament scholar Raymond E. Brown and the feminist Christian Testament scholar Jane Schaberg over the interpretation of the infancy stories in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Whereas for Brown the problem of the virginal conception of Jesus was the problem of its historicity, for Schaberg the exegetical problem was engendered by the dogmatic reading of the text. Only someone who approaches the text with a dogmatic lens faces such a historical conundrum, Schaberg argued. A critical feminist historical approach to the texts can detect the illegitimate conception tradition in the Gospels and see that they probably speak about the rape of Mary, an interpretation also found in a later Jewish tradition. Reilly underscores the political price paid by both scholars because of the attacks by the Roman Catholic Right but stresses that Schaberg paid more “dearly.” Given that other feminist scholars upheld the “virginal conception of Jesus” interpretation, Reilly seeks to intervene in this argument by elucidating the plausibility of Schaberg’s thesis and demands that her work should become the necessary reference point for scholars who study the infancy narratives, just as the work of Brown has been until now. The exegetical subtleties of Reilly’s argument may be of less interest to readers who are not biblical scholars or Christians, yet his detailed analysis of the politics of interpretation and scholarship should be of great concern to all of us.

The importance of critical feminist biblical scholarship in the struggle over the power of naming in religion is expanded and underscored by Susanne Scholz. In her review essay she documents the Christian Right’s use of the Bible in fashioning a powerful alliance between right-wing politics and right-wing religion. She argues that three major positions characterize the Christian

Right's discourse on gender and the Bible. All three positions share faith in the divine authority of the Bible but differ in their understanding of gender: The "complementarian" position maintains that women and men "are equal but different." The evangelical "egalitarian" or "feminist" position, which is a marginal position, rejects the notion of "equal but different" and argues that the Bible, correctly understood, teaches the equality of women. A third position, which Scholz dubs the "moderate evangelical" position but which is found in a variety of Christian denominations, articulates antifeminist scholarship and insists on the masculinity and fatherhood of God. In her conclusion Scholz insists on the importance of analyzing the sociopolitical locations of biblical interpretations. We are grateful to her for such an incisive political analysis and very timely review essay.

The roundtable continues the discussion on the sociopolitical location of progressive feminist scholarship. Like Scholz's review article, the lead-in essay by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza focuses on a most powerful discourse of today: "nationalism." It maintains that feminist studies in religion and feminist theology have not sufficiently discussed the politics and impact of the rhetoric of nationalism on the lives of women and argues for articulating a transnational feminism in the context of globalization. The respondents critically and constructively address this thesis from the perspective of their different sociopolitical locations and experiences: Mary E. Hunt and Sharon D. Welch as U.S. citizens; María Pilar Aquino and Nami Kim as, respectively, Mexican and Korean feminist scholars living and teaching in the United States; Gemma Tulud Cruz as a Filipina scholar studying in the Netherlands; and Kathleen McPhillips from an Australian perspective situated in the contexts of the many different voices of the Pacific region. We are grateful to each and every one for producing on very short notice such an intellectually variegated and stimulating discussion, and we hope that many readers will continue the debate.

We conclude this issue with a Living It Out essay by Rita Nakashima Brock. In "Fantastic Coherence," she details how her professional experience and development began to coalesce around her anguish and outrage about right-wing Christian politics, prompting her move from academic administration to the creation of a think tank for progressive religions. In this move from academic to political practice, her relationship to her own Christian tradition was changing as well. In writing her first feminist work, she had understood herself as struggling from the margins of Christianity to make space for wo/men. Now she discovered a new religious center: paradise—the fullness of life that inspires our struggles in biblical religions for justice and well-being. Hence, we want to conclude this issue on the political and the religious with Brock's almost lyrical words:

This willingness to embrace rather than reject the world gives impetus

to religious work for a just and sustainable common good. In this work, we struggle for what we most love and simultaneously experience the pain of the world at its deepest. Much is promised to us in this work, as it asks much of us, this knowing of the fullness of life. It is a knowing that bestows the equanimity that comes with courage, the justice that comes with struggle, the love that comes with openness, the pleasure that comes with embodied life, the joy that comes with beauty, and the peace that comes with wisdom.