

Introducing Womanist Theology & The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology

reviewed by [Donna Freitas](#) in the [March 22, 2003](#) issue

I am a white, middle-class woman of European descent--Portuguese and Italian--who was raised in the Catholic Church. I have a Ph.D. I tell you this because an awareness of social location is foundational among women engaged in the theological enterprise today. Knowing who is doing the writing is paramount. Knowing a little bit about me will presumably help you in approaching this review.

The articles by Rosemary Radford Ruether, Kwok Pui-Lan, and Rita Gross in the first half of the *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* assert the above notion as pivotal to contemporary feminist theology. Whether you are black, white, Hispanic, Chinese or of another background will affect your theology and what you choose to illuminate in your work. In *Introducing Womanist Theology*, Stephanie Mitchem passionately asserts the centrality of her identity as a black woman to her construction of theology--she wants us to know that her background distinguishes how she writes and what she writes about.

Susan Frank Parsons says that women are reinventing their own theological language. At stake are not only how we talk about God, sacraments, worship and ritual, among other things, but also how we talk about each other and how we identify ourselves as women engaged in doing theology. What we refer to as "feminist theology" is not simply a challenge to male assumptions about religion and women, and a dismantling of those assumptions. Feminist theology is also about women challenging other women's assumptions about race, ethnicity, economic background and diversity of religious and spiritual experience. The theological task for women requires multicultural awareness, or intercultural awareness, as Pui-lan suggests. According to Rita Gross the task also requires an awareness that feminist theology extends beyond Christianity. She challenges women to open the conversation to other faith traditions.

Given the above concerns the reader may wonder whether the Cambridge anthology was appropriately titled "feminist." After all, for women naming is extremely important and integrally connected to identity--and many women writing on spirituality and theology do not identify themselves as feminists. Mitchem, a womanist, distinguishes herself quite succinctly from what is called feminist theology. Womanist theology is about black women shaped by black culture, black churches, black family values and beliefs and black experiences of oppression. She vividly compares womanist theology to jazz, which "utilizes improvisation," or "the never before voiced," and "requires a demanding level of skill and the ability to move free of the written music."

What you will find in both texts is a range of viewpoints introducing the many different concerns in the ever-growing area of feminist theological investigations. Perhaps the best way to navigate through these books and through their authors' diverse approaches to the theological task is to read one in light of the other.

Begin with the articles in the first section of the Cambridge anthology, which address the diversity of viewpoints and approaches of women engaged in theology. Here one finds not only discussions of multiculturalism (Pui-Lan, Gross) but a succinct and informative historical overview of women in theology (Radford Ruether), as well as a treatment of goddess theology (Carol Christ), among other topics. Move on then to Mitchem's text for an extended development of womanist theology that puts into practice the questions and issues raised in the Cambridge anthology. Then go to the last half of the anthology, where the articles focus on a feminist approach to Christian systematic theology.

Perhaps the major irony of the *Cambridge Companion* is that the articles can be read as critiques of each other (particularly Gross's of the rest of the text). In a book where the authors raise so many concerns about diversity and multiculturalism as a central, defining theme in feminist theology, most of the articles are written from the point of view of white women whose primary focus is on the Christian tradition. And for all the writers' emphasis on the importance of the reader's awareness of social location, the descriptions in the contributor's section tell us very little about the authors.

Despite these criticisms, I would highly recommend both texts for a wide range of readers, from the seasoned academic to the interested novice. Both books provide historical perspectives and general overviews of the most current issues for women

in theology. They also present thorough introductions to their topics, or comprehensive refreshers. The novice should be warned that the articles in the Cambridge anthology are very dense and written in a traditional academic style.

As Parsons reminds us, women engaged in the work of understanding theology and each other need patience. The theological enterprise among women has expanded tremendously, and with expansion comes growing pains. The task ahead is to address and respect the great plurality among women, yet at the same time hold to some common ground. Feminist theology fans out in many directions, and there is tremendous work to be done in dialogue between its many folds.

Perhaps Mitchem puts it best in her comparison of womanist theology to jazz. How are these "melodies" related? When are they in harmony with one another? When and where are they out of tune and tempo? How can we "utilize improvisation" while at the same time work toward the liberation that all women engaged in theology hope for? These are questions that need to be more deeply sorted out. The willingness to improvise is required of all of us.