

## Reviews

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*A history of women in Christianity to 1600*. By Hannah Matis. Pp. viii + 255 incl. 69 ills.  
Chichester–Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2023. £27.99 (paper).

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This is a well written and accessible history of women from the late antique to the early modern period, a timespan that covers the history of Christianity up to the major challenge of Protestantism. As the author sets out in the introduction (chapter i), her book offers a synthesis of research carried out over the last decades into the role and place of Christian women in society and in the Church. With admirable clarity she explains why it is important to study women who lived and worked in the one and a half millennia that until the early twentieth century were the domain of scholarship devoted almost exclusively to men. One explanation is of course that the Roman Catholic Church's officers were male from the pope at the top to the local parish priest at the bottom. Alongside the men who occupied the role of priest, the mediators of sacraments between the laity and God, were those who lived in monasteries or were active as hermits or wandering priests in the secular world. As Matis emphasises, only recently has the role and place of women in this patriarchal structure become an object of research, which is so voluminous in its output that there is a demand for a synthesis. A special theme of interest throughout the book is the history of canonised women and informal saintly women. In thirteen chapters Matis takes her readers chronologically through the period, with three chapters (ii–iv) devoted to the late antique period, two to the Merovingian and Carolingian periods (v–vi), two chapters to the long twelfth century (vii–viii) and one to the later Middle Ages (ix). Two final chapters are devoted to the role of women in Protestantism (x) and in the Catholic (Counter) Reformation (xi), and they are followed by a short conclusion (ch. xii). Each chapter is illustrated with black-and-white images taken from the Internet under the Creative Licence agreement, and is accompanied by a substantial bibliography as a guide for further reading.

The volume does indeed fulfil its promise as an introduction to the role and place of women in Christianity, a religion that turned itself in a bastion of male dominance and patriarchal morality. Matis teases out how lay women used religion to shape their own lives and that of their families in lively vignettes of historical women to illustrate the wide variety of ways in which they negotiated Christian precepts alongside and in interaction with male priests. And as promised in the introduction special attention is paid to women saints and saintly women whose actions

of piety and devotion left traces in the records allowing Matis to present them to her audience. For the early period covered by her book she has made ample use of recent archaeological research to fill in gaps in the written record by revealing what the material culture tells us about the role of women in Christianity.

Where the book is perhaps less successful as an introduction is as a guide to Christianity for an audience that is not Christian. Dogmatic aspects, such as transubstantiation and the eucharist, the Trinity, the Immaculate Conception, or the resurrection are mentioned but are not explained. In our increasingly secularised modern society, which of course is also a multi-religious society, more effort could have been made to explain the Christian religion both in terms of dogma and in terms of pastoral practice.

Bearing this limitation in mind, altogether this is an useful well-written introductory text that will be helpful for students with knowledge of Christianity who venture into the late antique, early modern and medieval periods.

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*Early classical authors on Jesus.* By Margaret H. Williams. (The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries, 7.) Pp. xvi + 227. London–New York: T&T Clark, 2023. £90. 978 0 5676 8315 1

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Although there is no shortage of scholarship on references to Jesus by the pagan authors Pliny, Tacitus, Lucian, Suetonius and Celsus, almost all of it focuses on the factual contents of these accounts – often with such high demands for historiographically trustworthy data that they are curtly cast aside. This is the impetus for Margaret H. Williams's new monograph, where she sets out to discuss these texts from a wider perspective including the language in which they are composed, the literary conventions they use and the context in which they were written.

There is no mystery in the fact that few pagan authors mention Jesus, Williams maintains, as they were almost exclusively concerned with Greco-Roman culture, wars and politics, and the vast majority of what they wrote is lost. To have a handful of authors mention a mere Judean carpenter who was executed before he could pose any threat to the rule of Rome is plenty in comparison to any other Roman subject of comparable social status, Williams declares.

Pliny the Younger, our first author, advanced from being an equestrian and a minor judicial functionary to being a senator, consul and the governor of a province. From his uncle, Pliny the Elder, he learned to keep mum on any subject that could draw criticism from the current ruler, Williams argues, and suggests that this is why Pliny gives the impression that the growing Christian movement was almost unknown to him. What little he states about Christ presents him as a human being whom his adherents venerated as a god in such uncontroversial practices as hymn-singing, communal meals and pledges not to commit crimes. By not dwelling on the Christians' reluctance to worship the pagan gods, he clearly intends to get Trajan to agree that the Christians did not presently pose a threat to the empire.

Tacitus was, like Pliny, the first in his family to become a senator and a provincial governor. In his *Annals* of Roman history under the Julio-Claudians, he briefly