

## Book Review

*The Faith Lives of Women and Girls: Qualitative Research Perspectives*

Eds. N. Slee, F. Porter, & A. Phillips

Farnham: Ashgate, 2013

ISBN 9781-4094-4618-7, 278pp (hbk), £65

Jocelyn Bryan

Given the establishment of feminist theology over the past forty years, it is surprising that there is a paucity of feminist practical theology. Authors such as Elaine Graham, Bonnie McLure-Miller and Heather Walton have all made significant contributions to theory and methodology in practical theology, but empirical research into the lived experience of faithful women is still limited. This book makes a considerable contribution to addressing the void. In a collection of 19 essays by established and new female researchers, the findings of a wide range of predominantly qualitative small-scale research projects are drawn together; it is a valuable resource.

The book is divided into 5 sections. In Part 1, Nicola Slee and Jan Berry provide separate reflections on the distinctive forms of research adopted by the contributors to the book. For Slee, qualitative research is more than a scholarly enterprise; it encompasses a spiritual practice in which the core values of the faith community may be reflected and enshrined within the research process. The spiritual nature of the research is also influenced by the location and context of the research, and the book offers a variety of contexts and locations. Nevertheless, the chapters are bound together by a perceived shared location on a liminal margin. This is a place portrayed as having 'little status, recognition or understanding from other theologians or social scientists'.<sup>1</sup> It is a challenging, sometimes harsh location, and one senses the mutual support, conviction and commitment shared by the contributors.

Every chapter challenges the reader to 'hear into speech' the lives of the women and girls who provide the rich material for the research. Their lives are 'sacred texts', which reveal the texture of their faith in the midst of the painful and the ordinary facets of their experience. For Slee, the publication of such research is about claiming power and visibility as women, claiming a place in the public arena and demanding that their voices are heard.<sup>2</sup> The dichotomy of public and private is challenged by Berry. Taking up Arendt's notion of a breakdown of public/private dualism, she suggests that, although women's spirituality and ritual making has traditionally been held in the safe space of the private domain by speaking out into the public

---

<sup>1</sup>N. Slee, F. Porter, & A. Phillips (eds), *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls: Qualitative Research Perspectives*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.

domain, it challenges us to ‘transgress boundaries and move from privacy to prophecy’.<sup>3</sup>

The four chapters of Part II focus on the faith lives of girls, younger woman and older women. The religiosity of Anglican Women born in the 1920s and 1930s is explored by Abby Day, who contests the notion that women are more religious than men and that their faith is less active and serious by pointing to their performance of religious work on behalf of themselves, their families and their communities as a significant mark of their religiosity. At the other end of the age spectrum, Anne Phillips interviewed 17 girls from free churches, identifying their struggles with Christian teaching and the liminal nature of puberty and other transitions in parental relationships, changing schools and peer relationships.

Part III allows for a comparison between different contexts and locations and their impact on the response of the faith of women and girls. The response of Protestant and Catholic women to the troubles in Northern Ireland begins to identify how the conflicts have shaped the way in which women have courageously embodied their faith. From a different context, Manon Ceridwen James examines the influence of the expectations and culture of the dominant religion in Wales on women’s sexual morality. Using Welsh poetry as a resource for an authentic moral sensibility, she contrasts the shaping of Welsh women’s identities with that of powerful English maleness. In the remaining chapters in this section, the impact of a particular church culture on women and the roles which they feel able to inhabit is researched. Ruth Perrin considers how role models influence young evangelical women focussing on the lack of positive biblical role models in teaching and preaching. Whilst, Desta Davis investigates preaching in the Black Pentecostal tradition, examining the use of gender imagery and gender assumptions in sermons. Each challenge the teaching and worship in these congregational settings to respond to the gifts and needs of women.

Part IV brings together research into the variety of women’s beliefs, practices and spirituality. The use of silence, a feminist ritual, religious attachment and the experience of spiritual accompaniment shed light on hidden transformative experiences in the faithful women who contributed to the small-scale studies described.

The final section pays homage to the resilience of women’s faith in the face of death, abuse and birth. These are moving chapters which provide stories of courage and hope. They illustrate the messiness, pain and distortions of real-life experience, and how faith narratives are woven into personal narratives in such a way as to sustain and transform women’s lives.

To the extent that it brings to our attention key aspects of women’s and girls’ faith experiences and gives them a rich description, this book makes a valuable

---

<sup>3</sup> a) Hannah Ardent, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edn (Chicago, IL, 1998 [1958]); b) N. Slee, F. Porter, & A. Phillips (eds), *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls: Qualitative Research Perspectives*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 35.

contribution to feminist practical theology. However, it offers little by way of theological reflection, and this remains one of the key weaknesses in the majority of chapters. The conversation with theology and major theologians is notably absent. Despite much of the research being small-scale or in some cases pilot studies, they are the first, but significant, steps in building our understanding of the faith lives of women in the UK. Many women will identify with the case studies and quotations cited, although I suspect others will find them difficult to relate to: even alien to their own experience. Some readers will be uncomfortable with the nature of the research and its methodology. But one of the strengths of the book is its attention to methodology. Each chapter details how the researcher is personally situated within their research. It reflects upon their impact on the research and the boundaries which might have become blurred in the process. Inevitably, the question of validity remains. Acknowledging these issues and subjecting them to both self-scrutiny and the scrutiny of others does not necessarily make that particular question go away. Added to which, the small numbers of participants involved in many of these projects makes any insights tentative and particular.

This is a book written by women for women. Will men read it? I hope so; if only to ask the question, should practical theology be addressing the same questions to the faith lives of men and boys.

[www.theologyandministry.org](http://www.theologyandministry.org)