Female Faith Practices

This book explores female faith practices, drawing on qualitative research to consider how women navigate and create spiritual and religious practices. The chapters cover Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist contexts as well as newer spiritual movements. The contributors examine prayer and ritual practices and familial, educational and ritual spaces and relationships in a variety of cultural settings. The volume reflects on the ways in which women subvert traditional or patriarchal religious practices and spaces, both problematising and expanding existing notions of ‘religious practice’. It also touches on research itself as a form of spiritual and academic practice, considering ways in which women challenge androcentric modes of research as well as ways in which the subject of research – in this case, female faith – may challenge the researcher’s convictions and practice.

Blending case studies with empirical research, this book will be an outstanding resource to theologians and researchers interested in Practical Theology, Gender Studies, Sociology of Religion and Anthropology.

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Acknowledgements

A book of this kind does not come to completion without a great deal of effort and support from a variety of quarters. We are grateful to all the contributors to the volume for their willingness to revise original conference papers so that they worked well as chapters with a specific focus. More widely, members of the symposium and delegates at the 2019 conference have each played a part in supporting the development and completion of the book. Our commissioning editor at Routledge, Katherine Ong, and Yuga Harini, editorial assistant for the Religion and Anthropology titles at Routledge, have been both patient with the project during various delays and unfailingly helpful in providing advice and information when we have needed it. Dr Alison Woolley, a long-standing member of the symposium, has generously given a huge amount of time and painstaking work to prepare the manuscript for submission to Routledge, ironing out inconsistencies and clarifying the text. Finally, readers of the previous two books have been generous in letting us know how helpful those volumes have been to them in their own studies, which gives us confidence that this book will receive a warm reception. So, we thank our readers, both new and continuing, for your interest in and support of our endeavours.
The nature, contexts, and aims of the book

This is the third collection of essays arising from the Symposium on the Faith Lives of Women and Girls, a gathering of feminist researchers meeting since 2010 who employ largely (though not exclusively) qualitative methods to research female faith.¹ The group is based at the Queen’s Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham, and usually meets there but has, on occasion, moved to other locations around the UK. The first book, *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls*, gathered 19 papers from early Symposium meetings, representing a range of research undertaken by its members. The work of early-career, never-before-published scholars, including those working at Master’s level, sits alongside chapters by more established members. Although many of the pieces in the book represent work that is small in scale, most of the contributions are pioneering, breaking new ground in the empirical study of women’s and girls’ faith. Collectively, they contribute to a fuller, more rounded and nuanced, more rigorous, and critical account of female faith lives than was previously available. At the time of publication in 2013, we were able to claim, rightly: ‘our book represents the first significant gathering of a body of feminist qualitative research on the faith lives of women and girls within the British context’.² The second book, *Researching Female Faith*, published in 2018, has a specific focus on qualitative and feminist research methodology and methods. It explores how feminist researchers employ qualitative methodology and methods to study the faith lives of women and girls. In a way that is still rare in methodology texts – though gradually changing –

contributors describe in detail what they did and why, the challenges or difficulties they faced in developing their research design and how they overcame them or, sometimes, had to change tack and take a new approach. They discuss the variety of methodological frameworks available to them and, in some cases, the development of new methodologies and new variation on well-worn methods.³
In March 2019, the Symposium hosted its first, larger conference, entitled ‘The Faith Lives of Women and Girls: Identities, Experiences, Practices, and Beliefs’. This was very different from the normal, small-scale seminar-style meetings of the Symposium: generally, no more than 20 scholars gathered in a room pre-COVID, online during COVID, and, over the past year or more, taking hybrid forms mixing face-to-face presence with online attendance. We had become aware of growing interest in the work of the Symposium and a desire on the part of others who did not meet the criteria for membership to hear about the research of our members and engage with it, as well as to bring their own research and concerns into dialogue with the work of the Symposium. The criteria for membership of the Symposium are specific: it does not exist for feminist theological research more broadly (there are other fora for this), but specifically for qualitative studies into female faith. Seeking to respond to the wider interest, in 2018 we put out a call for papers and opened our doors to anyone who wanted to attend. More than 60 participants gathered in March 2019 for a two-day conference, with four keynote lectures, 28 papers, an open mic session of poetry, a variety of feminist rituals, and, of course, the conversation around meals, drinks, and formal sessions. This book, somewhat delayed due to COVID and other pressures faced by the editors, is a gathering of some of the offerings from the conference.

The conference and this book represent a broadening of the parameters of the Symposium in significant ways, which we welcome and intend to pursue in the coming years. Alongside the overwhelming White privilege of the Symposium, for most of its history the group has been broadly Christian; that is, whilst not every individual member would self-identify as Christian, the research represented by the Symposium has mostly focused on the faith lives of women and girls within, or on the edges of, Christian tradition. There has also been a strongly Anglican bias in our meetings and publications to date, which doubtless reflects the ongoing privilege of the Church of England within a UK context. Our 2019 conference invited Black women and global majority scholars whose expertise is in religious or spiritual traditions other than Christianity. Of our four keynote lectures, two focused on women in Islam (Yafa Shanneik spoke on ‘Performing the Sacred: The Female Body as a Form of Resistance in Shia Islam’ and Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor on ‘What Happens when Women “Own” Religious Spaces? Analysing the Experiences of Muslim Women’), one on female spirituality in contemporary wellbeing culture (Chia Longman on ‘The Art of Sacred Pampering and Radical Self-Care: Complicity, Resilience and Resistance in Contemporary Wellbeing Culture’), and the fourth was Nicola Slee’s reflections on the history and development of the Symposium, which formed the basis for this introduction. Of the large number of papers presented at the conference, many of which could not be included in this volume, traditions and topics ranged across the Red Tent movement, the politics of the veil, religion in the lives of women in asylum centres, Catholic girls and sex, crafting, knitting and female spirituality, atheism and faith, girls’ bodies as religious objects.
in classical Athens, women’s reading and writing practices both ancient and contemporary, same-sex marriage, female clergy wellbeing, women’s faith lives and disability, and much more. Religious traditions examined across the conference included Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity, as well as atheism, goddess movements, and inclusive spirituality traditions that do not think in terms of historic religious traditions.

Another broadening of perspectives represented by the conference and within this book concerns the movement away from a limited focus on the UK. That focus was always accidental rather than intentional, reflecting the fact that all the women attending the Symposium are rooted in the UK and that their research was UK-facing – although that has never meant a uniformity of perspective, and some of the most interesting papers have been those interrogating Welsh, Scottish, and Irish female faith identities and practices as well as the recognition of the diversity of ethnic and religious identities within contemporary Britain. The 2019 conference broadened our geographical horizons more obviously, with participants attending from across Europe, Africa, the Antipodes, and North America, and papers exploring female faith in Poland, Norway, Nigeria, Kuwait, and Bahrain, as well as London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Cardiff. This widening of perspectives and participants has only increased since 2019, with online and now hybrid meetings enabling women scholars to attend meetings of the Symposium from around the world.

The Symposium has always welcomed and encouraged a range of disciplinary perspectives on female faith, and this book demonstrates the richness of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary ways of studying faith. Theological, artistic, literary, and historical perspectives sit alongside psychological, sociological, economic, ethnographic, and autoethnographic studies, to mention only a few. This is another aspect of the broadening of perspectives evident in this book, although it has probably been more of an incremental change than a new direction.

What has not changed is the strategic commitment to the study of specifically female faith, whilst seeking to be open to new and emerging discourses on gender. The Symposium has never espoused a naively essentialist view of gender. We are well aware of discourses around gender that challenge a straightforward gender binary and invite recognition of gender as something fluid, dynamic, complex, and multi-layered. We are, of course, aware of the intersection of gender with many other dimensions of faith – age, class, social and geographical location, sexuality, gender variance, ethnicity, wealth and its opposite, poverty, the embodiment of faith in unique and different bodily conditions, and so on: in a word, intersectionality. Coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the concept of intersectionality is variously defined but, at its simplest, refers to the ways that race, class, gender, and other variables ‘intersect’ with one another and overlap in any individual or group identity.² It is widely used as a framework for understanding and analysing oppression. Many of the most creative papers at the Symposium are those
that bring the feminist commitment of prioritising female faith into dialogue with other liberation perspectives, or perspectives that explicitly challenge the feminist commitment of the Symposium. Thus, we have had papers on the faith of transwomen (one given by a cis male minister of a church with a predominantly LGBTQI+ congregation), as well as papers that challenge and critique the continuing White privilege of Symposium (it is encouraging to note increasing numbers of Black and global majority women working at Master's and doctoral level and contributing to Symposium gatherings). Whilst most of our meetings have been women only, we have occasionally invited men working on female faith to present papers, and our 2019 conference was open to all, however they identified in terms of gender (and of course, it is important to recognise the growing number of those who do not recognise the gender binary and do not identify as either male or female). It may well be that, in time, the strategic commitment to continuing to privilege the academic study of female faith will need to give way to a more fluid, shifting study of gender, but as long as women and girls are still massively disadvantaged along multiple indices of education, earnings, status, safety, rape, and domestic violence, and as long as women and girls continue to be marginalised and victimised in many religious traditions, the Symposium will continue to hold its commitment to researching female faith, even as it welcomes theoretical and methodological diversity and maintains a space for rigorous, critical, and nuanced conversation.

Female faith practices

Over the years, it is possible to detect a growing interest in the practice of faith and specific faith/spiritual practices, as a distinct focus of research and academic study. This is something that has always marked the discipline of practical theology, but has taken new impetus from a range of significant publications. In the UK, Elaine Graham’s *Transforming Practice* offered a powerful argument for the rigorous study of practice as a primary form of theological expression, not merely something that followed on from some other primary religious commitment, such as belief or dogma. In the USA, writings by practical theologians such as Dorothy C. Bass, Craig Dykstra, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Stephanie Paulsell, and others have explored the wide range of faith practices by which religious commitment is embodied and lived. ‘The Practices of Faith’ series, edited by Dorothy C. Bass, includes titles on a wide range of Christian practices, from the offering of hospitality to household economics, from prayer, testimony, singing, and forgiveness to the keeping of Sabbath and dying well. In *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters*, chapters are delightfully and imaginatively offered on spooning, swimming, camping, dancing, rocking, eclipsing, disciplining, imagining, unknowing, and collaborating, all perceived as oft-neglected embodied practical wisdom through which Christian discipleship is formed and deepened alongside the more obvious, traditional practices of prayer,
fasting, keeping Sabbath, and so on. At the same time, Lauren F. Winner, in The Dangers of Christian Practice,⁹ exposes some of the ways in which Christian sacraments have been deformed and abused to do terrible damage, as feminist liturgists such as Marjorie Procter-Smith, Teresa Berger, and Jan Berry have long known.¹⁰ In a series of case studies, Winner shows how the practice of eucharist in 13th-century Europe was used to legitimise anti-Semitism, how prayer was used by female slave-owners in the American South to subdue their slaves, and how affluent American families in our own time use baptism to endorse their own lineage and privilege.

From a more sociologically informed tradition, the notion of ‘lived religion’ has taken root in a range of European as well as American texts and contexts and now informs much scholarship worldwide. In Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life, Meredith B. McGuire orients the study of religious commitment away from allegiance to institutions and towards the practices of faith in everyday life.¹¹ Her work, like that of the others we have mentioned, attends to popular faith practices in the home (such as the erection of home altars, meal rituals, and rites of healing), political practices in pursuit of justice that are regarded by those who engage in them as religious commitments, and the centrality of the body to such everyday spirituality. She also shows how lived religion is strongly gendered, often enshrining a gender binary and patterns of dominance and submission which feminists seek to contest. Similarly, a collection of essays gathered by Nancy Ammerman around the same time as McGuire’s book appeared (and including an essay by McGuire) offers sociological accounts of ‘everyday religion’, largely but not exclusively in the USA, which demonstrate that religion is very much alive and kicking and bursting out of the institutional boundaries set by what were formally mainstream religious traditions.¹² Vrije Universiteit, in Amsterdam, has a Centre for the Study of Lived Religion within the Faculty of Religion and Theology, and many publications and research projects associated with it.¹³ Topics include the relationship between lived religion and praxis in practical theology, lived religion and trauma, lived religion and sexuality, and much more besides. Leading researchers include Ruard Ganzevoort, Srdjan Sremac, David J. Bos, Miranda Klaver, and Johan Roeland.¹⁴ Circling back to the UK, the work of Clare Watkins, Helen Cameron, James Butler, and others associated with the Theological Action Research approach has popularised the notion of theology that is done via ‘four voices’. Within this approach, ‘espoused theology’ is differentiated from ‘enacted theology’ (as well as ‘formal’ and ‘normative’ theologies), helpfully encouraging students to explore the relationship between what is professed and what is practised by religious believers and not to assume a straightforward correspondence or a one-way relation.¹⁵ Abby Day’s The Religious Lives of Older Lay Women¹⁶ and Caroline Starkey’s Women in British Buddhism¹⁷ represent significant ethnographic research on the lives of older Anglican women and ordained Buddhist women in Britain, respectively, whilst Yafa Shanneik’s The Art of Resistance in Islam extends the close study of women’s religious lives to the Middle East and beyond.¹⁸
Feminist, womanist, LGBTQI+, and body theologies, to mention only a few, have always paid close attention to the lived, experiential, and embodied forms of human faith, celebrating their diversity and refusal to be owned or controlled by religious institutions or spokespersons. These liberation theologies have been critical of too great an emphasis on right belief, noting how orthodoxy has often been employed to control and oppress women, children, nondominant men, and other disenfranchised groups. This is not to say, of course, that religious traditions do not seek to police and control religious practice and that there is not an equal need for scholars to pay close attention to the tendency for conformity of religious behaviour as well as religious belief. Indeed, some might argue that religious practice is more overtly and readily controlled than religious conviction since particular codes of dress, confinement to the home, or exclusion from particular roles can be more readily enforced than the inner sanctum of personal belief or imagination. In a similar vein to Winner’s work on the dangers of Christian practice, feminist accounts of prayer and liturgy have critiqued male appropriation of women’s capacity to give birth in baptismal rites and of women’s nourishing of their offspring from their own bodies in eucharistic practice from which, historically, women themselves were largely excluded. Be that as it may, the study of female faith practice has paid particular attention to the practice of faith within the home, in the education of the young, and in the care of the sick and elderly, amongst other locations – spaces that have, perhaps, been less overtly controlled by men and religious institutions than the public space of church, temple, synagogue, or mosque and, at the same time, have often been overlooked in accounts of how faith is nurtured, formed, and developed.

There is thus a range of reasons to focus on the study of female faith practices, and a rich range of resources and perspectives to inform such a study. Whilst not absent in our previous two collections, the focus on practice and practices within this third collection of papers from the Symposium on the Faith Lives of Women and Girls offers much to an understanding and awareness of female faith in our contemporary world.

A synopsis of the book

The third book from the Symposium begins where our second one ended, that is, with the practice of reflexivity in research. Three chapters from widely differing contexts and perspectives offer accounts of the authors’ practices of reflexivity and the challenges they faced in inhabiting their research as feminist practitioners. Grace Thomas, writing as both an Anglican priest and a feminist researcher, as well as a global majority woman and mother, places herself in the frame of her research on female clergy wellbeing, drawing out what self-care and flourishing can mean for female clergy in an institution that frequently places damaging expectations on women (all women, but perhaps especially those who are ordained or in authorised lay ministries) to care for everyone else, without limitation, except themselves.
Employing a ‘retrospective reflexive review’ of research she previously conducted, Thomas uses her more recent experience as a priest in the Church of England to critique the notion of ‘resilience’ and to press for a flourishing environment within which individual self-care is supported by institutional resources and practices.

Anna Szwed’s research context is very different, and her research project focused on the religious agency of Roman Catholic women in Poland. It resonates and connects with Thomas’s reflections through its discussion of resistance and subordination as key tropes within the lives of Roman Catholic Polish women (echoing Thomas’s reflections on resilience). But more pointedly, Szwed reflects in a similarly transparent way on the experience of conducting her research and the difficulties she experienced in doing it. First, she needed to challenge and subvert the dominant use of quantitative methods to examine Polish Catholicism; only by using in-depth one-to-one interviews could she excavate the nuanced meanings of diverse faith practices of the women included in the study. Second, she had to work with the prevailing assumption amongst her interviewees that she was, like them, a woman of Catholic faith when, in fact, she describes herself as ‘non-religious’, whilst having the experience of formation in Catholic faith. Szwed’s feminist identity was frequently challenged by her participants’ strong critique of feminist politics, particularly around abortion. Thus, her own position as a researcher was both highly liminal and costly, something she is at pains to interrogate for its impact on the research process and findings. Thirdly, Szwed seeks to challenge and problematise the notion of ‘agency’ as it is frequently used with regard to religious women, complicating understandings of what might be assumed to be conservative and non-emancipatory but, on closer examination, is revealed to support women in their self-determination.

The final chapter in this first section is by Clare Herbert, who offers a powerful account of how her own research on the experience and understanding of women in same-sex relationships transformed her own sense of herself, as a researcher, as an Anglican priest, and as a person in a committed same-sex relationship. She reflects on how undertaking the doctoral project became a process of revealing, to herself and others, and integrating fundamental aspects of her identity: her feminism, queer identity, faith, and priestly vocation. Recognising that her own public commitment to her partner in the rite of civil partnership had been ‘the single action which had most loudly empowered’ her became the motivating force for interviewing other lesbian and gay couples who had similarly undergone such a legal and public commitment. The process of conducting and analysing conversations with couples she knew from her own ministerial context became the crucible for working out her own theology of same-sex marriage and for facing and throwing off the taboos she had implicitly internalised through years of living in and working for a homophobic church. Herbert’s essay is most powerful for the way in which she evokes the dynamic, complex, surprising, and iterative nature of the research process, in which the selfhood of
the researcher, with all its accompanying convictions, beliefs, and habits, is continually challenged, expanded, and transformed.

Part Two turns to questions of space and identity, exploring how varied religious and spiritual spaces—literal, cultural, psychological, and digital—are employed by women to express and navigate their shifting cultural, religious, and spiritual identities. Lindsay Stewart explores her own journey out of a restrictive evangelical purity culture into what she calls a ‘post-purity landscape’ and reflects on the experiences of a group of six women she gathered from across the UK who were also navigating that transition. Her chapter charts several spaces: the space of the research group itself, which functioned as a pastoral support space as well as a space for gathering other women’s stories; then the contrasting spaces of purity culture, often assumed to be an American phenomenon but also existing in evangelical churches in the UK; and the post-purity landscape, which, of course, is not one space but many. She names and analyses the harm and damage done by rhetoric, restrictive codes, and taboos; the enforcement of tight emotional boundaries within purity culture; and the work of reclaiming a space on the other side of purity culture, marked by the embrace of complexity and the often-painful processes of relearning and rebuilding.

Madeleine Castro’s chapter examines the literal as well as spiritual space of the Red Tent movement: gatherings of women, often around the time of the new moon, for shared ritual, sometimes in red tents. Contrasting with Stewart’s account of purity culture, she describes how, for those who attend Red Tents, the space is construed as a safe space of connection, belonging, healing, and even transformation. She examines the claim made by Chia Longman that this movement is forging new forms of femininity, exploring in detail the Red Tent as a ceremonial space, as cultivating agape, and as embodying femininity. She shows how there are counternarratives within the Red Tent movement and how different forms of femininity are prized and embodied, from a supportive, non-judgemental expression to something that is more energetic and symbolic, centred around the concept of a ‘womb-space’ of the tent. Both expressions of femininity are formed through ritual that offers alternatives to dominant neo-liberal discourses as well as traditional religious rites.

Renasha Khan interrogates some ways in which millennial Muslim women use Instagram to curate new and creative versions of selfhood. This chapter examines the digital lives of Muslim women from the British Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets, London, demonstrating how the women use social media to empower themselves and assert their selfhood, to subvert binaries that define them in rigid confines of stereotypes of ‘Muslimness’. Khan analyses the ways in which the image-making and self-publishing aspects of social media apps like Instagram can both promote traditional patriarchies in idealised images of Muslim women and, at the same time, undercut such images by engendering feminist and post-feminist consciousness. Khan thus argues for the social and spiritual dexterity of millennial
Muslim women as they negotiate issues around representation, expectation, and aspiration in their everyday digital practices.

Women have always been intimately connected with the production and preparation of food and clothes, as well as other kinds of fabric, and their identities and most profound convictions have been embodied in food practices and the crafting and wearing of clothes. Part Three investigates female faith practices connected with food and fabric, in three chapters that interweave but also spin out into diverse settings and theologies. Beginning this section, Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz examines the ritual practices of Orthodox Jewish women observing *kashrut* (the complex of dietary laws). She contrasts the ways in which women approach ‘*kashrut* as practice’ with a male ‘*kashrut* as theory’ approach. In Orthodox Judaism, the kitchen is often still the preserve of women, with men largely excluded, whilst, until recently, men alone had access to the classic texts on *kashrut*, thus legislating this gender binary. Taylor-Guthartz examines the ways in which women learn about *kashrut* rules, the resources they use when dealing with *kashrut* problems, and the specific practices that they develop. The chapter is based on interviews with mainstream Orthodox Jewish women, which established that women learnt about *kashrut* from their mothers or other female relatives, whilst factors such as work, marriage, and later education often influenced their practices. When encountering problems, the women tended to consult their mothers or invoked common sense rather than turning to books or rabbis. Their solutions to problems often diverged from traditional rabbinic teaching, illustrating the tense relationship between elite, text-based culture and popular practice or lived religion.

Chapters by Allison Fenton and Donna Bowman focus on women’s practices, and the meanings associated with them, that employ the materiality of fabric. Allison Fenton examines the meaning-making processes of mothers who come to church to have their babies ‘christened’ (this is the preferred term over ‘baptism’ in the north-east of England where Fenton did her ethnographic research), arguing that ‘as mothers approach the church for christening, they also negotiate a family narrative which reinforces kinship bonds, family identity and continuity’. Listening to voices that are often ‘muted’ in official theology, Fenton offers her research as a way of reclaiming such women’s narratives and lives at the heart of church liturgy and ministry. Amongst other practices and aspects of ‘folk religion’ that she noted in the group of women she surveyed and interviewed, Fenton highlights the significance of the christening robe or shawl in reinforcing family identity and initiating the new baby into the family, preserving threads across generations. This was one of many material elements in the rite that enabled a public performance of family, ‘bringing together elements of official and folk religion through ritual and tradition, whilst at the same time reinforcing and perpetuating family narrative, connecting one generation with both the previous generation and the next’.

Donna Bowman’s research documents, examines, and analyses ‘the spiritual formation of women in prayer shawl ministries’. Her chapter draws on
Nicola Slee et al.

Interviews with lay women in the USA who are part of prayer shawl ministry groups, which meet regularly to craft together prayerfully and to plan for the presentation of their handcrafted wraps or blankets to sick and grieving persons. She shows how knitting and crocheting are perceived as a spiritual practice for the women involved in this ministry, ritualised through the offering of prayer, the lighting of a candle, or the saying of a blessing, and deemed to be particularly conducive to contemplative prayer and meditation. Whilst some of Bowman’s interviewees expressed shame over their failure to follow such prayer practices consistently, the groups they were part of developed distinctive rituals – such as the playing of quiet music, sitting in silence to knit, and also an opportunity for sharing what had been made and reflecting on the work together, thus creating a powerful group solidarity. Evidently, the practice of making prayer shawls embodied for the participants a meditative practice of being in the present as well as focusing outwards towards others in the intentionality of the act as a gift.

Female faith practices focused around food and fabric are very often rooted within the family and the home, and Part Four examines the influence of families and familial relationships on women’s spiritual formation. Claire Williams examines the meanings and challenges associated with young motherhood for women in the conservative, charismatic New Frontiers tradition. Her research ‘sought to understand the lives of women as they adapted to their changed circumstances upon becoming mothers and, in particular, the quotidian spiritual practices undertaken whilst raising young children at home’. Building on the work of Helen Collins, Williams identifies the discontent and loss experienced by young mothers in a church community in which their previous identities and daily lives changed dramatically after the birth of their babies. They struggled to find time to encounter God in the ways they had been used to, and they experienced worship services as conflictual spaces in which they found it hard to balance their own needs with their need to care for their children. Williams describes the ways in which women adapted their spiritual practices to work around the new constraints, such as changing their times of prayer and integrating prayer into the work of caring for their babies, although they were suspicious of adopting practices from other Christian traditions, in case these were no more than ‘empty rituals’. Certain hospitality practices, the prioritising of support for their husbands, and church practices such as sharing possessions via the ‘grace table’ are seen as distinctive of New Frontiers’ ecclesiology, whilst other practices are held in common with women across diverse denominations.

Sonya Sharma explores faith practices in relationships between Muslim sisters, noting that little sociological or psychological research has been conducted into sibling relationships in religious communities. Parents have tended to be key figures of study and research, regarded as central to religious socialisation. Asserting the significance of sisterhood in Muslim families, Sharma’s research is based on interviews with women who identified as Muslim and as sisters, representing a diverse range of ethnicities and ages.
The often-invisible relationships and everyday religious practices of sisters are revealed as rich and nuanced. Away from the public gaze, sisters inform and teach each other how to pray, how to comport themselves, how to ‘do Islam’ and ‘do family’ at the micro-level, for instance in an elder sister showing a younger sister how to wear the headscarf ‘properly’, in supporting and encouraging one another to fast during Ramadan, or in learning to share the kinds of ‘mothering work’ that elder Muslim girls, in particular, are expected to do in the family. Sisters could also experience conflict and disagreement over such everyday practices if one sister is perceived as more devout than another. Yet, on the whole, Sharma identifies that religious practices contribute to the closeness of Muslim sisters’ relationships.

Finally, in Part Five, three essays offer perspectives on women’s work and, at the same time, raise profound questions about the value of women’s faith lives in economic and vocational terms, especially as women age. Almost the whole of our book could be seen to address women’s domestic, spiritual, religious, and cultural work in a wide variety of forms and ways. The essays in our final section investigate specific aspects of work not touched on, or only lightly touched upon, in the preceding chapters. Asma Shahin Khan offers a mixed methods investigation of the impact of religious practices on economic activity amongst British Muslim women. Beginning from the well-documented fact that British Muslim women are more likely to be economically inactive than active, choosing to look after home and family rather than entering paid employment outside the home, Khan seeks to establish whether religious practice increases the levels of economic activity amongst these women. She finds that ‘individual religious practice is not a significant predictor of LAHF (“looking after home and family”) among Muslim women in statistical analysis, and that Muslim women themselves do not see religious practice as a barrier to economic activity’. Khan’s interviews with 27 economically inactive Muslim women from Manchester elicited rich data concerning *hijab* (modesty and ‘covering’ practices) and *salah* (daily prayers), enabling Khan to conclude that ‘hijab is not a static symbol of oppression; covering practices vary between women and over life-stage, and between women within the same family’ and that ‘hijab gave the interviewees greater confidence in their interactions in mixed gender settings, particularly in their interactions with Muslim men’. Not all women who wore the hijab prayed regularly, and there was a wide variation in levels of religious practice amongst interviewees. Nevertheless, none of the interviewees regarded religious practice as a barrier to economic activity. Accepted practices of making up missed prayers are employed by the women, and most women expressed the view that workplaces were or would be accommodating of their religious needs.

The final two chapters of the book offer fascinating insights into the lives and ministries of older women in religious congregations and how they perceive their work now that they are no longer active in former ways. In the chapter by Jane McBride with Annemie Dillen, interviews conducted with
religious sisters in their old age provided an opportunity for them to look back on their long years of living in community and of missionary service. McBride’s interviews with sisters from the Zusters van de Jacht provide an oral history of one of the oldest female Flemish missionary congregations, expanding recent accounts of Protestant missionary women by including a Roman Catholic perspective. Employing voice-centred analysis, the chapter examines the sisters’ experiences and understanding of their missionary vocation and gives vivid accounts of the ways in which this missionary vocation was lived out through various experiences of inculturation, solidarity with the women and children they were living with and serving, prison reform work, and empowerment through education. In each of these contexts and ways, the sisters formed close relationships in the communities to which they were sent, ‘where their long-term presence and commitment to individuals, families, and communities built faith in the lives of those they served’ and also expressed a sense of familial loyalty and intimacy which were often unexpected fruits of their lives. In retirement, most of them have continued to have involvement in the communities in which they served.

Finally, Catherine Sexton holds up for scrutiny and affirmation the spiritual work of elderly Roman Catholic sisters who perceive themselves to be ‘ministering Christ’ even as they experience diminishment of their capacity to be actively engaged in the kinds of ministries that formerly constituted their religious practice. Sexton’s chapter, like McBride and Dillen’s account of their research with elderly Belgian missionary sisters, adds to the literature on the lives of religious sisters, but also examines and challenges the theological meanings of ‘work’ from the perspective of faithfully lived old age. Where women’s lives are no longer productive in the kinds of ways that are measurable and valuable in contemporary society, they may nevertheless be generative in ways that critique and challenge those prevailing norms. Here, then, is another example of how feminist-inspired research can centre norms in both religion and academia and bring to visibility forms of faith and practice that would otherwise remain hidden.

Notes
3 Nicola Slee, Fran Porter, and Anne Phillips, eds., Researching Female Faith: Qualitative Research Methods (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 1, 2.
4 Although these two lectures do not form part of this book, one has been published elsewhere, and the other one is in preparation. They represent something significant about the breadth of this collection. See Yafa Shanneik, The Art of Resistance in Islam: The Performance of Politics among Shi’i Women in the Middle East and Beyond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 96–127. Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor’s lecture is in preparation for publication.


See note 4.

See references in note 10 for examples.


Part I

Reflexivity and Research