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Welch, Kristen and Abraham Ruelas. The Role of Female Seminaries on the Road to Social Justice for Women

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Welch, Kristen and Abraham Ruelas. *The Role of Female Seminaries on the Road to Social Justice for Women*

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Review by H Patricia Hynes, professor (retired) of Environmental Health, Boston University, School of Public Health and on the board of directors at the Traprock Center for Peace and Justice.

Many are unaware of the existence of the female seminary in the 19th century United States and of its role in promoting equal education opportunity for young girls and women. This book, *The Role of Female Seminaries on the Road to Social Justice for Women*, sets out to foregrounds that history and to credit Christianity with pioneering secondary level female education in institutions called seminaries, many of which were antecedents to secular women's colleges.

Welch and Ruelas trace the roots of women's education in the United States to George Washington's 1796 message to Congress in which he argued for a National Institution to educate youth [meaning male youth] in the science of government, as the 'future guardians of the liberty of the Country.' They suggest that it was not a big leap to argue for the education of women as "future guardians" of the family and first educators of the country's youngest citizens. They return often to the irony that it was the ideal of motherhood – mothers being the first shapers and teachers of their male children – which provided the impetus and *raison d'être* to advance girls' education from ornamental arts to subjects as comprehensive and rigorous as boys received in secondary institutions. One cachet of this book is the detailed examination of curriculum at well-known schools such as Mary Lyon's Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary and others, which demonstrate the rigor to which female seminaries aspired.

The Christian underpinnings of the early seminaries were based substantively on an interpretation of Scripture that promoted women's idealized role in the home as wife and mother. Yet, as the authors recurrently stress, the education of young women, particularly as it achieved the quality of young men's education, led naturally to the concept of normal schools for women to be trained as teachers and, ultimately, to a public role for women in the world. Thus, female seminaries were subversive in opening the door for women to the wider society and social justice, albeit constrained to teaching.

The strengths of this book are many but it also has flaws that demand mention. As for strengths, the case studies, including Emma Willard's Troy Female Seminary and Mary Lyon's Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, as well as the demonstrated evolution of curricula throughout the 19th century, provide depth in what could have been only an historical survey. Also, the authors examine the parallel education history of Native American and African American girls, so as to reveal the racial and ethnic diversity in Christian schools for girls and young women.

The book's shortcomings range from minor to substantive. Of some significance, the book lacks an index and also has a number of grammatical and spelling mistakes. More serious, while the authors acknowledge that most Christian schools for Native Americans purposefully intended to destroy Native American language and culture and to assimilate and Christianize their students, they devote the two chapters on Native American education to a few successful and enduring Christian Native American seminaries. Thus, their account lacks a fair assessment of the impact of Christian female seminaries on Native Americans. Lastly, an undercurrent of animus towards secular feminists runs through the book, with the authors asserting that secular feminists do not credit the Christian female seminaries with the evolution of women's rights particularly in the 19th century.

Christian female seminaries did, as this history honors, crack open the door to higher education for women and subsequent gains in becoming teachers. However, as the last chapter reveals in a section on the history of the Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, it was Quaker women and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, by then skeptical about religion, who launched the secular suffrage movement in the first wave of feminism. This momentum and secular education in the 20th century propelled women into the world with goals of full equality. It is not clear that women would have advanced so thoroughly if Christian roots had not given way to secular maturity, as happened in the case of Mt. Holyoke College.