

Arvind Sharma *Editor*

# Women in World Religions

Exploring the Future

 Springer

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# Preface

The progress of women's studies in the West exerted its influence in the fields of the social sciences, literature, psychology, human rights, theology, and so on and then also began to influence the comparative study of religion in particular and the field of religious studies in general. This was then naturally followed by an increase in the number of books and papers being published about women in religion.

For a while these books continued to deal with the position of women in the various individual religious traditions such as Christianity, or with various denominations within Christianity. Then the stream of such publications broadened to include books on Judaism and Islam, and thereby the Abrahamic religious tradition began to get covered. By then articles and small studies on women in Eastern religions also began to appear.

We fast forward now to the year 1976.

It was around this time that an agent specializing in religious books appeared at my door in Brisbane, Australia, where I had just commenced my academic career as a lecturer in Asian religions. He proposed that the time was ripe now for a book on women in world religions and wondered whether I would be interested in such a project. When I pointed out to him that although I did teach world religions at the introductory level, my field was really Indian religions, he suggested that it could be an edited volume. At this point I took a deep breath and said: "Are we not overlooking something obvious?" He replied: "Such as what?" "That I am a male," I responded. "Would it not seem odd that a man should be editing such a book, especially as the chapters will be by women scholars, as you suggest?" He was not to be dissuaded easily. He then said: "Why don't you go ahead anyway? The matter could be reconsidered if such an objection is raised".

So the project was initiated, with the understanding that it would perhaps never come to fruition. Although stationed in Australia, I had continued my membership of the American Academy of Religion in the United States, whose annual meetings I made a point of attending every year. While on these trips I would meet some of my female colleagues in the field of world religions. I would tell them about the project, and to my pleasant surprise many of them promised to participate in it.

Years passed. Seven years passed. In the meantime, I had moved from the University of Queensland to the University of Sydney.

I could hardly believe that by now I had chapters on Hinduism (Katherine K. Young), Buddhism (Nancy Schuster Barnes), Confucianism (Theresa Keller), Judaism (Denise L. Carmody), Christianity (Rosemary R. Ruether), and Islam (Jane I. Smith). I even had a chapter on Tribal Religions: Aboriginal Australia (by Rita Gross), but still did not have a chapter on Taoism (Daoism). I was on the verge of panicking when a colleague put me in touch with Barbara Reed. I especially remember her because when I sent the share of royalties which belonged to her, she sent me an (almost) ecstatic note saying that this was the first time ever she was being paid for her writing. The amount was of course modest, as it was shared by all the contributors, but the fact that this was a first-ever payment seemed to make up for it!

No one was more surprised than me when the book appeared. I have always wondered why no one objected to a man taking the initiative in the matter, although with genuine reluctance. I am privately convinced that I was treated as an honorary woman, coming as I do from a Third World country. But more seriously, it is an amazing tribute to the genderblind nature of our field.

It was in the year 1987 that the book titled *Women in World Religions* saw the light of day, and it was also the year when I moved again, from Sydney in Australia to Montreal in Canada. It was as if the appearance of the book heralded my continental migration.

The book ended up being one of the most sold books by the State University of New York Press (SUNY). I personally came to know of its popularity in a somewhat unorthodox manner. Two copies of it were stolen from the book displays at two conferences in different parts of the United States!

Nothing succeeds like success. SUNY Press then commissioned me and Katherine K. Young, who had published the book in her McGill Series, to edit an *Annual Review of Women in World Religions*. Six volumes appeared in this series from 1991–2001. A series of other books edited by me also appeared in the wake of the publication of *Women in World Religions*. These were *Religion and Women* (1994), *Today's Women in World Religions* (1994), and *Feminism in World Religions* (1998)—which I co-edited with Katherine K. Young. This last book was selected as CHOICE Outstanding Academic Book of 1999.

When I surveyed this corpus at the beginning of the new century, it seemed to me that the *history* of the position of women in world religions had been covered in several volumes, as also the *contemporary* situation in this regard. So perhaps it was time to turn to the future.

All this, then, is by way of introducing the book you are holding in your hand. It has a long pedigree and an even longer gestation period than the book which started it all. This long interval, between when the book was commissioned sometime at the beginning of the millennium, and now when it appears, has seen many changes. Nancy Ellegate of the SUNY Press, who commissioned all the above books, passed away suddenly some years ago. Rita Gross wrote her chapter on Buddhism for us but is no longer with us to see it in print. Rajkumari Shanker, who wrote the chapter on women in Sikhism, has also left us. Katherine Young, my co-conspirator in these

projects, has retired and is enjoying much deserved rest in Victoria, British Columbia. I, too, have aged.

It is therefore with some sense of satisfaction that I am writing this preface, tinged though it be with some sadness at the events described above. The book, after years of suspense regarding whether this would ever happen, is on the verge of appearing.

It is customary for an editor to write an introduction or a conclusion to such a collection of essays. I thought of doing so myself but now wonder if it will serve any useful purpose. These essays are of course part of a single if variegated quilt, but they are exciting for the way the threads of various traditions get woven around their future prospects, and what distinguishes them is their uniqueness rather than their uniformity.

The scholars included here have worked on the position of women in their religious traditions for years and I urged them to write freely about what they wanted to highlight in accordance with their own judgement. I specifically requested them not to feel constrained by the academic straight jacket, as it were, and to even write in the first person, if they felt that this was the best way to address the issue. Most of the books edited by me in the past were broadly either historical or contemporary in orientation. This time I asked the contributors to identify what they saw were current trends in their religious traditions, which were likely to produce consequences in the future, and to use their imagination where required. The idea was to provide them with a certain latitude so that they could be personal, and even futuristic, if they so felt. Therefore, to summarize these chapters artificially merely for the sake of form could well be a redundant and even a futile exercise.

Let me not stand between you and them any longer.

Montreal, Canada

Arvind Sharma

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# Editor and Contributors

## About the Editor

**Arvind Sharma** (1940) started his life as a public servant, as a member of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) while in India, but subsequently moved to the United States to pursue higher studies in economics. While studying for his Ph.D. he became interested in the role of religion in economic development and finally made the study of religion itself the main focus of his academic interest, especially as this field is ignored in India. After obtaining his MA in economics from Syracuse University, he moved to Harvard Divinity School and obtained a Master's in Theological Studies, which he followed up with a Ph.D. in Sanskrit and Indian Studies from Harvard University in 1978. By that time, he had already started teaching in departments of religious studies in Australia. In 1987, he moved to McGill University in Montreal, Canada, where he is at present the Birks Professor of Comparative Religion in its School of Religious Studies. He has published extensively in the fields of women's studies, comparative religion, and Indian religions.

## Contributors

**Sherry E. Fohr** is an associate professor of Religious Studies, the co-founder and the curricular director of the Interfaith Studies Program, the Religious Studies Program coordinator, and the co-director of the Women's Studies program at Converse University in Spartanburg, South Carolina. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in religious studies, with specializations in Jainism and religions of India. She is a Fulbright scholar, and her research in India and with Jains resulted in numerous articles, book chapters, and the book, *Jainism: Guides for the Perplexed* [Bloomsbury]. Her most recent publications include "Female Renouncers, Modern Perspectives" [*Brill's Encyclopedia of Jainism*], and "Conversations with Jains

about Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation” [*Journal for Interreligious Studies*]. Her current research focuses on interfaith cooperation.

**Dr. Yudit Kornberg Greenberg** is the George D. and Harriet W. Cornell endowed chair, professor of Religion, and founding director of the Jewish Studies Program at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. Dr. Greenberg is the author and editor of books and articles in modern and contemporary Jewish thought, comparative religion, women and religion, and cross-cultural views of love and the body, including the 2-volume *Encyclopedia of Love in World Religions* (2008), *From Spinoza to Levinas: Hermeneutical, Ethical, and Political Issues in Modern and Contemporary Jewish Philosophy* (2009), *The Body in Religion: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Bloomsbury Academic (2017), *Dharma and Halacha: Comparative Studies in Hindu-Jewish Philosophy and Religion*, Lexington Publishers (2018), and the *Routledge Handbook of Religion and the Body* (2022). Dr. Greenberg is on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* and serves on the Body and Religion and the Comparative Studies in Religion committees at the American Academy of Religion.

Dr. Greenberg lectures nationally and internationally and is the recipient of numerous awards including the Cornell Distinguished Faculty Award, the Arthur Vining Davis Award, and the Presidential Award for the Promotion of Diversity and Inclusion from Rollins College. In 2017, she was a visiting research fellow at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and in 2018, she was a research fellow at the Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften der Goethe-Universität in Bad Homburg and Frankfurt. During her most recent Fulbright-Nehru Scholar Award in 2019, she taught at the University of Mumbai in India and conducted research on love and the body in Hindu-Jewish comparative philosophy and religion.

**Rita M. Gross** (1943–2015) taught comparative religions at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago for a dissertation titled “Exclusion and Participation: The Role of Women in Aboriginal Australian Religion.” She was the co-editor of *Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures* and wrote extensively on Hinduism and Buddhism. She was a leader in feminist scholarship and theology in North America and has many publications on these topics. She was also very active in the area of Buddhist–Christian dialogue. Her books include *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1993); *Feminism and Religion* (1996); *A Garland of Feminist Reflections* (2009); and *Buddhism Beyond Gender* (2018).

**Jing Iris Hu** is an assistant professor of Philosophy at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. Her work focuses on moral emotions such as sympathy, empathy, shame, and related topics such as moral progress/discovery and moral agency. Hu is particularly interested in understanding the social aspect of moral emotions in Chinese philosophy and moral psychology. In addition, her recent work examines women’s plight in Confucian philosophy—whether Confucian philosophy, given its emphasis on filial feelings and care, is a natural ally of feminism, or a tradition that

obscures women's moral development and fulfillment. Hu received her philosophical training from Duke University (Ph.D.), the Chinese University of Hong Kong (M.Phil.), and Wuhan University (B.A.).

**Zayn Kassam** is the John Knox McLean Professor of Religious Studies at Pomona College, Claremont, California. A graduate of McGill University (Ph.D. 1995), she teaches courses on mysticism, gender, literature, ethics, and the environment.

She has lectured widely on gender issues in the United States, Canada, and Britain. She has been honored with three Wig Awards for Distinguished Teaching at Pomona College, as well as an American Academy of Religion Excellence in Teaching Award.

Kassam is the author of *Introduction to the World's Major Religions: Islam* (2006) and editor of *Women and Islam* (2010) and *Women in Asian Religions* (2018). She is also the section editor for Islam for the volume on Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism for the *Encyclopedia of Indian Religions* (2018).

She has chaired the department of religious studies at Pomona College and has coordinated the programs in gender and women's studies, Asian studies, and Middle Eastern studies. She is currently the director of the Pacific Basin Institute. She serves on several national editorial boards, including the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* and the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.

**Lingqian Kong** was trained in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Hong Kong and subsequently studied East Asian languages and cultures at Columbia University and received her Ph.D. in East Asian Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Kong's areas of research are concerned with gender and sexuality in late imperial and early republican China. She is interested in examining Chinese literary traditions in various different genres such as fiction, poetry, and drama. She specifically studies the images of writing women in erotic fiction and how the sexualized female images affected the real writing women—a socially and culturally determined class—of that time.

Kong has taught classes such as gender and sexuality in late imperial China and the representation of women in Chinese culture at Smith College. In her new projects, she is working with modern and contemporary Chinese literature and cinema. She is also interested in Chinese language pedagogy.

**Lucille Marr** is an affiliate member of McGill University's School of Religious Studies where she has taught courses on Women in the Christian Tradition and Canadian Church history for many years. She formerly held the position of Associate Professor in History and Women's Studies at Augustana University College, in Alberta. An ordained Mennonite minister, currently she is the chaplain and academic dean at The Presbyterian College, Montreal. She has published widely in church history and feminist studies and continues to research and write. At present, she is working on twentieth-century evangelical women in Quebec and the biography of H. Frances Davidson, a nineteenth-century American educator and pioneer missionary in the Rhodesias (Zambia and Zimbabwe).

**Nancy M. Martin** is a professor, chair of Religious Studies, director of the Schweitzer Institute at Chapman University, and life member of Clare Hall, University of Cambridge. Her research and publications focus on devotional Hinduism, oral song traditions in Rajasthan, women's religious lives, and comparative religious ethics. Her most recent publications include "Mirabai's Poetry: The Worlding of a Hindu Woman Saint's Dynamic Song Tradition," in the *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Literature*, vol. V (2020), edited by Ken Seigneurie and B. Venkat Mani, and "The Gendering of Voice in Medieval Hindu Literature," in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Philosophy and Gender* (2019), edited by Veena Howard. Professor Martin is currently completing the final manuscript preparations for her three-volume comprehensive study of the popular saint-poet Mirabai, from the sixteenth century and early manuscripts of story and song to present invocations and incarnations of the saint in film and fiction, on stage and television, and in the lives of contemporary men and women in India and increasingly around the world.

**Dr. Rajkumari Shanker** received her M.A. from the University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, India, and Ph.D. from the University of Sorbonne, Paris, France. She taught at the University of Ottawa in the Department of Religious Studies since 1976. She also worked as a freelance development consultant for the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), especially on issues pertaining to women in development. She was an associate professor in the School of International Development and Global Studies and was a joint chair of Women's Studies, Carleton University, and University of Ottawa, from 2009 until 2010. She passed away in December 2022, while this book was under preparation.

# Chapter 1

## Women in the Jewish Tradition: Contemporary Trends and Future Possibilities



Yudit Kornberg Greenberg

“Feminism has contributed to the creative and compassionate blooming within Judaism today by thinking outside the sphere of standard practice and by enlarging the circle of Jewish life.”

–Maralee Gordon, founder and editor of *Lilith’s Rib*.

### 1.1 Preface

The widespread modernization and change in Jewish communal life, in which women play an integral part, is a phenomenon that is being influenced by patterns in Western society and religion.<sup>1</sup> Recent trends attest to the profound attainments by women, but also the backlashes and an ever-growing schism within the Jewish community, especially between the liberal<sup>2</sup> and the ultra-Orthodox camps.<sup>3</sup> Despite the current culture wars in Israel and the United States, the gains made by women, not only in liberal but also in Modern Orthodox Jewish life and thought are significant. In

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay I focus mostly on the two major centers of contemporary Jewish life: The United States and Israel. On the future of American Judaism, see Jonathan Sarna’s article “American Jews in the New Millennium: Transformation and Uncertainty,” *Patheos*, July 12, 2010.

According to Sarna, these developments parallel contemporary American religion as a whole. Other articles in the same issue include those of Anita Diamant and Zalman Schachter.

<sup>2</sup> Under Liberal Jews, I include Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal, secular/unaffiliated, and Jews who participate in new and alternative spirituality.

<sup>3</sup> As I write this article, a crisis is looming in Israel in response to the ultra-Orthodox Haredi community’s severe measures of discrimination against young girls and women. There is a public outrage and condemnation from across the Israeli political spectrum against what is rightly termed “Jewish fundamentalism” where girls are being spit on for so-called immodest dress and women pushed to the back of public buses.

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this essay, I map recent innovations in Jewish life and thought that have enabled women's religious equality as well as their intellectual and spiritual creativity.<sup>4</sup> In particular, I review advances in the areas of ritual and education and the intellectual contributions of feminist thinkers to shaping the discourse on women in Judaism and include "voices" of women who are integral to the ongoing process of Tikkun (Hebrew, mending) of women's status in Judaism.

## 1.2 Jewish Feminism in the Last 50 Years

There was a strong presence of Jewish women such as Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, Betty Friedan, and Andrea Dworkin in the 60's feminist movement.<sup>5</sup> Looking back, there is little doubt that their activism and ideologies served as a catalyst for the emergence of the Jewish feminist movement. The movement's origins can furthermore be traced to the increase in synagogue attendance by women and with it, heightened awareness of and challenges to the inequities pertaining to women in the public sphere of religious life. Since the 1970s, Jewish women have gained access to and have been engaged in what were once off-limits religious practices. In liberal Judaism, the desire and activism for full synagogue participation eventually translated into the ordination of women in the Reform rabbinate in 1972. The first Reconstructionist female rabbi was ordained in 1974. For the Conservative movement, the initial breakthrough was the decision in 1973 to count women in the Minyan (prayer quorum); the first female Conservative rabbi was ordained in 1985. It is estimated that one in four Reform rabbis today is a woman.<sup>6</sup> Rabbinic school classes at HUC tend to have a 50–50 ratio of women and men, which matches other graduate programs in the country. In the Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Jewish Renewal communities, the inclusion of women in all realms of synagogue and religious organizations, including their role as rabbis and cantors, are now established practices.<sup>7</sup> As Professor and Rabbi Dvora E. Weisberg puts it,

"I see the progress Jewish women have made both in the academy and in the religious arena, mirrored in my own experience. Thirty years ago, I began my graduate studies at a seminary that did not ordain women. All of my professors were men, and I was advised to avoid anything having to do with gender or women when considering doctoral research. Today, the seminary in which I studied ordains women, and has many women on its Judaica faculty. I myself teach in a seminary where at least half of the tenured faculty are women, and where

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<sup>4</sup> I also address those spheres, especially in Orthodox Judaism that are still in need of amelioration.

<sup>5</sup> The large number of Jewish women in the movement has been variously attributed to Jewish women's tendency to embrace progressive causes, their love of debate, and relative comfort with being seen as outsiders. See Eryn Loeb's article on the topic in Tablet Magazine, Aug. 15, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity*. However, gender hierarchy remains, especially in women holding pulpits and serving as senior rabbis.

<sup>7</sup> Nadel 1998. However, there are challenges for both lay and clergy women in Conservative Judaism, including inconsistent requirements for ordained rabbis. On this issue, see Anne Lapidus Lerner, "Pacing Change," in *New Jewish Feminism*.

I serve as the director of the rabbinical school. My own research focuses to a great extent on gender, and a perusal of conference programs indicates that field is a rich and varied one".<sup>8</sup>

An integral part of the changing status of women in Judaism has been accomplished through projects aimed at providing women with a voice in worship and scholarship. Feminist ideology and theology have raised fundamental questions regarding the androcentric nature of classical Jewish texts, including the prayer book. Scholars have transformed Jewish liturgy through the introduction of an inclusive language of prayer and the creation of new rituals that center on women's experiences.<sup>9</sup> Among certain Modern Orthodox communities, we have seen the emergence and growth of women's prayer groups.<sup>10</sup> Equally important have been innovations in the areas of education and scholarship. In addition to their roles as presidents of congregations and other communal organizations, women now hold spiritual and scholarly leadership roles, serving as spiritual and halakhic advisors, running Jewish day schools, teaching Jewish studies at the university level and in rabbinical seminaries, and publishing scholarly works in the field of Jewish Studies.

### 1.3 Feminist Thought and the Depatriarchalization of Liberal Judaism

Since the emergence of the feminist movement, a critical transformation for women in Judaism has been scholarship, especially the academic study of Judaism in areas such as biblical studies, theology, philosophy, rabbinics, history, and literature. Jewish feminist thinkers began with questions of gender inequality, but have since extended the parameters of their work to all areas of Jewish life and thought that pertain to gender, sexuality, and ethics. Feminist Jews in the 80s debated the question: "what is the most fundamental and urgent area for Jewish feminist analysis: Halakha or Theology?" In retrospect, both theological and halakhic scholarship have informed and shaped new perspectives and methodologies in interpreting, constructing, and democratizing an inclusive Judaism.<sup>11</sup> Ozick's argument for halakhic justice, as well as Plaskow's premise that halakhic injustice toward women is rooted in a theology where women are absent or "other," validate the extent and significance of the Jewish feminist project.

Feminist theology provides a theoretical framework for re-envisioning the three pillars of traditional Judaism—Torah, God, and Israel, and aims to apply the moral

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<sup>8</sup> Director of the School of Rabbinic Studies, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles.

<sup>9</sup> See especially the creative scholarship of Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival*, Harper Collins, 1996; see also the work of Rachel Adler, 1998. Imported from liberal Judaism in North America, interest in gender issues in prayer in Israel has increased in the past 2 decades.

<sup>10</sup> Greenberg 1981, Grossman and Haut 1992.

<sup>11</sup> In *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, edited by Susannah Heschel, New York: 1983.

imperative for inclusivity and equality, not only to women but also to other groups who have been ignored, and to other socio-political causes. Rabbi Margaret Holub reflects on the shifts that are occurring in theorizing about women and Jewish thought: “the whole understanding of gender is complex and becoming more fluid in this generation, so that the idea itself of ‘women’ is more interesting than it used to be. What is a woman’s point of view? What are the power dynamics? Where are authority and privilege located?”<sup>12</sup>

Plaskow’s scholarship was the first systematic feminist Jewish theology that focuses on recovering women’s history and redefining women’s relationship with the sacred.<sup>13</sup> One of the most important questions that Plaskow raises is whether feminism is actually transforming Judaism or is it only attaining equal rights while social and religious structures remain unchanged. She challenges women and men to embrace the notion of Jewish transformation and is adamant that women must see themselves “standing again at Sinai” as recipients and partners of the covenant. This entails critiquing deeply embedded notions of hierarchy and exclusivity as these exist in the Torah, in liturgy, and in Halakha. Furthermore, as partners of the covenant, feminist theologians must redefine the Jewish community’s ethics of inclusivity, ameliorate what they characterize as imbalanced “god language” and create new midrashim and liturgy that reflect women’s experiences and sensibilities.<sup>14</sup>

Rachel Adler is another seminal feminist Jewish scholar who juxtaposes Halakha, ethics and theology in her work, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*.<sup>15</sup> She is committed to Halakha but at the same time recognizes the pervasive injustice toward women in rabbinic texts. Adler’s agenda in developing her inclusive theology and ethics is not only to critique but also to offer alternative models of legally binding contracts. A primary example is her ethical commitment contract—brit ahuvim (lovers’ covenant), based on the principle of mutuality, replacing traditional marriage contract (Ketubah) and its language of acquisition with this alternative contract. She views her constructive Jewish theology and ethical praxis as Tikkun

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<sup>12</sup> Statement made by Rabbi Margaret Holub, in response to my request to reflect on the recent changes affecting women in Judaism. She continues to remark: “Last year I was at a conference about hevre kadisha—it was in Berkeley, granted, but nevertheless I found myself at one moment chatting with three transgender rabbis. And the topic that brought us together wasn’t even gender. As it happens, one of them was working on developing a hevre kadisha specifically oriented to working with transgender Jews when they die. That seems pretty interesting and, in its own way, deeply unsettling of categories that many of us have taken for granted.”

<sup>13</sup> Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990. Plaskow, Judith. “Jewish Theology in Feminist Perspective.” In *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*, edited by Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, 62–84. New Haven and London: 1994; Plaskow, Judith. “The Right Question is Theological.”

<sup>14</sup> One of Plaskow’s ideas for transforming tradition is to replace the traditional idea of chosenness with the notion of Jewish distinctiveness. As she sees it, the notion of “chosenness” has perpetuated an environment that is antagonistic to pluralism and that had led to social inequality in the Jewish community.

<sup>15</sup> This is Adler’s full-length project which was published by the Jewish Publication Society, 1998. Her earlier essays include important and thought-provoking critiques such as “The Jew who was not there.”



Olam (mending a shattered world). Other pivotal feminist scholars include Ellen Umansky, Marcia Falk, and Rebecca Alpert. Umansky's theology centers around the critique of traditional male god language and on the creation of new and innovative rituals for women.<sup>16</sup> Marcia Falk offers creative innovations to the Jewish liturgy with her scholarly and poetic work on prayers and blessings.<sup>17</sup>

A trend which has not nearly crested yet is the queering of Judaism. Feminist thought and activism have opened up Jewish communal life to gay and lesbian Jews where they are slowly gaining acceptance and even leadership roles. Lesbian Jewish feminists have made substantial contributions as rabbis, lay leaders, activists, and scholars.<sup>18</sup> Rebecca Alpert is a thinker and activist whose contributions to feminist Jewish theology are dedicated to the lesbian Jewish experience. Despite the fact that Jewish texts have been traditionally read as denouncing lesbians and gays, she chooses to remain in the realm of Jewish textuality by offering new readings and interpretive possibilities that incorporate lesbian and gay perspectives. Furthermore, she asserts that creating new stories stemming from lesbian and gay experiences is crucial to the transformation of Judaism as a whole.<sup>19</sup> Alpert and other lesbian and gay thinkers are challenging notions of family, community, and religiosity by their presence within and outside the organized Jewish community. They are challenging the criteria for membership in Jewish congregations and communal organizations; they engage in constructing new rituals such as commitment ceremonies and events to celebrate "coming out" in a Jewish context. They are also demanding that the Jewish community address homophobia and the impact of the AIDS epidemic on Jews. The flagship organization of this movement is The World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Jews: Keshet Ga'avah (WCGLBTJ), which consists of around 50 member organizations in numerous countries.<sup>20</sup> An outgrowth of WCGLBTJ that demonstrates its growing impact on mainstream Judaism is the

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<sup>16</sup> Umansky, Ellen. "Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology: Possibilities and Problems." In *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, edited by Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, 187–198. San Francisco: 1989; Umansky, Ellen. "(Re)Imaging the Divine." *Response* 41–42 (Fall-Winter 1982): 110–119. *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality: A Sourcebook*, Ellen Umansky and Dianne Ashton, ed. 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Falk, Marcia. *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath and the New Moon Festival*. San Francisco: 1996; Falk, Marcia. "Notes on Composing New Blessings: Toward a Feminist-Jewish Reconstruction of Prayer." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 (Spring 1987): 39–53; Falk, Marcia. "Response to Feminist Reflections on Separation and Unity in Jewish Theology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (Spring 1986): 121–125.

<sup>18</sup> See Plaskow 1990, Beck 1982, Balka and Rose 1989, Alpert 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Alpert's writings include *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* (Columbia University Press, 1997); *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation*, editor, with Sue Elwell and Shirley Idelson, (Rutgers University Press, 2001); and *Whose Torah?: A Concise Guide to Progressive Judaism* (The New Press, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> The Hebrew subtitle Keshet Ga'avah—Rainbow of Pride—emphasizes the importance of Hebrew and of Israel to the World Congress. The Congress holds conferences and workshops representing the interests of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews around the world.

Institute for Judaism and Sexual Orientation (IJSO) of the Reform movement in its emphasis on social justice, holiness, and community.<sup>21</sup>

## 1.4 Women in Modern Orthodox Judaism

The process of gaining access to the fundamental areas of Jewish life within Orthodox institutional life begins with the study of classical texts, especially Talmud. The rationale of “Torah learning” as the means to equal access in leadership roles in legal and ritual matters hinges upon one’s mastery of the Halakhah (the Jewish legal tradition) as traditionally, rabbis function as teachers, scholars, and as legal authorities. As women become text-literate, they are able and indeed are becoming experts in legal decision-making. Even so, appropriating religious leadership roles in the Orthodox community has been rather slow. Women who have proven their mastery of Talmudic texts still face the challenges of wide communal acceptance. This is especially true with regards to holding the title of “rabbi.” According to some halakhic authorities, resistance to women’s ordination in Orthodox Judaism does not stem from halakhic issues, but rather from the threat of change in the social status of both men and women that a woman rabbi entails for the Orthodox community.

For Orthodox Jewish feminists, the challenge has been negotiating women’s rights and Halakhah, while maintaining that gender differences are religiously binding. Blu Greenberg’s pioneering scholarship has paved the path in empowering women in areas of education and ritual.<sup>22</sup> Addressing the patriarchal foundation and essence of Judaism, she nevertheless sees Halakhah as capable of affirming women’s rights, especially with regards to divorce. Recently, Tamar Ross has contributed her Orthodox perspective to feminist Jewish thought by taking a holistic view of Judaism and challenging the androcentric foundation of Halakhah.<sup>23</sup> She too sees the possibilities of working within Halakha and argues that feminists can and should participate in its interpretive process. Despite modest progress in women’s leadership roles, hurdles to full expression of women’s spiritual life and participation in the halakhic process remain. These involve their public role in religious ritual such as public Torah reading, ordination, as well as the issues of divorce and the Agunah.

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<sup>21</sup> [http://www.glbtejews.org/rubrique.php3?id\\_rubrique=134](http://www.glbtejews.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=134).

<sup>22</sup> Greenberg, Blu. *On women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*, 1981.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, Tamar. “Can the Demand for Change in the Status of Women Be Halakhically Legitimated?” *Judaism* 42 (Fall 1993): 478–492; Ross, Tamar. “Modern Orthodoxy and the Challenge of Feminism.” In *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy*, edited by Jonathan Frankel, 3–38. Oxford: 2000; *Exploring the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism*. Brandeis University Press, 2004.

Still, profound achievements have been taking place in the spiritual, cultural, and intellectual domains of Orthodox Jewish life and thought.<sup>24</sup> These include the emergence of contemporary Yeshivot (academies for the advanced study of Jewish texts, especially the Talmud) for women, including Drisha in New York and Midrashat Lindenbaum in Israel. Furthermore, a significant phenomenon which is a consequence of these Yeshivot is the rise of a group of women scholars who act as spiritual and legal advisors. Rabbis Angel and Weiss have been the primary supporters of Orthodox women in leadership positions by establishing the International Rabbinic Fellowship, an association created as a more “open” alternative to the mainstream Rabbinical Council of America.<sup>25</sup> Their statement on women in leadership positions reads: “We view as encouraging the most recent efforts to bridge gaps within various segments of modern Orthodox rabbinic leadership. In this regard we salute the Rabbinical Council of America and Rabbi Avi Weiss for working together to strike a compromise that preserved shalom (peace) in the Orthodox community. At the same time, we affirm that attempts to delegitimize rabbis and synagogues for the positions they take on this debate go against the spirit of respectful and meaningful conversation.”

At present, with few exceptions, women cannot be ordained in Orthodox institutions.<sup>26</sup> The debate whether women can halakhically be given *semicha* (rabbinic ordination) divides the Orthodox community into two camps: the more liberal camp that recognizes that there are no legitimate legal restrictions on the ordination of women; and the right-wing camp that continues to adhere to the stance prohibiting women from ordination. One woman who has recently been in the headlines is Sara Hurwitz, who received her ordination from Rabbi Avi Weiss, senior rabbi of Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Her ordination actually took place in 2009, but at that time, she was given the title of *Maharat*, an acronym which stands for “*Madricha Hilchatit Ruchanit*,” or legal and spiritual guide, a newly created title. In 2010, she was finally given the title *Rabba*—the feminine equivalent of Rabbi by Rabbi Weiss. This move caused uproar from Agudath Israel,<sup>27</sup> which led Rabbi Weiss to refrain from further ordination of women. His acquiescence to Agudath Israel represents a significant stalling of progress for women in the Orthodox community and signals that perhaps a break from the conservative factions of Orthodoxy might be the answer to the advancement of women in Modern Orthodoxy.<sup>28</sup>

Rabbinic ordination is not the only obstacle for Orthodox women who desire full participation in public religious life. Another area is the role of women in *Tefillah* (prayer), including mixed gender as well as women-only prayer groups, an issue that

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<sup>24</sup> Renewal in Orthodox Judaism can be seen in young people’s return to Orthodoxy and the flourishing of educational institutions such as Jewish day schools, university Jewish studies programs, and Yeshivot for women.

<sup>25</sup> The Rabbinical Council of America was established in 1935 and is the largest Rabbinical group within Orthodox Judaism.

<sup>26</sup> Mimi Feigelson and Eveline Goodman-Thau were both ordained by Orthodox Rabbis.

<sup>27</sup> The communal organization of the ultra-Orthodox.

<sup>28</sup> Agudath Israel of America is the umbrella organization of the ultra-Orthodox.

continues to be debated and to divide the Orthodox community. The first women's Tefillah group began in the late 1960s on the holiday of Simchat Torah at Lincoln Square synagogue in Manhattan.<sup>29</sup> The women, with the support of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, were given Torah scrolls for the celebration and permitted to convene a separate Torah reading.<sup>30</sup> A major step forward took place when women in other Orthodox synagogues were also granted the privilege of holding the Torah and carrying it to the women's section. Women's groups followed suit and began to conduct full-fledged women's Simchat Torah services, in which women read the Torah portion aloud and gave *aliyot*<sup>31</sup> to every woman present.

During this period, only two rabbis sanctioned this practice, forcing the women to meet in private homes.<sup>32</sup> By the late 1970s, a number of groups began to meet monthly. Some of these prayer services were tied to Rosh Chodesh (the beginning of the month) and the new moon cycle and met on weekdays, while others met once a month on the Sabbath.<sup>33</sup> In 1984, five rabbis from Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) issued a statement called the Riets Five Responsum, forbidding women from dancing with the Torah scroll, from women-led Torah services, and from Megillah readings. The reasons for this backlash were viewed by many as not halakhically based but rather, driven by fear of the feminist movement, which they equated with secularism and promiscuity.<sup>34</sup>

Women's prayer groups have since become accepted in many circles. At present, there are approximately 80 Tefillah groups around the world, with the majority being in the United States, and mostly in the New York area. Women participants in the Tefillah groups tend to be well educated (both in Judaism and in secular studies) and hold influential professional positions. Their achievements in the secular world leads them to feel particularly frustrated when at the synagogue they are relegated to a place behind the Mechitzah (partition) which separates them from the men but more importantly, from full participation in the rituals. According to a study conducted in Metropolitan New York, women who belong to a Tefillah group find it spiritually fulfilling.<sup>35</sup> The majority of the women interviewed in this study contrasted their group Tefillah experience with their passive role in synagogue, where Shabbat experience is usually noisy and distracting from serious davenning (Yiddish, prayer).

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<sup>29</sup> On Simchat Torah men carry and dance with the Torah scrolls, a practice from which women were excluded.

<sup>30</sup> A central part of the liturgy of the Sabbath and the holidays.

<sup>31</sup> The honor of being called up in the synagogue to read from the Torah.

<sup>32</sup> Rabbi Avi Weiss of Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, and Rabbi Haskel Lookstein of Kehillat Jeshurun were the only exceptions.

<sup>33</sup> In the early 1980s, the first women's Tefillah group in Canada was founded. In 1988, Rivka Haut organized a women's prayer group at the Western Wall in Jerusalem which spurred ultra-Orthodox anger and violence.

<sup>34</sup> When asked to rule on the question of women's public Torah reading, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein stated that *in theory* it might be permissible so long as those women are exceptionally righteous women, but it is essentially impossible to find such women.

<sup>35</sup> Ailene Cohen Nusbacher, Jewish women's prayer groups: seeking a more meaningful religious experience, *Le'ela*, 49, 2000, 41–46.

Surprisingly, most of the women interviewed were reluctant to be identified as feminists, which could be explained in light of the perceived negative image and secular connotations of “feminism.” Despite the antagonism, the vast majority of the women interviewed were content with their Orthodox lifestyle and did not consider leaving the Orthodox community. Moreover, they all rejected egalitarian Minyans, where women and men have equal roles in participating and leading prayers.

While women’s Tefillah groups are meant to supplement, rather than replace, regular Shabbat and holiday synagogue services, a more radical solution to women’s secondary status in Orthodox Judaism is the egalitarian Minyan which enables women full and equal participation in communal religious observance. Such congregations include Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem, the Minyan, and Darchei Noam in New York City. A *Guide for the “Halakhic Minyan,”* which outlines the practices of Orthodox egalitarian Minyanim, begins with the explanation that “despite our departure from traditional practice to include women, we may only innovate as far as the halakhah, as recorded in the writings of traditional ‘decisors’, permits.” The establishment of Orthodox egalitarian congregations has aroused significant and heated discussion among contemporary halakhic authorities. The controversy of women’s public participation and leadership roles in religious rituals, particularly in the reading of the Torah, stems from a combination of historical and societal factors and varying interpretations of Jewish law.

According to Rabbi Menachem Shapiro, the issue of women reading Torah publicly is not necessarily a halakhic one. “The explanation [of this opposition] lies not in halakhah per se, but in an ingrained conservatism, naturally suspicious of change, which is heightened by the perception of being under siege from a dynamic, attractive, and sometimes unsavory general culture.” Instead, he feels the opposition to the practice stems from a need to cling to traditions and customs. For Rabbi Daniel Sperber, who has also written extensively and participated in public debates on this issue, the question of kavod hatzibur (the concept of public dignity), which is sometimes brought up as a rationale against permitting women access to public Torah reading, seems irrelevant. According to his reasoning, even if the issue is a halakhic one, the principle of kavod habriyot (individual dignity) takes precedence.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the struggle to obtain full participation and leadership roles in public religious life, Orthodox feminists are challenging the halakhic issues and the mechanics of Jewish divorce (Get) where power is unevenly distributed in favor of men. The special case of *Agunot*—women chained to their husbands who are either missing or refuse to give their wives a divorce is problematic and is indicative of the obstinacy of Orthodoxy. This dilemma has been addressed by many feminist scholars on behalf of *Agunot*, but the problems on the ground persist as right-wing elements in the Orthodox community are working against any attempts to change the power dynamic as well as the status of women in their community. Recently, Fraidy Reiss founded the new organization “Unchained at Last,” which is committed

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<sup>36</sup> For further discussion on this topic, see Julie Rapoport, *The Orthodox Egalitarian Minyan: An Analysis of Women and Public Torah Reading*, *Jewish Voices on a Secular Campus*, Vol. 2, Spring 2009.