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Prefatory Note

Martha J. Reineke
University of Northern Iowa

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Prefatory Note

The essays in this journal are a collective effort in feminist scholarship. What is feminist scholarship? The intent and focus of feminist scholarship is wonderfully illustrated in a student's response to a handbill taped to my office door that announces: "*What is Feminism? Come and Find Out. First Feminist Mass Meeting.*" On moving closer, one reads: "*February 17, 1914, 8:00 p.m., People's Institute.*" The student commented in astonishment, "I didn't know there were feminists in 1914!" Without knowing it, the student captured a central aspect of feminist scholarship: feminist scholarship is scholarship that addresses the "I didn't know" which surround the life histories and experiences of women who, in any time period, quest after equality.

The essays in this volume grew out of the "I didn't know" expressed by five students in my course "Women and Christianity" in the spring of 1987. Offered by the Department of Philosophy and Religion at UNI since 1984, "Women and Christianity" was developed by the department in recognition of the important place of feminist research in a university program in religious studies. "Women and Christianity" is of interest to majors in religion and other humanities disciplines, as well as to students pursuing the women's studies minor at UNI. Offered at night to accommodate students who are employed elsewhere during the day, "Women and Christianity" also attracts students who have an interest in women's studies but who are not engaged in degree programs at UNI.

During the fall of 1987, five students from the spring 1987 class and I formed a writing group to work toward publication of ideas first explored in essay exams the previous semester. The essays gathered here represent the cumulative efforts of this writing community. In diverse ways, each student's essay addresses an important "I didn't know" of feminist scholarship: Hagar's and Tamar's stories, usually neglected by readers of the Old Testament, are brought to view; Thecla, a woman in ministry with the Apostle Paul, is discovered for the first time; *The Color Purple*, already a classic of black women's literature, is explored for its profound theological significance; and patriarchy, only dimly a feature of everyday experience, is examined under the bright light of critical scholarship. Together, these essays typify current feminist scholarship in religion.

In these essays, the students attend to a fundamental principle of feminist scholarship: people without a memory, without a story to tell, are forever vulnerable to oppression. The students became acquainted with this

principle on a theoretical level in the course "Women and Christianity." They learned from historians that the roots of liberation are historical. To have roots, to have a history, is to have arrived at the necessary beginning point for establishing an identity. Women's liberation, they were told by historians, will only succeed if women today reclaim their past and the memory of struggles for liberation to be found in the past. Women must not only recover women's lives from neglect but also reconstruct history. Reading not only the lines of the text that is patriarchy but also between the lines of that text, they will learn that although patriarchy is the message, the message is not co-terminal with reality. The text that records the marginality of women does not prove the actual absence of women from the making of history.

In the essays collected in this volume, the students have moved from theory to practice: their essays reclaim and reconstruct history. As they attend to women's history, these students are nurturing roots on which a new growth of freedom from past oppression may spring forth and blossom.

In assigning their ideas to the printed page of a published journal the students highlight another tenet of feminist scholarship: "no documents, no history." Women without a documented history are like a civilization which must reinvent the wheel in each generation because every hundred years a catastrophic event occurs that destroys all memory of the wheel. For such a civilization, time stands still because the new developments that would follow upon the invention of the wheel are forever postponed as creative energies circle again and again around the same beginning point. Women's situation is analogous to that civilization's, for they too have engaged in cycles of self-discovery, catastrophe, and reinvention which have occurred, over and over, for centuries. That women today know nothing, for example, of the women ministers in second century Christianity or of the strong feminist movement in the 19th century, means that they face the daunting prospect of "reinventing the wheel," whether they are studying for the ministry or claiming equal rights in the workplace. Unaware of earlier efforts of their forefathers, women's creative energies cycle always around the same initial forays for equality. Women mark time rather than make progress.

For this reason, *Draftings in Feminist Studies in Religion*, like other efforts to document women's lives and histories, represents a special commitment to women's liberation, one that the daughters or granddaughters of its authors may come to appreciate more than the authors themselves. *Draftings in Feminist Studies in Religion* counters the cycle of "no documents, no history, no liberation" with history and documentation.

In committing their ideas to the published page, its authors hope that theirs will be the last generation to “reinvent the wheel” of women’s equality, the last generation for whom the “I didn’t know” of women’s history comprise an obstacle to full autonomy and equality. These essays, linked with feminist scholarship elsewhere to form a small but sturdy “root-stock,” are both a permanent record of women’s history and a basis for new growth in freedom for future generations of women.

Martha J. Reineke
Assistant Professor of Religion