
Many readers of this journal have perused a three-volume set dating from the 1970s by the late Yale historian Roland Bainton of a nearly identical title to this work by Kirsi Stjerna, associate Professor of Reformation history at Gettysburg (PA) Lutheran Seminary. But in addition to being composed three decades apart, these works of so similar title are markedly different in purpose and in cadence.

Bainton’s three volumes—*Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy* (1971), *Women of the Reformation in France and England* (1973), and *Women of the Reformation from Spain to Scandinavia* (1977)—were part of this Quaker historian’s larger “project” of rehabilitating persons customarily marginalized in Reformation history, including Sebastian Castellio and Michael Servetus. Bainton’s own affiliation with the oft-maligned Quaker tradition gave him an “eye” for others who had also been left in the “eddies” of the Reformation stream. In the case of *Women of the Reformation* at least, Bainton reaped nothing but praise for his efforts. And the reprinting of his three volumes in 2001 bears testimony to the value of his decades-old researches.

Stjerna, of course, has had a different motivation. Openly disclosing her stance as a feminist historian, she goes well beyond Bainton in maintaining that the story of Reformation women has not only suffered from neglect, but that the story of what women in fact contributed to this great cause has been suppressed. She takes the view that the Protestant Reformation too often constrained women by its insistence that the proper sphere for the ministry of women was no longer the convent but in the domestic duties of wife and mother. The movement, so full of promise in its earliest days, only imperfectly realized the ideal of the priesthood of all believers. “Teaching courses on the Reformation is no longer feasible without the inclusion of women as subjects in the story of the Reformation and its evaluation” is the theme articulated in her opening paragraph (p. 1) and pursued assiduously through twelve chapters of background study and character vignettes.

Her chapters are extremely well-researched; the volume of literature surveyed and named is truly impressive. In writing about her subject so capably, Stjerna for the most part conveys the learning of others; I found only two references to her own earlier essays. She consciously builds on the labors of not only the venerable Bainton, but of Charmarie Blaisdell, Miriam Chrisman, Natalie Z. Davis, and Jane Dempsey Douglass (to name but a few). It is clear that this fine book is the outgrowth of her own capable teaching of this material at Gettysburg in a class bearing the book’s title. The massive bibliographies alone make a copy of this book essential for every theological library.
Stjerna’s work is not the first on this theme read and pondered by this reviewer, but it is the most influential. Despite its tinge of feminist militancy, Stjerna has largely made her case that as to the actual “difference” that the Reformation might be alleged to have made for women, there is ample evidence that the life of females was relatively constant before and after the Reformation. Equal opportunities for learning, for elected public service, for church leadership, and for single women functioning as free individuals in society were just as remote under Protestant regimes as under Catholic. With the gradual closing of convents under Protestantism, even that distinct sphere in which church ministry was deemed legitimate by women to women evaporated.

And yet, with this cautionary principle established, Stjerna proceeds to describe chapter by chapter the individuals—some who left the convent to enter the novel role of “pastor’s wife” (so Katie Von Bora, Katharine Schutz-Zell, Marie Dentière), some who used their royal positions to advance the cause of religious toleration for Lutherans and Huguenots (so Marguerite de Navarre, Jean D’Albret, Renée of France, Elizabeth von Brandenburg, and Elizabeth von Braunschweig), and some women of learning who faced great risk in writing apologetic works on behalf of the Reform (Argula von Grumbach, Olimpia Morata). It is a wonder that in the still very patriarchal sixteenth century, these Christian women accomplished so much when, very often, they were opposed by a suspicious public (for whom the notion of “pastor’s wife” was self-contradictory), by royal husbands (often strenuously anti-Protestant), and academia (which then, and until the early twentieth century, had no place for a woman).

This marshaling of evidence should give conservative evangelicals pause. The reviewer, a “soft” complementarian, asks, “Are our churches and our evangelical agencies any more welcoming, any more affirming of such ‘church mothers’ in our time?” The sixteenth-century Protestant movement very often owed its expansion and survival to just such persons as these. Instead of conservative evangelicalism taking a stance of resistance to the ministry of women, we need to press forward in the advancing and recognizing of all the ministry of women endorsed in the NT. There were and there are “Priscillas.” We also need an “eye” for the hand of providence in our civilization. Sixteenth-century rhetoric about the “monstrous regiment of women” was blind to this; the rhetoric ought not to be repeated now.

With this said, certain shortcomings of the volume must also be acknowledged. In a time when church history is one of the first disciplines to be rationalized given the economic pressures facing theological education, there will not be very many classes modeled after Stjerna’s own Gettysburg offering. Does the book therefore fondly presuppose a feminist-oriented readership and curriculum? Further, this is a book that will have readers rubbing their eyes repeatedly and rereading many sentences in order to grasp elusive meaning. Though the Finnish-American Stjerna praises her Blackwell copy-editor (p. viii), it is hard to know what to say about a volume from such a prestigious publishing house so plagued by poor word choice, stray words, and bad idioms. Copy-editors exist to prune away such problems. As the volume is reprinted, these blemishes need to be weeded out. And then there is the format. The Stjerna volume, just because so determined to relay in detail the harvest of studies in this field, has by its opting for in-text citation (rather than page-bottom or chapter-end) confronted us with a text in which page after page is larded with insertions about sources, and with insertions of paragraph-length content notes which are a complete distraction to the reader. Again, this is not what we expect from a Blackwell volume. In sum, here is a very fine volume capable of being made still more useful.

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