



Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University
DigitalCommons@SHU

Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies Faculty
Publications

Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies

12-1996

Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives (Book Review)

Christel Manning

Sacred Heart University, manningc@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/rel_fac

 Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Manning, Christel. "Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives" (Book Review). *Journal For The Scientific Study Of Religion* 35.4 (1996): 452.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.

DEFECTING IN PLACE: WOMEN CLAIMING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN SPIRITUAL LIVES

By Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis, and Allison Stokes.

New York: Crossroad, 1994. v-xii + 312 pp. \$22.95 cloth.

The many volumes written on feminist theology might suggest that feminists are so dissatisfied that they are leaving the churches in droves. Not so, say Winter et al., whose nationwide survey of almost 4000 Protestant and Catholic women suggests that, while many feminists are alienated by sexism in their churches, the majority choose to remain active participants in their congregations. These women have not resigned themselves to patriarchy; rather, with support from feminist spirituality groups, they participate on their own terms and thus become potential agents of change. They are, in the authors' words, "defecting in place."

Defecting in Place is an important book that raises as many questions as it answers. The first half of the book presents the authors' discussion of the survey results, some of which are new and surprising. They are the first to profile and categorize the variety of women's spirituality groups that exist within Christian congregations. Contrary to the widely held perception (especially among secular feminists) that feminist spirituality groups are escapist and prevent women from engaging in social reform efforts, the authors provide evidence that involvement in such groups actually increases the likelihood that a woman will engage in political activism. Other findings of this book have implications beyond the study of feminism. The authors show that defecting in place is a phenomenon found across all major Christian denominations, both Catholic and Protestant, and in both liberal and conservative churches. This finding suggests that the common use of church membership as an indicator of religious conservatism or liberalism may not yield an accurate measure. In describing how women defect, the book shows that Jesus and the goddess are compatible god-images. This conclusion suggests that women's participation in goddess-spirituality need not mean a loss of commitment to the Christian community, a fact that has important implications for theories of religious conversion.

While the data themselves are fascinating, the treatment of these data is open to question. One problem is organizational. The women's responses are organized into two groups: Catholics and "Protestants and related traditions." Yet it is arguable that there are more differences today between liberal and conservative Protestants than there are between Protestants and Catholics. The term Protestant (never mind "related traditions") covers such a wide diversity of traditions that one wonders how useful it is as an analytical category. A more significant problem is the lack of analysis or story. Each of the first five chapters of this book begins with up to 40 pages of quotes from the women interviewed — without any comment by the authors. I suppose this arrangement reflects a postmodern feminist commitment to letting one's research subjects speak for themselves and not forcing the particularities of an individual's experience into the researcher's meta-narrative. But without a narrative about who these women are, the authors are not so much giving them a voice as using their voices to make a feminist point — a point that could have been made by selecting just a few representative quotes. Aside from finding these sections repetitive and difficult to follow, I would have liked to hear more about what the authors think about the data they collected.

Instead, the second half of the book presents the reflections of 10 other feminist scholars on the authors' findings. These essays are helpful because they present ways of understanding the data that are often different from, and sometimes even critical of, those of the authors. Fiorenza points out that it is important to distinguish between women's spirituality groups that are feminist and those that are not. Indeed, several studies of women in conservative religious communities have found an emphasis on women's spirituality that is quite compatible with patriarchal values. The fact that 20% of women surveyed by Winter and her colleagues did not test out as feminist by the authors' criteria suggests that participation in a women's spirituality group is not necessarily a sign of defection. Other commentators criticize the lack of African-American and Hispanic respondents in the sample, a limitation the authors acknowledge. Eugene argues that African-American women differ from white women in that the former are not defecting in place but defining a new spirituality of survival. Yet it is not clear how this new spirituality is different from defecting in place: many white feminists surely believe that they, too, are defining

something new. A stronger challenge to Winter's thesis comes from Diaz, who points out that defecting in place is a strategy that Hispanic women have followed for centuries with little or no effect on the institutional church. Though it could be argued that these women lacked feminist consciousness, it is an issue the authors do not address.

Despite these limitations, *Defecting in Place* is well worth reading. Since much of what we know about feminists in the churches has focused on a fairly elite group — clergy and academics — this book fills a real gap in the literature by giving voice to ordinary women. It is also sure to initiate debate. A book that raises questions is far better than one that claims to have all the answers.

By Christel J. Manning and David M. Wulff