

Feminist Reconstructions of Christian Doctrine, by Kathryn Greene-McCreight

reviewed by [Katherine Sonderegger](#) in the [January 2, 2002](#) issue

Feminist Reconstructions of Christian Doctrine: Narrative Analysis and Appraisal. By Kathryn Greene-McCreight. Oxford University Press, 175 pp., \$29.95.

Can feminism and Christianity co-exist?" This provocative question ends Kathryn Greene-McCreight's book, but it might as well begin it, since it animates the entire work. The book's title might suggest a "comprehensive survey of feminist theology," an exposition and analysis of major works in the field. But "those who expect such will only be disappointed," Greene-McCreight warns us early on. She sets herself a more modest and strongly methodological task: to "use William Christian's observations about the relationship between doctrine and truth and the related observations of George Lindbeck and Hans Frei about the biblical narrative and its role in theology [in order] to examine feminist theologies to see how they fit the patterns outlined in the theory."

Readers familiar with those names will recognize the source of this book's subtitle. Readers unsure of their way around Christian, Lindbeck and Frei, the "Yale School" trio, might well wonder just how we get from feminism and Christianity to the technical thickets of "second order reflection," "governing doctrines," "figured narratives" and the irreversible "flow of interpretation" that crop up wherever that simple word "story" appears these days in Protestant theology.

It will take us a good way into this searching, careful and deeply scholarly book to explore, however briefly, the fit between the two halves of Greene-McCreight's title. I might put the problem this way: What would lead an author to assume that the relationship between feminist theology and the Christian tradition could be illuminated by examining narrative and its place in the Bible? Greene-McCreight devotes her book to answering that question.

She begins with an opening chapter on the methodological claims of the Yale School. The Christian Bible, so this school tells us, should be read as one long story, moving from creation to fulfillment in Christ. As we read that story, we and our whole world become lit up in its light and conformed to its shape and goal. As in any great realistic novel, the characters, places and conflicts of the biblical story are unique: we can no more replace Zacchaeus with a generic abstraction--greedy merchant--than we can pluck Casaubon out of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and replace him with a generic ineffectual rationalist. Moreover, Christian theology as a whole works something like a story. It stands at some remove from the story--at the "second order"--but draws out the rules or "governing doctrines" that allow the scriptural story to speak and mold us as its grateful auditors.

Greene-McCreight especially favors Christian's form of these rules, a kind of strict implication or entailment that moves from authentic doctrine to that which is held to be true and right. (Logically: if A is authentic, then it is true and right-- $A=T/R$.) Unlike its converse--if a doctrine is true and right, then it is authentic ($T/R=A$)--Christian's schema allows secular truths to exist outside the faith. But they need not be accepted into the authentic doctrines of the religious community. The world of Christian practice and story stands on its own, generated from its own resources, and moves out into the larger world to engage and shape it to the form and character of Christ.

This pattern of narrative identity and norms characterizes, Greene-McCreight claims, authentic or "classical Christian theology," summed up in the creedal definitions at Nicea and Chalcedon. Where does this leave feminist theology? Greene-McCreight recognizes several strands in religious feminism: biblical, mainline and post-Christian. Only biblical feminists are taken as real candidates for the narrative reading of scripture and followers of the $A=T/R$ pattern of doctrine. Post-Christian feminists, to no one's surprise, have no interest in such strictures.

Mainline feminist theologians, then, come in for the greatest scrutiny in this book, as they share broad Christian commitments but fail to meet the criteria of narrative reading and doctrine. Greene-McCreight's breadth is impressive. She examines the work of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Sallie McFague, Rita Nakashima Brock, Rosemary Ruether, Susan Thistlethwaite and Elizabeth Johnson at some length. Many other feminists, both secular theorists and theologians, are treated at least in passing. Greene-McCreight's mastery of this wide range of feminist work is one of the book's great strengths.

She presents "feminism" not as a monolith or abstraction, but as the dynamic, varied and contradictory force that any living movement embodies. And she takes mainline feminist theologians at their word. She investigates their doctrines--on sin, Christology and the Trinity--not simply their methods or feminist aims. Greene-McCreight prepares us to ask the very question she poses at the end of her book: "Would we agree that . . . much mainline feminist theology . . . is in error?"

Here, I think we should move carefully. At this early stage of "narrative analysis" it can only be a claim, not an established fact, that Christian orthodoxy has always been narrative in character, even implicitly. The tremendous variability of Christian faith has made general claims like this one--or Daphne Hampson's assertions about the "uniqueness of Christ"--improbable or at least premature. And we might reflect, too, on the entailment William Christian proposed and Greene-McCreight endorsed as the proper "doctrine about doctrines." Mainline feminist theology could be viewed plausibly as adhering to the A=T/R schema in its contrapositive form: these feminist hold that certain Christian doctrines are not true or right--they are patriarchal or oppressive--and are therefore not authentic doctrines of the church. It may be that second-order analysis of doctrine cannot yield as much insight into Christian teaching as we might hope.