CHAPTER 1

Surveying the Landscape of Doctrinal Imagining

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Imagining in Theological and Political/Cultural Context

Christian doctrines and global gender justice rarely appear together in the same sentence. The inception of authorized Christian doctrine was hotly contested in the early centuries of Christianity, while the Reformation saw both Protestant reformulation as Lutheran and Calvinist doctrines and an elevation of Scripture over and above doctrine as a source of theology. With radical feminist, womanist, and postcolonial critique, received doctrinal traditions have been subject to a healthy hermeneutic of suspicion: the power relations inherent in the imposition of doctrines by authorized ecclesial authorities have come under scrutiny. As will become clear, the project taken forward in this volume is premised on the conviction that Christian doctrines and global gender justice can indeed appear in the same sentence; in stronger terms, Christian doctrines will necessarily be misunderstood if this connection is broken.

With regard to global gender justice, we write in troubling times. In Syria and Iraq, the hope so recently expressed in the upbeat metaphor of an Arab Spring is currently overshadowed by a grim reality of brutal violence toward civilians, targeting children and women as much as male fighters, while the longstanding Palestinian-Israeli conflict is concurrently inflamed. In Nigeria, young women have been abducted from their place of education to a form of sexual slavery. In these places beset by violence, it is awful to contemplate the day-to-day realities in the lives of children and women, as well as male civilians. In the regimes envisioned by those who fight, the prescribed subordinate position allocated to women is grim.

The social and economic destabilization caused by global climate disruption bears most heavily on the poorest peoples of the world, and particularly on the
poorest women—those who benefit least from the economic and technological practices that accelerate this disruption. In Asia, human trafficking of young poverty-stricken girls is increasing, particularly in Southeast Asia. Many young girls are sold by family members to traffickers who then take them to other countries to be sold into brothels, prostitution rings, or the garment industry or as domestic workers. The demand for young girls is created by structural issues of globalization, colonization, neocolonialism, and militarization. The family members’ pressure to sell their girls is in response to increasing poverty as they are driven away from their lands, and so they lack a source of income due to these global economic and structural forces. Many of these young girls will never make enough money either to send back to their families or to return home. This is a contravention of human rights and an inhumane act of violence committed against young girls; the numbers are on the rise. Trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery.

In the United Kingdom, recent revelations in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, about the systematic grooming of young white girls for sexual abuse—affecting an estimated 1,400 young women over a period of 16 years, with the complicity of police and social services—show that the privileges of whiteness are inflected by class and gender. It has subsequently become clear that this is but one instance of a long-standing wider culture of institutional cover-up of child abuse, particularly of the most vulnerable children. In the Rotherham case, the men who perpetrated the abuse were of Asian heritage, while the vulnerable young white British women they targeted were not socially privileged. In this case, the ethnic background of the perpetrators was an additional factor in the reluctance of the authorities to investigate, due to a fear of inflaming community relations; though the majority of girls affected were below the age of sexual consent, they were deemed to have “chosen” their abusers as partners. These women struggle with the legacy of their prolonged experiences of abuse, exacerbated by the effective sanctioning of systematic exploitation by the statutory authorities.

In Ukraine, violent destabilization of the new nation-state poised between Russia and Western Europe raises the specter of a renewed Cold War between East and West, focused on Eastern Europe. In the United States, recent unrest in the city of Ferguson following the shooting of an unarmed black teenager by a white policeman highlights the increasing militarization of the police force; the incident makes clear that the aims of the civil rights movement are far from being fully realized.

Added to these political destabilizations is the self-inflicted economic collapse of 2008, which began in the United States, with the consequent austerity policies in Western nations and their wider reverberations. The comfortable stability enjoyed by the privileged in the postcolonial and post–World War II