



# *fides et humilitas*

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## Author Interview:

Lynn H. Cohick and Amy Brown Hughes:

*Christian Women in the Patristic World: Their Influence, Authority, and Legacy in the Second through Fifth Centuries.* Baker Academic, 2017

A brief bio about each author:

Dr. Lynn H. Cohick serves as Provost/Dean at Denver Seminary. She earned her Ph.D. in New Testament and Christian Origins from the University of Pennsylvania. She researches the ways Jews and Christians lived out their faith in the ancient settings of Hellenism and the Roman Empire, and how Jews and Christians today can better appreciate and understand each other. Dr. Cohick also explores women's lives in the ancient world, most recently focusing on Christian women in the Early Church. She enjoys studying the Apostle Paul and his epistles within their larger Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts. Her publications include *Philippians* in *The Story of God Commentary* (Zondervan, 2013); *Ephesians* in *New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010); *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians* (Baker Academic, 2009).

Dr. Amy Brown Hughes is an assistant professor of theology at Gordon College. The overarching theme of Amy's work as a historical theologian is that early Christian writers continue to be fruitful interlocutors in modern discussions of theology. Her research interests

include Eastern Christianity, Trinitarian and Christological thought, Christian asceticism, theological anthropology, and highlighting the contributions of minority voices to theology, especially those of women. In addition to *Christian Women in the Patristic World*, Dr. Hughes contributed to an edited volume of essays from a symposium on Methodius of Olympus at Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany, *Methodius of Olympus: State of the Art and New Perspectives* (De Gruyter, 2017) and co-authored a series of essays about early Christian writers with George Kalantzis (Wheaton College) for the early Christianity section of the volume *Reading Christian Theology in the Protestant Tradition* (T & T Clark, 2018).

**CACS Editors:** Why did you two decide to team up and co-write this book on Christian women? How did you go about co-writing, how did you choose these figures, and what did you hope to accomplish?

**Dr. Cohick:** We knew each other at Wheaton College, where Amy received her PhD and we discovered we had similar interests in the women of the early church. We lived in the same location for the first year of the project, so it made collaboration easier. We would meet over lunch and sketch out our research findings and discuss ideas. We chose figures who exemplified their culture and its questions.

We wanted to offer an accessible, academic volume that would demonstrate the variety of women and the range of experiences and contributions they made. There are other excellent books on these women that focus on the historical – what it was like to be a woman in late antiquity, what do we know about their particular contexts, how to read texts written by men about women, etc.

We wanted to draw upon that work and then focus on the theological contributions of these women. We are used to hearing about the church “fathers” and their contributions to trinitarian theology and other major discussions but not so much about what role women played in the development of Christianity. We wanted to show that they were there, they were in those conversations, and they were innovating and living lives of devotion and service just like their male counterparts.

**CACS Editors:** You highlight female martyrs, females in art, females and the spiritual life, females and written literature, women and the Empire, and women and early Christian theology. Seeing that women experienced such a broad role in early Christianity, what does this tell us about the role of women in the early Church? What might we do to help recapture this vision of women in antiquity?

**Dr. Cohick:** I think people have a skewed view of women at this time – that they were very minimally involved in the church, very passive, just not really doing things in the public sphere. But that is not what the texts and inscriptions and other evidence tell us.

For example, women were arrested and testified publicly for their faith. We have many examples of female martyrs, and confessors, those who were awaiting their execution. The second-century martyr, Thecla, serves as a model for later men and women who desire an ascetic or strict moral life dedicated to teaching the gospel and healing. In 203 in North Africa, Perpetua and Felicitas were martyred. We have Perpetua’s diary, where she talks about her struggles with her father,

who was not a Christian. He pleads with her to recant, but she says she cannot, for she is a Christian. This line “I am a Christian” is a constant refrain. Slave women, such as Blandina from ancient Lyons, or Felicitas, Perpetua’s companion and a slave woman who gives birth just days before she goes to her death in the arena, make this testimony.

We think the fearless testimony by these female martyrs is astonishing and compelling. It means that the public face of Christianity was that of a martyr, male and female. In the most crucial of events—dying for Christ—we see that there is neither male nor female, all are one in Christ. This might be a guide for working together in churches today—regardless of the church’s ordination practices. The bishop was martyred alongside the slave woman—both equally testified to the reality of the resurrection of the body.

A second matter is that women were active participants in the worship life of the churches, as noted in inscriptions that talked about their active prayer life, and we see it in catacomb frescos. We see it in women’s desire to live ascetic lives that challenge the status quo that pursues wealth and social status. Actually, in some ways Roman culture in the third and fourth centuries is a lot like American culture. But the denial of self gratification that was evidenced in many Christian women’s lives was a push back against a culture that also was highly stratified and did not care at all for the lives of slaves and the poor. Women actively met the needs of the poor and sick.

**CACS Editors:** You (Dr. Hughes) recall an encounter with a young woman in a small urban church who struggles through her Christian vocation. Would you mind expanding upon your experiences as a

woman in scholarship, a woman in the church, and how we might paint a better vision of human flourishing for women and men in the church/scholarship?

**Dr. Hughes:** Sarah's question struck me so deeply because it was a question I had asked myself over the course of many years. She wasn't just asking about her vocation, she was asking me about what trajectories were even available in the first place.

If there's little to no representation or a lack of cultivation of a broad range of opportunities for women, then those trajectories, if they are even available to women in the first place, aren't obvious. Let me offer an example of what I mean: I knew that I wanted to be a teacher from a very young age and I knew that I wanted to study theology as a first-year undergraduate student. What was not clear to me was that becoming a professor, and a theologian at that, was even an option. I had never seen or even heard of a women theologian, let alone a woman pastor until I entered college. Even then, they were few and far between. It took some perceptive mentors (most of whom were men) who saw something in me, showed me what was possible, and helped me navigate the terrain.

For me, a better vision of human flourishing for women and men in the church and in scholarship involves prioritizing opportunities for women (especially women of color) to move freely through the ecclesial and academic spaces. We also need to highlight voices and books by scholars who are the trailblazers and support those newer scholars and church leaders well.

Flourishing is difficult when one is isolated as the only woman in the department or on staff. The isolation is magnified when one is the only black woman, the only Native woman, the only disabled woman, the only mother, the only single woman in that environment. It is exhausting to be “the only.” Until it is normal for women to be in the pulpit, in the department, in the administration, in the boardroom, we need to work toward intentional, practical support systems for women to flourish.

**CACS Editors:** How does this book, that highlights the role of Christian women in antiquity, help us in modern expressions of the Christian faith? How does this help us engage public theology, university life, and ecclesial life?

**Dr. Hughes:** About halfway through a class on early and medieval theology, one of my students reflected upon what he was learning (most of it for first time) and mused “I feel held by the tradition.” This struck me because I think it’s easy to make the mistake of skipping over context and privileging what’s right in front of us. It takes work and empathy to listen to the stories of and learn from those in our own families who are a few decades older than us, let alone those who lived centuries ago and are removed from us by language, location, and culture.

Yet, Christianity doesn’t make sense without the story of God’s relationship with the people of Israel, God showing up in first-century Palestine, or the witness of both those who saw him in the flesh and those who’ve remained faithful to that witness ever since. That “great cloud of witnesses” is always with us and they instruct us through their

lives of devotion, their treatises, their letters, their art, their churches, and whatever other physical and textual connections they have left behind. Without those witnesses, our Christianity becomes untethered, impersonal, and small. Learning about those who've gone before us in the faith brings connection, family, and breadth to our faith; and upon experiencing the embrace of witness, we feel the security and intimacy of being "held by the tradition."

This is the experience I had when I began reading about these women. It was like realizing for the first time that Christianity had always been for me as a woman. You'd think that would be obvious but it wasn't. When the story doesn't include you, you don't think the story is about you. I needed these stories told. Women and men need these stories told for what they are: core to the development of Christianity.

The moment we relegate women as tangents in the history of Christianity is when it becomes normal to treat women as ancillary to theology, scholarship, and the work of the Church now. Unfortunately, this is already par for the course in some academic arenas and in far too many churches. This should tell us that we've not been telling the story well for a long time. We hope our book helps us relearn the story of the early development of Christianity, not merely for the sake of knowing it but so that all of us can feel "held by the tradition."

**CACS Editors:** Why are the voices of (ancient and modern) Christian women important for the life and growth of Christian piety, Christian theology, and the Christian way of life?

**Dr. Cohick:** I read this question several times, and thought – would anyone ask why the voices of Christian men are important? I think the fact that we even ask about women’s voices shows that we have conceived of the church as really only half a body of Christ. But as we study ancient female Christians, we see the piety and endurance of these disciples – the women who stayed with Jesus at the cross and faced the likely harrassment of the Roman soldiers; the women who died horrific deaths as martyrs, testifying to the faith; the women who learned Scripture and debated theology with the male leaders of the day. Their testimony provides confidence for women today that they have a history to live into, and to live up to.

Our book is in part a response to the incomplete story the church has told about its early centuries. We know about the councils and their creeds, but we have not remembered the dialogues learned, wealthy, and imperial women had with their male counterparts in the church. We have not fully accounted for the influential testimony of female martyrs that shaped men’s and women’s spiritual imagination for centuries. I would say that women’s voices are as important as men’s voices in fully understanding the Christian life – and we have neglected to listen.

**CACS Editors:** You invite your readers to *tolle lege* ancient sources. If educators, academics, and the informed Christian pick up your book, what ancient sources might they supplement their reading? [Perpetua, Eusebius on Blandina’s martyrdom, etc.]

**Dr. Hughes:** Thankfully there are many translations out there to choose from that make these texts accessible. Many of them are even

available online (mostly older translations but still a good resource). There are a couple of collections of texts about women in early Christianity that have selections or full texts.

The trailblazing scholar in this field is Elizabeth Clark and she has a volume like this called *Women in the Early Church*. There is also a volume that focuses on the Greek texts by Patricia Cox Miller called *Women in Early Christianity*. These volumes include the sections from Eusebius's *Church History* that tell the story of Blandina as well as others referenced in our book. Those are a good place to start. Full texts of the *Life of Melania the Younger* and Gregory of Nyssa's two works with his sister Macrina (*Life of Macrina* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*) are widely available as is Augustine's *Confessions*.

**CACS Editors:** Are there any remaining comments or words that you'd like to leave us with?

**Dr. Cohick:** I'd like to say that I think anyone studying women in the ancient world runs a risk of making the historical figures two-dimensional. They might nuance the material to suit a modern purpose. Both Amy and I have tried to let these women speak for themselves, even if they seem hard to relate to by modern standards. I don't know what I'd chat about with Felicitas or Blandina if I had a coffee with them – their lives as slave women is so foreign to my own. But I'd love to hear them talk to me about their Savior, because I know I would see Him with deeper understanding. I guess what I'm getting at is that in our proper quest to bring these ancient women into the modern conversation, I want also to make sure that they say what they want to say, and not what I want them to say.