

Faith and Feminism

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, feminist activism seeking equal rights and legal reform to redress discrimination against women became gradually more common throughout the world. Women's movements arose in many countries expressing this universal desire, but in locally distinctive ways. This new feminism was a modern form of agitation and activism for change – but it was not without roots. Wherever such movements arose they were, at least in part, made possible by the long (but scarcely documented) history of women's experiences in religion, self-expression and social participation.

Religion and religious traditions formed a broad part of the early history of feminism: as with ideas of human freedom generally, the emancipation of women first appeared in public consciousness within the context of faith. Similarly, the rigid, gendered moral codes that persist today are often rooted in interpretations of religious belief and practices that once reflected preponderant social attitudes: women's exclusion from education and public life, employment restrictions, the denial of universal suffrage, legally sanctioned marital rape and violence, the lack (or denial) of child custody – these were (and in many cases still are) the problems of a very real and unforgiving life often aggravated by cultural and identity politics in plural societies.

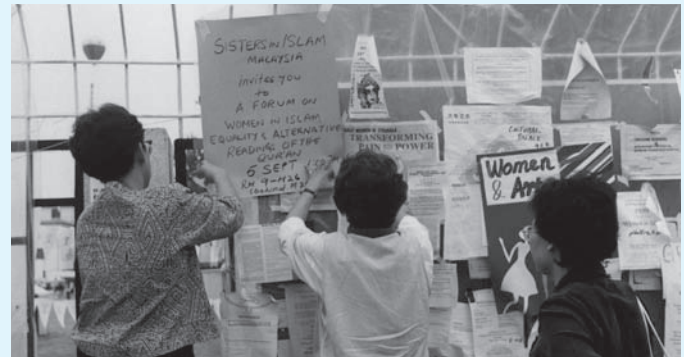
Thus in mediaeval Europe, some of the earliest women to speak out did so within a religious framework and in religious terms, either while secluded in convents or after embarking on long religious pilgrimages (Walters, 2005; Spearing, 2002).

However, the mediaeval attitude towards religious fervour and divine inspiration in women was often uncompromising, and these women were sometimes punished for deviation, madness, or worse – witchcraft.

While feminism has developed from diverse sources and origins, an assessment of the early history of feminism must acknowledge the central importance of women's religious and literary expressions that sought spiritual equality and deplored women's unjust subordination.

In evaluating this history there has been a strong focus on organised religions – particularly the Abrahamic faiths, as well as Hinduism and Buddhism. This is due not to any "primacy" of these religions but their immense impact on legal, moral, social and or individual decisions throughout the world. This impact continues to colour, and in many cases dictate, a range of considerations from private conduct to the formulation of government policy. Likewise, modern feminist and other scholarly approaches to gender discrimination must necessarily address religion due to the perspectives of patriarchy and power that frequently underlie and dominate these religions' organisation.

Furthermore, women's modern secular self-assertion and their aspirations towards equal status, worth and dignity in the family



Some women's rights activists choose not to turn their backs on religion and feminism, as can be seen at the NGO Forum during the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

and society have developed historically from a consciousness and activism grounded ultimately in religious experience – whether in recognition that gender equality was a natural right, or in opposition to those who would deny such a right.

In this issue of *BARAZA!* women activists and activist-scholars from different religious and cultural backgrounds describe their journeys through faith and feminism, and recount how the encounter between religion and feminism influenced the trajectory of the feminist struggles in which they have been involved.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini finds that the emergence of a sustained 'native' Islamic feminism was delayed until the 20th century's last two decades. Emerging since the 1980s, the new political Islam is primarily concerned with *shari'ah* implementation in historically contingent forms, which are often anachronistic today. They offer an hierarchical and patriarchal vision of gender relations in family and society. Muslim women have responded with a new consciousness that is feminist in its aspirations and demands, and yet Islamic in its cultural idiom and imagination.

[more @ page 02 >](#)

- 01 Editorial
- 03 New Feminist Voices in Islam
- 04 The Story of Sisters in Islam
- 06 What it Means to be Catholic and Feminist
- 09 Finding God's Grace: A Hindu Scholar's Personal Journey
- 12 Religion, Women and Feminism in India
- 14 Patriarchy is not Inherent in Buddhism
- 17 Women's Struggle in Israeli Society
- 19 Recommended Reading on Faith and Feminism

CONTENTS

< continued from page 01

Malaysia-based **Sisters in Islam** consciously chose from the beginning to work within the Islamic framework believing that God could not but be just. This spurred them to return to Islamic law's primary sources and challenge the Islamic establishment on its own terms. Twenty years on, SIS is part of an emerging women's pressure group that uses the holistic framework of religion, rights and current everyday realities to change how Islamic teachings are understood and translated into law.

Frances Kissling identifies her feminism's religious roots within the Catholic Church's rejection of divorced women and its refusal to accept their remarriage – especially those refusing to accept established teachings uncritically, seeking instead to understand them and thus reclaim Catholic women's rights to equality and justice. Her 25-year journey to reconcile feminism and Catholicism required her to question religious orthodoxy and clericalism. However, her faith and commitment remains steadfast, and she continues to engage critically with members of her faith community.

K. Thilagawathi describes childhood encounters with Hinduism, and her disappointment at being excluded from certain ceremonies because of her gender. However, her journey towards deeper religious understanding has also been a journey towards the realisation that the divine is present in all creation.

Nivedita Menon points out that the encounter of feminism and religion in post-colonial India emerged from contestation over the application of uniform statute law (the Uniform Civil Code or UCC of India) overriding minority groups' customary laws and religious specificities. She describes how debate surrounding the divorce of a Muslim woman, Shah Bano, impelled Indian women's movements to reconsider how best to seek legal reform to achieve full gender justice.

The Venerable Dhammanda, a *bhikkuni*, religious scholar and founding member and editor of *The Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities* holds that patriarchy is not inherent in core or founding Buddhist teachings. Women are free to join monastic orders based on their abilities and spiritual potential for enlightenment.

Leah Shakdiel points out that there is now a growing gap and polarisation between the religious and secular members of Israeli society. She too has to challenge and break down the monopoly that men hold over religious tradition and state bureaucracy to seek women's inclusion in Israel's political and institutional arrangements. She says "the expansion of Torah knowledge" is what enables Jewish law's core to be separated from common practice, which should evolve.

The articles and other resources featured *BARAZA!* this time cannot capture the breadth of endeavours of those who struggle in both faith and feminism. But it is our hope that these will inspire others to learn about the challenges faced by our sisters of faith who struggle to hear the voice of justice and equality in their spiritual traditions.

Norani Othman and the Editorial Team

References

- Walters, Margaret. 2005, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Spearing, Elizabeth. 2002, *Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Tanenbaum, Leora. 2008, *Taking Back God: American Women Rising Up for Religious Equality*, New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux.



EDITORIAL TEAM

Norani Othman
Norhayati Kaprawi
Shanon Shah
Zainah Anwar
Zaitun (Toni) Mohamed Kasim
Masjaliza Hamzah
SALT Media

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sisters in Islam (SIS) would like to thank Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Frances Kissling, Dr K. Thilagawathi, Nivedita Menon, Venerable Dhammananda and Leah Shakdiel for permitting us to use their articles; Jana Rumminger and Chuah Siew Eng for their editorial input; and Syarifatul Adibah and Musfiza Mustafa for their assistance.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Toni (1966-2008) who was part of the *BARAZA!* Editorial Team.

BARAZA! is a resource primarily for activists; policy makers; academics and students of law, Islamic and gender studies; and SIS funders and supporters.

It provides:

- * a focus on contemporary matters affecting Muslims today, especially women's rights in Islam
- * resources for reference

Please send comments, suggestions, requests, bouquets or brickbats to:

BARAZA! Editorial Team

Sisters in Islam
No. 7, Jalan 6/10,
46000 Petaling Jaya
Selangor, MALAYSIA.
Tel: 603-7785 6121
Fax: 603-7785 8737

E-mail: sistersinislam@pd.jaring.my
URL: www.sistersinislam.org.my

New Feminist Voices in Islam¹

Ziba Mir-Hosseini

Muslim women have always resisted gender inequality. Yet the emergence of a sustained native feminism was delayed until recently.

As feminism began to grow in Europe and the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries, it was also used to attack native and Muslim cultures as responsible for the subjugation of women in those societies. At the same time, anti-colonialist and nationalist movements also began challenging anything that was associated with the colonial powers, including feminism.

During this period, women became symbols of cultural authenticity, which meant that any dissent voiced by women could be construed as a kind of betrayal to the cause. Muslim women activists were thus under pressure to conform to anti-colonialist and nationalist priorities, sometimes at the expense of the fight for women's rights. Many Muslim women faced a painful choice – they had to choose between their Muslim identity, their faith and their new gender consciousness.

One of the paradoxical consequences of the late 20th century rise of political Islam is that it helped to create space in which Muslim women could reconcile their faith and identity with the struggle for gender equality. This is not because Islamicists offered an egalitarian vision of gender relations, but because

These are juristic constructs that follow from the way that early classical Muslim jurists conceptualised and defined marriage.

While the ideals of Islam call for freedom, justice and equality, social norms in the formative years of Islamic law impeded their realisation. These norms were assimilated into Islamic jurisprudence through a set of theological, legal and social theories and assumptions, such as women are created of and for men; women are inferior to men and need to be protected; women's sexuality is a danger to the social order. The rules on marriage and divorce, through which gender inequalities are sustained in today's Muslim societies, encapsulate these assumptions.

There was not a conspiracy among classical jurists to undermine women, and they did not deliberately seek to ignore the voice of revelation. Rather, in reading the sacred texts and discerning the terms of the Shari'a, these jurists were guided by the social and political realities of their age and a set of legal, social and gender assumptions and theories that reflected the state of knowledge and the normative values and patriarchal institutions of their time. Their rulings – which were all the product of either juristic speculations or social norms and practices – came to be treated by successive generations as though they were

“Feminism gives me the head. But Buddhist spirituality gives me the heart.

- peace activist Ouyporn Khuankaew ”

their return to the Shari'a and attempt to translate the patriarchal notions inherent in traditional interpretations of Islamic law into State laws and policies, provoked many women to increasing criticism of these notions and spurred them to greater activism. A growing number of women came to see no inherent or logical link between Islamic ideals and patriarchy, and no contradiction between their Islamic faith and feminism. This allowed them to free themselves from earlier anti-colonial and nationalist discourses. Using the language of political Islam, they could critique the gender biases in Islamic law in ways that were previously impossible.

By the late 1980s, there were clear signs of the emergence of a new consciousness and a gender discourse that is feminist in its aspiration and demands, but Islamic in its language and sources of legitimacy. Some versions of this new discourse came to be labelled 'Islamic feminism'.

As with other feminists, the positions of Islamic feminists are local, diverse, multiple and evolving. All of these women seek gender justice and equality, though they do not always agree on what constitutes justice or equality or the best ways of attaining them. Many have difficulties with labels and object to being called either Islamic or feminist because these labels are meant to exclude: as soon as someone is called feminist, she is not a good Muslim; as soon as she is called Islamic, she cannot be a feminist.

By uncovering history and re-reading textual sources, Muslim feminists are proving that the inequalities embedded in fiqh are neither manifestations of divine will nor cornerstones of a backward social system, but human constructions that are contrary to the essence of divine justice as revealed in the Qur'an. They show how men's unilateral right to divorce or right to polygyny was not granted to them by God, but by Muslim male jurists.

immutable. In this way, Islamic legal tradition in time came to overshadow the 'ethical' voice of Islam and its call for justice and reform, thus negating the spirit of the Shari'a.

The new feminist voices in Islam are part of a larger intellectual and ideological struggle among Muslims over two opposed understandings of their religion. One, promoted by Islamicists, is an absolutist and legalistic Islam as constructed in traditional fiqh which makes little concession to contemporary realities and aspirations of Muslims. The other, promoted by Reformists, is a pluralistic and tolerant Islam that is making room for these realities and values, including gender equality, and that has sheltered newly emerging feminist voices and feminist scholarship.²

The main question for Islamic feminists is whether a feminist discourse that takes its legitimacy from Islam's sacred texts and has to operate within a closed legal system like fiqh, with little support from the tradition's power base, can break that system apart. It is possible for three reasons.

First, given the current realities of the Muslim world in which Islamicists have the upper hand in defining the terms of reference of political and gender discourses, only those who are prepared to engage with Islam's sacred texts and its legal tradition can bring about change. Secular feminism in the Muslim world paved the way for women's entry into politics and society in the early 20th century. But since the rise of political Islam in the second part of the century, the struggle must be conducted in a religious language and framework where jurisprudential constructions of gender can be examined and the patriarchal mandates of fiqh can be challenged.

Second, the new feminist voices in Islam can overcome the

[turn to next page>](#)

< from previous page

false dichotomies and polarities between Islam and feminism, religious and secular, and East and West. This is of particular concern in the context of the “War on Terror”, which, because of the perception that it is directed at Muslims, makes it more likely for Muslims to cling to religious tradition and also erodes the credibility of secular and Western discourses.

Finally, the daily lives of Muslim women are governed by a set of patriarchal beliefs and laws for which divine rules and mandates are claimed. Feminist voices in Islam are in a unique position to bring about a much needed paradigm shift in Islamic law. They are exposing the inequalities embedded in current interpretations of Shari’a as constructions by male jurists. Taken to its logical conclusion, this argument demonstrates that some rules hitherto claimed as ‘Islamic’ and part of the Shari’a are in fact merely reflections of the views and perceptions of some Muslims, and are rooted in social practices and norms that are neither sacred nor immutable but human and changing. The political consequence is both to free Muslims from taking defensive positions and to enable them to go beyond old fiqh dogmas in search of new questions and new answers.

Currently, elite and highly educated women are in the best position to reject or challenge these beliefs and laws. But by separating patriarchy from Islamic ideals and giving voice to an ethical and egalitarian vision of Islam, Muslim women from all walks of life can be empowered to make dignified choices. This, in the end, is what Islamic feminism is all about.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini is a legal anthropologist, specialising in Islamic law, gender and development. She studied Sociology at Tehran University and has a PhD in Social Anthropology from University of Cambridge (1980). She has been Hauser Global Law Visiting Professor at New York University since 2002, and is Research Associate at the London Middle Eastern Institute and the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Law, both at SOAS, University of London. Her publications include Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran (1999), and (with Richard Tapper) Islam and Democracy in Iran: Eshkevari and the Quest for Reform (2006). She has also directed (with Kim Longinotto) two award-winning feature-length documentary films Divorce Iranian Style (1998) and Runaway (2001).

Endnotes

¹ This essay is based on a talk given by Ziba Mir-Hosseini in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 19 March 2006, as well as her article entitled, “Islam and Gender Justice”, *Voices of Islam*, ed. Vincent Cornell and Omid Safi, Praeger Perspectives (2007).

² Many scholars still avoid the term ‘feminist’ and instead call themselves Muslim women scholars or activists (see Webb 2000). A large majority of them have focused their scholarship on Qur’anic interpretation: Barlas (2002), Hassan (1987, 1996, 1999), Jawad (1998), Mernissi (1991), Shaikh (1997), Wadud (1999, 2004). The following deal directly with fiqh: Al-Hibri (1997, 2000, 2001), Ali (2002, 2003), Mir-Hosseini (1999, 2003a), Sardar Ali (1998), Abou El Fadl (2001), An-Na’im (2000), Engineer (1992) and Esack (2001) are prominent among male scholars who have written on women’s rights.

Malaysia-based Sisters in Islam has often been used as an example of a group within the Muslim faith that uses the holistic framework of religion, rights and the realities of modern day life to change the way Islamic teachings are understood and translated into law and policy. Some academics even label SIS as ‘Islamic feminists’. This article traces how the group began.

The Story of Sisters in Islam

When the government implemented new Islamic Family laws in 1987, little did it know that the ripple of that action would eventually create the force that is Sisters in Islam (SIS) today.

Enacted in 1984, the laws were proving problematic to Muslim women seeking legal redress for their marital woes. Concerned by these growing complaints, a small group of women lawyers and their friends – academics, journalists, analysts, lawyers and activists – came together under the Shari’a Subcommittee of the Association of Women Lawyers (AWL) to discuss the matter. Their initial meetings were held in the house shared by Zainah Anwar, a former journalist and senior analyst who would later spearhead SIS as its first Executive Director, and Nor Faridah Ariffin, then President of the AWL.

The group’s continued discussions increasingly made clear that the origin of such anti-women laws stemmed from contentious interpretations of the Qur’an, and their focus expanded to include broader concerns that pointed out clearly the need to re-read the Text to ascertain for themselves what was actually written. An added impetus at this time was the campaign by women’s groups to make domestic violence a crime – the Islamic Centre (Pusat Islam) of the Prime Minister’s Department had thrown a spanner into the works with its damaging claim that Islam permitted husbands to beat their wives.

By 1989, the group had evolved into a core of eight women who founded what was to become Sisters in Islam. They began to meet every week to study the Qur’an closely, especially verses used to justify domestic violence and gender equality in general. At these weekly meetings, the founding members discovered that the Text showed that women’s struggle to lead lives of equal worth and dignity to men was clearly located within Islamic teachings.

This discovery opened up a world of Islam that was based on the principles of compassion, equality, justice and love. It enabled SIS to take the unequivocal position that men and women were equal in Islam, that a Muslim man did not have the right to beat his wife, that polygamy was not an inherent right in Islam but a contract permitted only in the most exceptional circumstances, that one male witness did not equal two female witnesses... and a great deal more.

The group wanted to share with others that it was not Islam that oppressed women but male-centric interpretations influenced by cultural practices and values of a patriarchal society. In 1990, a ruling by a Shari’a Appeals Court judge provided an opening:

In a rare decision, the judge forbade a husband from taking a second wife, deeming him to have failed the four conditions for



In discussing issues related to Muslim women, Sister in Islam addresses religious interpretations as well as realities on the ground.

polygamy stipulated in Islamic Family Law. Joining the ensuing debate, the founders of SIS wrote to major newspapers under the name 'Daughters of Islam', taking after a group they had met at a women's meeting on 'Reading the Qur'an for Ourselves' in Karachi, Pakistan. When that letter was published in *The Star* newspaper to enthusiastic response, rival paper *The New Straits Times* requested a modified version of the Letter to the Editor under another name. Thus, in 1990, the 'Sisters in Islam' were born.

More validation came in 1991 with the launching of two booklets by SIS: *Are Women & Men Equal Before Allah?* and *Are Muslim Men Allowed to Beat Their Wives?* Datuk Napsiah Omar, then Minister-in-charge of Women's Affairs, attended the launch during a one-day public forum. She was joined by more than 200 women and men from civil society groups, academia, the government and the business community.

Recognising the importance of advocacy for law reform and engaging with the larger issues of Islamisation and the challenge of change and modernity, SIS began to submit memoranda to the Malaysian government and to initiate collaborations with international scholars of Islam.

In 1992, the group held its first national workshop on 'The Modern Nation State and Islam'. The following year, it submitted a memorandum to then-Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad containing religious, legal and socio-historical perspectives contesting provisions in the proposed Kelantan Shari'a Criminal Code (hudud law). In 1994, SIS issued another memorandum arguing that the Domestic Violence Act, which specified civil punishments for domestic violence, should also protect Muslims.

To build their own capacities, SIS members started taking weekly lessons on the Qur'an, Islamic law, social change and modernity from renowned Egyptian reformist scholar Dr Fathi Osman, then a visiting professor at the Law Faculty of the International Islamic University.

SIS then expanded its activism in promoting fundamental liberties guaranteed by the Federal Constitution, as its mission of ensuring

justice for Muslim women and men was (and still is) very much part of the larger human rights and democratic movement in the country.

By 1998, SIS's work, which had hitherto been voluntary and conducted without the facilities of an office, took on a more permanent aspect with the establishment of a small office headed by Zainah Anwar and Sharifah Zuriah Aljeffri as Co-Directors.

That year, SIS organised a workshop inviting the authorities and other stakeholders to alert those in power to the realities Muslim women faced on the ground, and thus to provide the basis for discussing necessary legal and procedural reforms. Among the participants were the National Council of Women's Organisations, the Women's Affairs Division of the Prime Minister's Department, and Pusat Islam.

To enlarge its support base for an Islam of justice and equality, SIS ran public education programmes – from study sessions for Muslim women that later included men and people of all faiths, to training sessions, public fora and talks.

SIS also branched out into advisory services when it set up a legal clinic in 2003, offering advice and counselling through e-mail, fax, letters, telephone and face-to-face meetings. The legal clinic served more than 1,700 clients in its first three years of operations. SIS also started a pioneer research project on 'The Impact of Polygamy on the Quality of Family Life in Malaysia'.

Today, more than 20 years after its founding, SIS' programmes have grown both in Malaysia and at the international level.

The group has embarked on a project of global Islamic family law reform, research and advocacy. Called MUSAWAH, this global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family was launched in February 2009 to bring together women's groups in many Muslim countries. MUSAWAH works to organise, network, build support and share knowledge and strategies to develop a more egalitarian and just vision of Islam.

And it all began with a simple question of faith: if God is just and if Islam is just, why do laws and policies made in the name of Islam create injustice?

What it Means to be Catholic and Feminist

Frances Kissling

Feminism has been a permanent feature of my adult life characterised by an unswerving commitment to justice for women. My adult religious life is more complex. My childhood was religious but not traditional. I was educated in Catholic schools, sent there by a Catholic mother who divorced and remarried a Protestant. She had no particular use for the church. The church also had no use for her: she was remarried she was considered an adulteress and ineligible to receive the sacraments.

My female role models were my rebellious mother and the extremely intelligent and independent nuns who taught me. I decided I wanted to be like those nuns and at 19, I entered the convent to become one. The decision was not without personal angst as I also disagreed with the church positions on divorce and on birth control. I was arrogant enough to believe that the Church needed nuns like me who did not accept positions blindly but sought to understand them. It took me less than a year to decide that I could not be an official representative of a religious institution I disagreed with and I left the convent.

Thus began the first stage of my adult life as a feminist and a Catholic which is best described as a period of profound indifference to religion and an effort to live out the ideals of

justice first learned as a Catholic in the secular left. This was a productive time and included opposition to the American war in Vietnam and a passion for women's rights, particularly reproductive health and rights.

Near the end of the 1970s I felt that something was missing from my commitment to reproductive rights. The discourse and values feminists and others brought to the debate lacked – for me – a deeper moral frame. It was not enough for me to simply fight for the legal right to abortion and it was disturbing that my feminist friends were adamant that our movement should not engage in a discussion of the morality of abortion. Those opposed to abortion talked about morality, those in favor of it talked about rights, especially women's rights.

I had also been influenced by my work in abortion clinics and the women who came for abortions. They were engaged in asking the big questions about their own decisions: were they doing the right thing in having an abortion? For many, the question of how God saw their decision was important.

Enter Catholics for a Free Choice which asked me to be on their board. I was attracted to the organisation not because it



was Catholic but because it seemed to me to be a place where the moral questions about abortion could be asked. I was back to square one. I believed the Catholic church asked the right questions about abortion and had a well developed nuanced moral theology that provided the methodology for answering those questions. At the same time, its male leaders had come up with pretty bad answers.

I was also intrigued and thought again about whether or not I could with integrity be a Catholic, let alone a Catholic feminist. I decided I wanted to try. I remembered from my Catholic childhood, the idea that doubt about God and in the teachings of the church were considered normal.

They are however stories I own as mine, they serve as the palette with which I paint my spiritual landscape and create a picture of the indefinably holy. It is a Catholic picture, not a Jewish, Buddhist or Muslim one. It is a picture I came to draw as a result of choosing to work as a Catholic, and learning that there were indeed many ways to be Catholic; one need not let others define one's Catholicism.

There is risk in such honesty; those Catholics whose identities are most defined by obedience to orthodox interpretation of texts and who are somewhat dominant in Catholicism in this period, will immediately label such an approach to Catholicism as heresy and the believer as outside Catholicism.

“It is true that women who move outside traditional religions dispense with the need to deal with certain arguments and institutions that drain feminist energy. Still, as I see it, the creativity, imagination, and risks involved in creating a feminist Judaism (or Christianity) are in many ways similar in nature and substance to the work and risks involved in creating a purely feminist spirituality.

- Judith Plaskow

in Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective



The way to deal with those doubts, we were taught, was to act as if we believed, and to humbly seek faith. I believed in Nietzsche's concept of the will to power and I found Rollo May's concept of the will to love heartwarming. Could there, I asked, be such a thing as a will to believe and could it be a feminist will?

Thus began a 25 year journey to reconcile feminism and Catholicism, a task replicated by feminists who are also Buddhists, Jews, Muslims and Hindus. As there are many forms of feminism, each woman in each faith comes up with her own answer regarding the possibility of co-existence of feminism and faith: yes, no, sometimes. I wake up each day with questions and my dream life is disturbed.

For me, deeply embedded inside the question of faith and feminism is a more pressing question: do I believe in Catholicism as it is currently taught by church leaders and if I don't, am I a Catholic?

This is a hard question and I must say that I do not believe as the past two Popes tell me I should believe. I do not even accept their right to tell me exactly how I should believe. Things that are important to the Pope, that he considers central to the Catholic faith, I see differently. The magical components of Catholicism such as Virgin birth, Resurrection of the Body of Christ, the transformation of bread and wine into the real body and blood of Christ, are for me just that: magical, inspirational and symbolic stories of great meaning and wonderful to contemplate. But whether or not they are factual is unimportant to me, and I confess unlikely.

Both my feminism and my Catholicism rejects this approach to the other. I seek an inclusive religious community and I welcome and accept Catholics whose ideas of what it means to be Catholic are different from mine. Anti-feminists, political conservatives, I accept them all as Catholics – some I believe are wrong, but they are Catholics. We share a commitment to respectfully engage the Catholic tradition from the inside.

Some feminists in the Catholic tradition have set about proving that the tradition is completely consistent with feminism. The problem is practice and interpretation. Men are in charge of the church and the early texts were written by men through a patriarchal lens.

Feminists interpret the same texts through a feminist lens, doing her story on the Bible and pointing out the significant role women played in the life of Jesus and in early ministry. Jesus was born of a woman, he was anointed to his mission by the woman at the well, when he was crucified it was women who remained with him under the cross and when he rose from the dead he first appeared to women and told them to go forth and tell his story. Why, they ask, are these not indicators of the priesthood of women?

They also relate the gospel, message of justice, freedom and love to the core principles of feminism. They call the church to return to this model of Christianity and to renewal.

We use the tools of the tradition – exegesis, worship, and education – as a means to renewal and reinterpretation.

[turn to next page>](#)

[< from previous page](#)

Along the road to renewal we continue, in varying degrees, to participate in the mainstream of the church and we look to lift up that which is positive and claim it as genuine. That which is problematic or negative in the texts and in behavior is rejected as inconsistent with the tradition and inauthentic. We reconstruct the texts and tradition, we do not demolish them.

That has been my approach for the last 25 years, but I am increasingly impatient with it and thus entering a third stage in seeking to reconcile my feminism with membership in a church that has and continues to systematically abuse women.

For Catholics, this abuse does not, particularly in the United States and Europe, take the form of persistent sexual abuse or physical violence. I try to be careful not to imply that I believe women living under more repressive religious regimes need to resist oppression in the same way that I believe those of us who are privileged by class, education and race can comfortably do.

But, for those of us who are privileged within religion, the words of Audre Lorde must ring in our ears: ‘Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older, know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support’.

How can I, who have gained an international voice as a Roman Catholic feminist leader, who is admired for her bravery and applauded for her passion, go beyond the comfort of reform? What, for Catholic feminists is the next step in our struggle for a transformed church?

If we remain in the church, we must commit more strongly to open resistance and radical honesty. This includes political activism in the secular world. It is inadequate to only work to change the church as it uses the state to oppress women.

We must adhere to the claim in various United Nations documents that ‘culture, tradition or religion cannot be used to justify violations of women’s human rights’. This does not only apply to extreme violations like honor killings, female genital mutilation and other acts that seem far removed from the ‘Christian tradition’. It applies to sexual and reproductive

Kissling believes that in order to transform religion, feminists of faith need to acknowledge that the texts are problematic.



health and rights, where Catholic opposition is central to the violation of women’s rights.

We must lift up the value of secularism. Secularism is the best friend women have and it is under attack from patriarchy on the right and the left.

In our work to transform religion, we are now called to radical honesty. This means acknowledging that the texts we seek to reinterpret are problematic. The problem is not just that men interpret them badly; it is that they clearly justify the subordination of women. It is time to stop emphasizing the positive and start accentuating the negative. These texts must be rejected. They are not the word of God.

We must also be honest about what we believe regarding issues that relate to women. For Roman Catholic feminists, this often means biting the bullet on abortion or gay marriage or sex outside of marriage. These are the issues that are likely to take a Roman Catholic feminist who has a seat at the hierarchical table out of the dining room and into the kitchen. We can no longer accept the argument that the interests of some women are better served if we do not defend the rights of all women. Silence is not golden.

The final element of feminist honesty is to truly confront and publicly acknowledge what we do and do not believe about in these so-called core teachings. Patriarchal views of God as male, Jesus as both man and son of God, Mary as Virgin and Mother, the priesthood of men, the infallibility of the Pope, the Catholic church as the one true church, all are used to subordinate women. To discover what we really believe, what it really means to be Catholic and feminist, we must not be afraid to acknowledge what we do not believe, what we doubt and what we do not know.

Silence will not protect us; it will not protect women. Only the most brutal honesty will end the brutality women experience in the realm of religion. I am a Catholic in my resistance to that oppression. There is nothing else to be.

Frances Kissling has been an international leader in efforts to reform the Roman Catholic church’s positions on women, sexuality and reproduction. As president of Catholics for Choice for 25 years, she built a movement of Catholic women throughout the United States, Latin America and in Europe to advance women’s rights.

Finding God's Grace: A Hindu Scholar's Personal Journey

Dr K. Thilagawathi

I was brought up in an extended family in which my maternal grandmother played the important role of instilling culture and religion in us all. She would observe almost every auspicious day with either simple or elaborate rituals.

Certain religious occasions include fasting and prayer as the main features, while others allow socialising and merry-making alongside the obligatory prayers. For instance, performing prayers at the home altar and in the temple are the two main requirements for the Hindu New Year in mid-April.

The Tamil lunar month between mid-September and mid-October is when the Navaraththiri (Nine Nights) festival is held. It honours the deity Parvathy in her three manifestations that respectively bestow wealth (as Lakshmi), knowledge (Saraswathy) and power (Shakthi/Durga). Devotees fast for the nine days and, each night, attend an elaborate *puja* (prayer service) accompanied by devotional songs and classical-dance performances.

My childhood enthusiasm for auspicious days was enhanced because I was a student in a Tamil school. In those days, Tamil schools would observe the Navaraththiri festival, particularly the three nights dedicated to Saraswathy. I really enjoyed fasting and performing prayers.

But things changed when I reached puberty, for Hinduism prohibits women from entering temples and praying at the home altar during menstruation. It was disappointing and discouraging for me to have to forego New Year or Navaraththiri prayers whenever I had my period.

avenues for different types of souls to pursue their spiritual journey from wherever they are. Even now, I pray at the home altar and in temples.

But what is most pertinent to me is being aware that God is within me and that HE directs me along the righteous path when I submit myself to Him while carrying out my duties. When one lives with God-consciousness and continues to acquire spiritual knowledge by reading the religious texts with a sincere and keen search for the true message, truths gradually unravel according to one's effort and commitment to the pursuit.

I have not been able to sit in meditation even for five minutes a day and I cannot claim to have achieved 100 percent concentration when I pray. Nevertheless, being aware of God's presence within me and beseeching His grace to make His abode (my mind) pure, calm and suitable for a comfortable and pleasant stay for Himself, I have been able to obtain a relatively clear understanding of Hindu teachings.

I did not go in search of a Guru but recognised one – and the Truth is that God presents Himself in the form of a Guru – when I was in my 40s. The Guru has passed on but His grace has guided and blessed me.

Through these efforts, I have been evolving as someone who can speak effectively on religion. By God's grace I have been accepted as a religious scholar. It gives me the assurance that I am walking the right path.

“Religion without humanity is poor human stuff.

- Sojourner Truth (1797-1883)

American author, lecturer, abolitionist, reformer, mystic, slave, and first Black woman to speak publicly against slavery”

Fortunately, Hinduism does not deprive women from reading and understanding texts on religion and philosophy. In fact, it encourages women to learn the ethical and religious messages of Hinduism by reading the great scriptures of the Ramayana and Mahabharata or by listening to religious discourses.

The religious understanding I acquired during my upper secondary education (if my memory is right) made me realise that the Supreme Power, termed 'God', is within each and every soul. It is that power which helps the soul to see, hear, speak, think and understand.

Hinduism teaches that the human body is a temple. God, who is within the human temple, knows the thoughts and intentions of the soul. God sees the beauty of the soul, not that of the body! Realising the Supreme Power within me and making an effort to communicate with that power has become a significant mode of prayer for me. This mode of worship puts me in a comfortable and confident position.

However, it does not mean that I disregard temple worship or religious ceremonies. I am aware that Hinduism offers various

Since I understand the purpose and objective of Hinduism and its psychological and philosophical approach towards achieving the main targets, I am able to accept and appreciate the specific role of rituals; these are steps to spiritual realisation and advancement. It is necessary to understand the philosophy and messages of religious ceremonies in order to attain the spiritual targets of Hinduism.

I feel elated and thankful to God that I am able to explain these messages to fellow Hindus, thus helping them to attain the goals of God-realisation and eternal bliss.

Dr K. Thilagawathi did Indian Studies and Linguistics at Universiti Malaya and holds a PhD in Linguistics-Tamil Syntax from Annamalai University in India. She helped set up the Indian Studies Department at Universiti Malaya, serving as Lecturer & Associate Professor (1973-2000) and Head of Indian Studies Department (1992-1999). Dr Thilagawathi has been giving speeches on various aspects of Hinduism for more than 35 years. She has also presented on Religion and Linguistics at international conferences and published in journals and special issues

Organisations and Movements Working on Faith and Gender

CANADA

1. Formed in 1982, the Canadian Council on Muslim Women (CCMW) is committed to the equality, equity and empowerment of Muslim women in Canada.

- CCMW works to counter racism and violence against women, and undertakes awareness campaigns, research projects and media outreach.

Contact: info@ccmw.com or www.ccmw.com

TURKEY

1. Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR) – New Ways promotes women's human rights in Turkey and internationally through activism, advocacy and lobbying for legal reform in Turkey, networking in Muslim societies, and the promotion of women's human rights at the United Nations level.

- It also initiated the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies – the first solidarity network in a Muslim society to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights as human rights.

Contact: newways@wwhr.org or www.wwhr.org

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1. The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance is a professionally staffed international alliance supported by leading Jewish scholars and leaders. It seeks to expand women's spiritual, ritual, intellectual and political opportunities within the framework of *halakhah* (Jewish law and practice) and advocates equality for women in family life, synagogues, and other Jewish communal organisations.

Contact: jofa@jofa.org or www.jofa.org

2. The Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE) is a global program, social network and grassroots social justice movement led by Muslim women, based in New York.

Contact: www.wisemuslimwomen.org

3. Catholics for Choice (CFC) serves as a voice for Catholics who support women's moral and legal rights on sexuality and reproductive health issues. Activities include seminars, workshops and collaboration with collegial groups. CFC researches, develops, publishes and distributes materials on reproductive health, ethics, theology and other topics.

Contact: www.catholicsforchoice.org

MOROCCO

1. The Democratic Association of Women in Morocco (L'Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc, or ADFM), established in 1985, works towards a more democratic society by defending and promoting women's human rights.

- Key achievements include the 2004 reform of the Moudawana (Family Code), today one of the most progressive family laws in the Muslim world. Contact: adfmca@menara.ma (Casablanca), contact@adfm.ma (Rabat), or www.adfm.ma

UNITED KINGDOM

1. Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLURL) is an international solidarity network providing information, support and a collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam. It endorses plurality, autonomy, and the multiplicity of opinions and links women and organisations in over 70 countries.

Contact: wluml@wluml.org or www.wluml.org.

2. The Muslim Women's Network UK (MWN-UK) channels Muslim women's views and ensures their involvement in national policy and decision-making processes that affect them. It also provides a platform for Muslim women to network and share knowledge, skills and experiences to invoke positive changes in their lives and communities.

Contact: contact@mw nuk.co.uk or www.mw nuk.co.uk

3. WATCH supports the female clergy and monitors discrimination following the ordination of 1,500 women priests in the Church of England. It also encourages the appointment of women to senior ecclesiastical positions; produces educational and campaign material; and challenges discrimination against women in the Church.

Contact: info@womenandthechurch.org or www.womenandthechurch.org

NIGERIA

1. BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights focuses on advancing women's rights under the three parallel legal systems in Nigeria – customary, statutory and religious – and promotes women's human rights by improving knowledge and by facilitating the development and exercise of rights within the existing legal systems.

- It conducts outreach programmes through popular education, training and public awareness activities, and advocates for social and legislative change; publishes books, pamphlets and posters; and engages in interdisciplinary teachings.

Contact: baobab@baobabwomen.org or www.baobabwomen.org

PALESTINE

1. Nissa wa Aafaq works to increase Palestinian women's rights through a liberal interpretation of Islamic scripture. Its founders remain committed to changing the social reality of Palestinian women inside Israel from within the community's socio-cultural context.

- It believes that traditionally patriarchal interpretations of religion have had a negative impact on impacted women's rights negatively, and focuses on these rights within the broader framework of human rights.

Contact: nisaa.waafaq@gmail.com or www.nisaa-wa-aafaq.org (Arabic) and www.womenandhorizons.org (English)





SOUTH AFRICA

1. Shura Yabafazi (Consultation of Women) represents individuals committed to the transformation of the legal and social environment surrounding Muslim family law. It is committed to the eradication of discriminatory prescriptions and practices against women, and to the promotion of substantive gender equality.

- Members of Shura Yabafazi are engaged in research, advocacy and awareness-raising to promote gender equality in the legal recognition of Muslim marriages in South Africa.

Contact: waheeda.amien@uct.ac.za

2. Muslim Youth Movement Gender Desk is a sub-committee of the Muslim Youth Movement set up to promote the spirit of justice, freedom and equality in Islam through women's active participation within the organisation, in mosques, within Muslim communities, and in society.

- Recognising that gender oppression is pervasive in Muslim communities, the Desk promotes a justice through research and advocacy, media work and public education activities. It also campaigns for the implementation of a just Muslim Personal Law and encourages young Muslim women to be scholars.

Contact: gdesk@mym.za.org or <http://shams.za.org/gender.htm>

IRAN

1. The Stop Stoning Forever Campaign began in response to the stoning of Mahboubeh M. and Abbas H. who were found guilty of murdering Mahboubeh's husband and committing adultery with each other on May 7, 2006.

- In cooperation with the Network of Volunteer Lawyers, women's rights activists started this campaign to abolish Iran's stoning law and have called into question the prevailing assumptions of patriarchal culture.

Contact: sara.sabaghian@gmail.com or www.meydaan.net

SRI LANKA

1. The Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum works towards a national identity through which citizens are equal in a plural society; equity and justice exist for all women in a society free of exploitation and violence; and where women's rights are not sidelined by the collective rights of the community.

- It provides a forum to discuss issues affecting the Muslim community, and it monitors the implementation of existing Muslim Personal Laws in keeping with the principles of equity and justice.

Contact: mwraf@slnet.lkwww.mwraf.org

EGYPT

1. The Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA) provides services such as legal aid and literacy courses for marginalised communities. It also conducts awareness sessions on women's rights, health and the environment, training for lawyers and NGO leaders, and contributes to national and international debates about women and the law.

Contact: info@cewla.org or www.cewla.org

2. The Women and Memory Forum (WMF) promotes the integration of gender as a category of analysis in the study of Arab history and social sciences in general and empowers women through research-based information generation and dissemination.

- It organises conferences and workshops, provides gender training, publishes, builds links with other groups, sets up information centres and runs public storytelling events.

Contact: oaboubakr@hotmail.com or www.wmf.org.eg

PAKISTAN

1. Shirkat Gah is committed to a progressive and democratic society where gender equality prevails, human security and opportunities are ensured for all, and resources are shared on a sustainable basis.

- It increases women's access to information, resources, skills and decision-making, and it helps to bring about positive change to policies, laws and practices.

Contact: shirkat@cyber.net.pk or www.shirkatgah.org

MALAYSIA

1. Sisters in Islam is committed to promoting women's rights within the framework of Islam, based on the principles of equality, justice and freedom enjoined by the Qur'an.

- It aims to promote and develop a framework of women's rights in Islam; to eliminate injustice and discrimination against women by changing practices and values that regard women as inferior to men; and to create public awareness and reform laws and policies on issues of equality, justice, freedom, dignity and democracy in Islam.

Contact: sistersinislam@pd.jaring.my or www.sistersinislam.org.my

2. Musawah is a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family calling for non-discrimination, justice and dignity as the basis of all human relations; full and equal citizenship for every individual; and marriage and family relations based on principles of equal rights and responsibilities.

Contact: info@musawah.org or www.musawah.org

INDONESIA

1. Rahima, the Centre for Education and Information on Islam and Women's Rights, was formed in 2000 to empower women from an Islamic perspective, and to establish a democratic society recognising women's rights as human rights. It conducts public education activities, advocacy and research, and produces the magazine *Swara Rahima*. Contact: rahima2000@cbn.net.id or www.rahima.or.id

2. Fahmina Institute is active in the fields of religious studies, strengthening civil society, and community empowerment. Focusing on the development and propagation of critical discourse surrounding religion, it works for fair and just social change.

Contact: marzukiwahid@yahoo.com or www.fahmina.or.id

PHILIPPINES

1. The Al-Mujadilah Development Foundation is committed to the promotion of gender equality, women's rights, good governance and peace-building to develop gender-just, humane and sustainable communities.

Contact: amdf@philwebinc.com or yasminlao@yahoo.com

2. Nisa UI Haqq Fi Bangsamoro (Women for Justice in the Bangsamoro) is a Muslim women's rights advocates network working on gender issues through discourse on Islamic legal theory and grassroots engagement.

- It conducts gender-sensitivity training and educational campaigns on reproductive and sexual health rights, the Code of Muslim Personal Laws, and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

Contact: laisa19@yahoo.com

THAILAND

1. Thai Bhikkunis works within the Buddhasavika Foundation to introduce the ordination of women in Buddhism. It produces a quarterly newsletter, *Yasodhara*, conducts training programmes, and runs a shelter for underprivileged girls.

Contact: dhammananda9@hotmail.com

Religion, Women and Feminism in India

Nivedita Menon

Religious communities and traditions do not operate within non-porous boundaries. How a religious majority responds to a religious minority, and vice versa, is an increasingly urgent issue to address especially in plural societies. And when religious traditions around the world are still administered mainly by men, women often end up being collateral when tensions rise between the religious majority and religious minorities. This is especially true for post-colonial India. This essay shows what happens when inter-religious politics intersect with women's quest for equality in the law, society and faith. The essay spotlights the complexities of searching for a common civil code applicable to men and women of all religions.

The question of women and religious identity in India inevitably leads one to the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) debate. While there is a uniform criminal code for all citizens, matters relating to the "personal" – to family, inheritance, marriage, divorce, custody of children – are covered by the different personal laws of different religious communities; and all these laws discriminate against women in some way or the other. This is why the women's movement in India has for very long made the demand for a UCC, from as long ago as 1937, long before independence.

However, the UCC has rarely surfaced in public discourse as a feminist issue. It has tended invariably to be set up in terms of National Integrity versus Cultural Rights of Community. The argument for a UCC is made in the name of protecting the integrity of the nation, which is seen to be under threat from plural systems of legality. Conversely, resistance to the UCC comes on the grounds that its imposition would destroy the cultural identities of minorities, the protection of which is crucial to democracy. However, each of these categories

National integrity as the rationale for a UCC is equally unacceptable because of the explicit assumption underlying it that while Hindus have willingly accepted reform, the 'other' communities (minorities) continue to cling to diverse and retrogressive laws, threatening the integrity of the nation state.

Thus, the argument for a UCC is very much part of the agenda of the Hindu-right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); which led the movement that demolished the 400 year old Babri Mosque in 1992; and under whose government there was a state-sponsored massacre of Muslims in the state of Gujarat in 2002.

In 1985, Shah Bano became the name around which the BJP was able to revive its Hindutva (politics of Hindu nationalism) agenda. Shah Bano was a Muslim woman who claimed maintenance from her divorced husband in the Supreme Court, under Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which applies to all citizens of India. Her husband claimed that under shariat or Muslim personal law, it was not necessary for the

“As Helen and I talk about our sense of a universal spirituality, she looks at me with bemused wonderment. ‘How did you ever get to be so full of love when you didn’t grow up in a church or any religion?’ I look at her with the same wonderment. ‘How did you get to be so full of love when you grew up in one with a Son of God and not even a Daughter?’ We both laugh. Suddenly, it dawns on me that we are engaged in the same process: each of us is trying to salvage whatever was loving and welcoming, spiritual and universal, in our childhood experience. Each of us is seeking support for our belief in the connectedness of all living things.

- Gloria Steinem

*in the introduction to Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance:
Five Spirited and Spiritual Women Throughout History*

– Nation and Community – is deeply problematic for Indian feminists.

Feminists cannot accept the unqualified rights of communities to their cultural identity, although the providing of space for such identity is crucial for a democratic polity. The rights claimed by communities vis-a-vis the state – autonomy, selfhood, access to resources – are denied by communities to “their” women. In other words, the discriminatory provisions of the personal laws are based on the same logic of exclusions that affects minorities vis-a-vis the Nation, and must be rejected on the same grounds.

husband to pay maintenance beyond three months after the divorce. The judgement held that there was no inconsistency between the shariat and Section 125, and granted maintenance to Shah Bano, arousing strong protest from some leaders of the Muslim community, who held this judgement to contravene Muslim personal law. However, there was equally vocal support for the judgement from large sections of the Muslim community including public demonstrations by Muslim women. Ignoring this voice, the Congress government passed an ordinance to overrule the judgement, later passed as The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights Upon Divorce) Act, removing Muslim women from the purview of Section 125.



Women activists in plural societies have to address the impact of inter-religious politics in their quest for equality.

It is important to note that by the early 1980s, the Congress had started on a path of instrumentally using politicised religious identities for political gains. In the late 1980s to early 1990s, we see a series of capitulations by this government, to the sectarian interests of one community and then the other. But we also need to understand why the Shah Bano judgement provoked such an outcry from sections of Muslims, when in earlier judgements the Supreme Court had upheld the right of Muslim women to maintenance under Section 125 and there had been no reaction.

By the mid-80s, the growing presence of organised Hindutva politics and a general legitimacy for it was becoming evident. The Shah Bano judgement too was hailed by the media as a victory against Islamic obscurantism. Hence the knee-jerk reaction of the self-styled leadership of the Muslim community to the judgement. But the Shah Bano judgement and subsequently, the legislation overturning the judgement, marks also, for a different set of reasons, the beginning of rethinking in the women's movement on the demand for the UCC with its implicit legitimising of the national integrity argument. It was increasingly becoming clear that 'national integrity' always came with a majoritarian cast.

The women's movement, even those sections that reiterate the need for state legislation, now prefer terms like 'common', 'gender-just' or 'egalitarian' codes over the term 'uniform'. Uniformity of laws is not necessarily good for women. Each religious community in India is a heterogeneous one, and 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' practices differ widely from region to region, from sect to sect. Some of these practices are better for women than others, and making them all 'uniform' is not only not a solution to gender-based injustice, it is not even a viable option – what is the uniform standard that will be adopted? Thus, heterogeneous practices need not be inherently unequalitarian, nor the imposition of a uniform law, necessarily the opposite.

In the current political climate in India, Muslim feminists struggle against both Hindutva and against patriarchal pressures from within their community. In Kashmir, the burqa (not indigenous to the state) is being imposed by Islamic militant groups. The Bangladeshi writer Tasleema Nasreen, in the face

of violent demonstrations in Kolkata, has had to withdraw portions of her autobiography critical of Islam for its treatment of women.

Similarly, Hindutva organisations try to control and punish manifestations of sexual autonomy by Hindu women, for instance, killing young people who marry outside the community. Anxieties around sexuality are central to Hindutva mobilising. Images of the virile, aggressive Muslim male and the fast-reproducing Muslim community with four wives to every man, abound in popular literature produced at various levels. The Hindu woman was to be chaste and virtuous while the Hindu male fantasy was to conquer 'the others' women, a fantasy played out during the Gujarat violence in particular, by mass public rapes of Muslim women.

The women's movement has since the 1990s evolved different strategies to bring about gender-justice. Increasingly, the movement supports initiatives within communities to bring about reforms, so that the rights of women do not become a casualty to the fear of minority communities, that reform of personal laws is only a pretext for eroding their identity in this sharply polarised polity. It is not a paradox that some Islamic states have managed to reform laws in the interests of women. When a minority community is threatened with annihilation, the obvious response is to close ranks. It is when a community is confident that it can afford to be self-critical.

For feminists however, there is no alternative but to turn the edge of critical reflection relentlessly on our own practices as much as on those of state and community.

Nivedita Menon teaches Political Science at Delhi University, India. She has been a Center Fellow at the International Center for Advanced Studies, New York University. She has been active for over a decade in Delhi in non-party, non-funded citizens' initiatives around issues of democratic politics, including feminist politics, anti-nuclear and anti-war issues, worker's rights, sexuality issues, and anti-communal politics. She has edited a volume on Gender and Politics in India and in 2004 authored *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*.

Patriarchy is not Inherent in Buddhism

Venerable Dhammananda

The highest spiritual goal for Buddhists is enlightenment; it is a state of mind which is free from all the negative energy, like greed, anger and delusion. The Buddha gave permission to women to join the monastic order on the basis of their ability and their spiritual potentiality to be enlightened. It was a rare recognition of women's spiritual potentiality. As long as he lived, he made a clear attempt to provide the opportunity for women to practise.

Early communities of monks were drawn from Indian society, heavily laden with Brahmanistic social values. When the women were allowed to join the Order, the monks still expected the nuns to serve them like when they were householders. The Buddha was very clear that when he allowed the women to join the Order, it was for them to practise and strive for their own spiritual attainment, not to do the household chores anymore. So he laid down rules forbidding the monks from taking advantage of the nuns. A monastic, male or female, was expected to lead a simple life, taking care of themselves. Once ordained, they should be free from household life and household expectations.

Enlightenment is for both men and women. Potentiality to be enlightened is the same for each one of them. It was important that the Buddha made sure that opportunity was also readily available for men and women, monks and nuns.

The Buddha established Buddhism with the expectation that the four-fold Buddhists namely *bhikkhus* (monks), *bhikkhunis* (female monks), laymen and laywomen would take the responsibility to study his teachings, to put them into practise and to be able to defend them. This responsibility is meant for all of them, men and women alike. In many Buddhist societies, the lay people are too busy making their livelihood and have become negligent towards the teachings. As a result, the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the ordained ones. When the lineage of the female ordination ends, nobody is there to take care to revive it; not realising that to revive the *bhikkhuni* is to revive one of the pillars of the four-fold Buddhists and that it will strengthen Buddhism in the long run.

We can confirm that patriarchy is not inherent in early Buddhism or at least it was not intended by the founder, though later on it crept back into the structure of the *Sangha*¹.

Buddhism is a source of liberation for women

Prior to the emergence of Buddhism in the 6th century B.C., Indian women under Brahmanism did not have direct access to spiritual salvation. Apparently the only path to salvation for them was through complete devotion to their husbands. A married woman could make offerings to the gods but as the other half of her husband, not on her own. Women were

A brief account of ordained women in Thailand

To be ordained, a woman needs to go through an ordination ceremony of what is called a dual ordination. A chapter of minimum five ordained nuns and five monks are

required. It is impossible, therefore, to ordain women if there are no existing ordained nuns to carry out the ordination, such as in Thailand.



expected to be married; her destiny was with her husband. Marriage, which was socially binding, also became a religious requirement as unmarried daughters were believed to be the cause of their parents' downfall.

Out of this fear, a strange custom emerged among Hindus in Nepal where some parents married their young daughters to bael fruits². I heard the story directly from a young woman who went through this ritual, so it still happens in this generation. This was obviously to free the parents of the religious burden and responsibility should their daughters go wrong before the proper marriages were arranged.

Once married, women were further expected to bear sons. Parents' salvation depended on their sons' ability to perform the final rite for them at the time of death. Hence women had to bear these religious and social burdens.

The Buddha first denied the caste system. According to him, a person does not automatically become a Brahmin with his birth, rather he becomes a Brahmin with his actions. Once the Buddha accepted women into the Order, the message was clear that women were as capable as men with their spiritual potentiality to be enlightened. A woman's access to enlightenment depends neither on her husband nor her son. It is not a surprise to find a large number of women joining the Order. At least 13 of them were praised by the Buddha for being foremost in various abilities.

The Buddha also confirmed the spiritual attainment of the nuns. Talking about the enlightened nuns, he said, 'There were

not one hundred, not two hundred, not three hundred, not four hundred, but five hundred and more'.

Once the women had joined the Order, the Buddha was particular to see that they got to practise and had an equal opportunity for their spiritual progress.

It is sad to see that his intention has not been respected and has not been taken seriously by his followers.

His prediction was that Buddhism would decline when the four-fold Buddhists do not practise *Satipatthana* (a form of insight meditation). But later on we often heard that Buddhism would decline with women joining the Order. The interpretation of the texts is a serious concern if we are interested in reviving the spirit of Buddhism.

In fact there have been monks who have come forward and performed ordination rites on women in Thailand. This is very brave as it defies the order of the *Sangharaja*³ in 1928 which the traditional monks keep using as an authority over and above the intention of the Buddha. There are monks who have studied the issue and are supportive, but the Sangha is hierarchical in nature; as long as they are Thai monks, they cannot voice themselves otherwise.

The *bhikkhunis* are still hanging in the air, having no recognition, having no legal right and still being treated as laywomen.

Each one of them however knows that they have been ordained according to the Buddha's intention, and are willing to serve the

[turn to next page>](#)

“If women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the prophet (Muhammad), nor Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite.

- Fatimah Mernissi
Moroccan feminist, writer, and sociologist



1928 CE

First attempt in Thailand to ordain women. The attempt is aborted, partly on technical grounds – it was not clear whether or not the ordination was carried out by a chapter of monks in accordance with the Vinaya. As a consequence, an order was issued from the *Sangharaja* (supreme patriarch) in Thailand forbidding Thai monks to ordain women in all three levels of ordination (novice, trainee and fully ordained *bhikkhuni*). The order is considered unconstitutional, but has been invoked even as recently as 2004.

2001 CE

Ven Dhammananda receives ordination from the Sri Lankan lineage of *bhikkhunis*. The Thai Government responds through Parliament, saying that women have the legal right to be ordained under the Thai constitution, but that recognition can only come from the Council of Elders who are in charge of the *Sangha*. However, in the *Sangha* Act, the word *Sangha* is defined as *bhikkhu*, which only refers to male *sangha*. There are records that show, on the other hand, that in classical texts, *sangha* refers to both men and women.

Apart from the constitutional uproar, the public also questioned whether a woman could wear the monk's robes. According to Venerable Dhammananda, the media remained fixated on this issue for 3 months after her ordination.

Present

Several more women have become inspired by Ven Dhammananda's ordination. There are now 7 fully ordained *bhikkhunis* and 16 novices in Thailand. The government still gives full power to the Council of Elders to decide. The Department of Buddhist affairs, a government office follows the decision of the Council of Elders.

< from previous page

community and at the same time each obstacle is an exercise to practise the letting go of anger which arises out of clinging to I, me, my and mine. If we understand the message of the Buddha and we are serious in following it, we will survive.

Venerable Dhammananda spent 30 years as a Buddhist scholar. Her lay name is Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. A former Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand, Venerable Dhammananda is known for her interest in feminist perspective in Buddhist context. In 2001, she became the first fully ordained Theravadin nun in Thailand where such status is not recognised. In 2005, she was selected as one of the 1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Endnotes

¹ *Sangha* is the term used for the Buddhist spiritual community. For some Buddhists, sangha refers only to monks and nuns.

² Bael fruits are more prized for their medicinal virtues than their edible quality. The tree is cultivated throughout India, mainly in temple gardens, because of its status as a sacred tree. In the Hindu culture, the leaves are indispensable offerings to the 'Lord Shiva'.

³ *Sangharaja* is the title given to a senior monk who is the titular head either of a monastic fraternity or of the *Sangha* sangha throughout the country.



Buddha gave permission to women to join the monastic order on the basis of their ability and their spiritual potential to be enlightened, says Venerable Dhammananda.

Key Concepts in Buddhism

The language of Buddhism might appear to be an obstacle for outsiders. There are a few key concepts to understand, and once these key concepts are understood then reading Buddhist literature will not be too difficult.

Buddhism is not an atheist religion

Buddhism never denies the existence of God the Creator outrightly, but simply takes a practical stand. Whether or not we were created by God, we are already here, and we are to do what is of most immediate. To engage in discussions about the creation of the world yields no ethical gain. I would prefer to say that Buddhism is non-atheist, whether there is a God or not is not our central concern. So the language of creation would be difficult in the Buddhist context as it presupposes the Creator and the created.

Enlightenment is the highest spiritual goal

Putting great emphasis on enlightenment does not mean that Buddhists neglect or deny physical development altogether. Rather, we put spiritual achievement on a higher level than the physical one. We have a saying that the mind is the master of the body. So the training of the mind is very important. With a trained mind,

then our body is in good control and guidance. In this sense, we are not completely the other worldly type of people.

There is no self

The no-self concept is unique to Buddhist teaching. This again has often been misunderstood. What we deny is not the concept of self as such, but the concept of self as permanent, non-changing. There is no self which is independently existing by itself, and there is no self that is eternal, non-changing.

Buddhism teaches non-violence

The concept of non-violence comes out of respect for all lives. We often talk about sentient beings, which include all lives, human beings and animals. In our basic ethical code of conduct, there are five precepts, very similar to the second part of the Ten Commandments. The first one: I take upon myself to observe not to kill any living things. This concept is based on the teaching on loving kindness and compassion. We wish all sentient beings happiness and that they are free from suffering; if we are true to our heart, then we should not only not harm them but also care for them. There is a great respect for equality of life, human and animal alike.

Women's Struggle in Israeli Society

Leah Shakdiel

I was born into the Zionist revolution as a *fait accompli*: my parents had rebelled against their Hassidic background and had left Poland as religious pioneers to Israel.¹ The necessary synthesis of tradition and modernity included changes in women's roles: my generation, males and females alike, were expected to acquire a university education and settle into the professional class in the new state, while maintaining a modern orthodox lifestyle.

When I moved to Yeruham, a small community in the Negev desert of mostly Sephardic immigrants, and became politically active there, I saw this as completing the unfinished business of my parents' vision, and thus it did not take long before women's issues became part of my agenda.²

I see my life as continuous *midrash*, a creative study of ancient texts. Some of the resulting innovations took place in the private sphere: I kept my maiden name; my husband and I set up an egalitarian household; we both combine childrearing with our paid jobs and political activities; and we both weave in as much Torah study and teaching as we can.³

All this occurs in the context of major changes in communal life, in which we participate enthusiastically: the outburst of Torah study for and by women of all ages, the consequent growth of women's religious leadership, and the impact of all this on synagogue life and ritual, with women pushing for as much visibility and participation as *Halakhah* allows.⁴

The expansion of Torah knowledge enables the careful separation of the core of law from common practice, which can and should change with the times, and opens up new venues for women's contribution to society. Eventually this movement will lead to changes in halakhic rulings as well, but this is a long and winding process.

As Yeruham's first town councilwoman ever, I saw another opportunity for action. Given the peculiar Israeli political arrangements regarding matters of state and religion, certain aspects of women's lives are governed by bureaucracies invested with legal authority in various matters, whose personnel are drawn from the religious parties.

Of all these bodies, the Religious Councils seemed to provide an arena where I could effectively work for the inclusion of women, and thereby breakthrough the so far unquestioned monopoly of men in these state services. The Councils are nothing more than administrative organs that spend taxpayers' money for the provision of local religious services, and thus, I thought they came under the 1920's rabbinical rulings that allowed women to be appointed or elected to such public offices. No further halakhic breakthrough was needed; it was a matter of demystifying one stronghold of religious male politicians.

And it worked. The Association of Civil Rights in Israel took up the case, and various segments of society supported my struggle for reasons as different as the wish to separate state and religion and the wish to put forward an orthodox woman as a hero.

The Supreme Court relished the opportunity of making a point in this matter, and ever since then, my case is included in high school textbooks for civic studies as well as in law school syllabi.

But first and foremost, it worked because my fellow Yeruhamites were ready for such a campaign and supported me through two years and nine months of continuous pressure from various ministries. They knew I could do a good job on the local Religious Council and rejected the patronising policies of Jerusalem, which had shortchanged them all these years anyway.

I ended up serving a full five-year term on the Council with everyone's fruitful cooperation, and opened the way for other women to serve on these Councils elsewhere.

But the story has another dimension. Ever since the Court announced its decision in my case, I have been distressed by the obvious difference between the opinion written by Judge Menahem Elon and the opinion of Judge Aharon Barak.

After the necessary discussion of points of law and bureaucracy, Elon added a halakhic treatise proving that there is no need for religious Jews to oppose the inclusion of women in Religious Councils, while Barak made an unequivocal defense of civil rights, civil liberties, and equality before the law.

These two learned decisions in my favour are, of course, complementary, and yet they express two different mindsets, two different philosophies – Jewish and Western – in one legal system. Here, the two civilisations that my parents set out to synthesise stand side by side.

I know now that this 1988 document foreshadowed a growing gap between the religious and the secular in Israel. As complicated as the alignment of these forces was at the time, it was still possible to bring them together in an ad hoc way around a specific issue and then move on.

Years later, such a synergetic process is far more rare. As badly as the then Minister of Religious Affairs wanted to appease the reactionaries of his constituency, he still knew that a Supreme Court decision must be obeyed, and so he obeyed it.

More recently, by contrast, we have experienced verbal assaults on the Supreme Court, violent demonstrations against it, and refusals of state officials to abide by its decisions.

If I had to argue my case again, public opinion would be more difficult to rally, and the final word of the Court would not carry as much moral and political weight as it did when Elon and Barak wrote their decisions. Not only are we more polarised than we once were; it also seems that some of the remedies applied to this will only make things worse.

The old secular elites experience a profound crisis in face of their dwindling hegemony. Some of the symptoms of this crisis are the basic mistrust of party politics on both the national and municipal levels, and the growing privatisation of the school system.

[< from previous page](#)

Instead of working on spreading their vision of a liberal democracy through parliamentary politics and education, many push for investing the Supreme Court with overriding constitutional powers that would enable it to fix everything.

I see this as a paradoxical attempt to strengthen democracy by escaping from its unavoidable difficulties, a move that alienates sizeable segments of our society even further from any viable consensus.

My struggle to take the seat that was mine on the Religious Council of Yeruham rightfully ended in the Supreme Court, because there was indeed a contradiction between an existing law of the state and the way this law was enforced by the relevant authorities – a contradiction that the Court was called upon to resolve.

Much of what ails us, including our continued dissatisfaction with the slow progress of women’s issues in Israeli society, cannot be brought to the Court; the necessary reforms need to ripen first through public debate, until they grow into appropriate legislative changes enacted by the Knesset.

Israel’s Supreme Court cannot be an effective tool for social change

unless its positions resonate with the sensibilities of a large part of the citizenry. We have to address these issues of social justice by ourselves - in our communities, in schools and universities, in arts and letters, in synagogues and through grassroots social action, in the media and in our homes.

Leah Shakdiel holds a BA from Bar Ilan University in English and French Literatures. In 1988, she became Israel’s first female member of a local Religious Council, following a successful struggle that ended with a landmark Supreme Court decision. Leah developed a model for feminist pedagogy for Israel when she was a Fellow for School for Educational Leadership from 1994-1996. She currently teaches in Be’er, a Torah study program for young religious women in Yeruham, and in Sapir College near Sderot, Israel.

Endnotes

- 1 Hassidic: pertaining to pietistic movement deriving from 18th century Poland
- 2 Sephardic: Jewish traditions from Mediterranean countries
- 3 Midrash: rabbinic exegesis
- 4 Halakhah: Jewish law and practice

Calling on Friends of SIS

About Us

Sisters in Islam (SIS) is a civil society organisation which believes that Islam upholds equality, justice, freedom and dignity. We are made up of Muslim women and men who take a rights-based approach to Islam. We focus on women’s rights within the frameworks of Islam and universal human rights. Our mission is to promote an understanding of Islam that recognises the principles of justice, equality, freedom, and dignity within a democratic nation-state.

Calling all friends

Throughout the years, people from all walks of life have voiced their support for SIS – loudly or silently, women or men, Muslim or those of other faiths. To them, SIS would like to extend an invitation to join Friends of Sisters in Islam, a membership category open to all supporters.

You can be a Friend of Sisters in Islam by contributing RM50 (tax-deductible). As a Friend, you will receive BARAZA! (SIS Bulletin), special discounts on SIS merchandise and the use of SIS Resource Centre. Above all, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you are part of a growing group of people who support the role SIS plays in Malaysia and at the international level in using a holistic framework of religion, rights and the realities of modern day life to change the way Islamic teachings are understood and translated into law and policy.

Yes count me in as a Friend of Sisters in Islam

Name

Address

.....

.....

City Postcode

State Country

Contact details

Tel

Mobile

E-mail

Areas of Interest

.....

.....

.....

Recommended Reading on Faith and Feminism

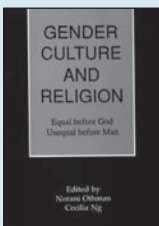
Multi-faith Perspective



Ahmed, Durre S. (ed)
Gendering the Spirit: Women, Religion and the Post-Colonial Response
New York: Zed Books

Castelli, Elizabeth A. (eds) 2001.
Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader
New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck and Findly, Ellison Banks (eds) 1985.
Women, Religion and Social Change
Albany: State University of New York Press



Norani Othman and Ng, Cecilia (eds)
1995.
Gender, Culture and Religion: Equal Before God, Unequal Before Man
Bangi: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia

Peach, Lucinda J. 2002.
Women and World Religions
New Jersey: Prentice Hall

Tanenbaum, Leora. 2008.
Taking Back God: American Women Rising Up for Religious Equality
New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux

Buddhism

Blackstone, Kath. 1998.
Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therigatha
Surrey: Curzon Press

Dhammananda Bhikkuni. 2008.
Beyond Gender
Chiangmai: Women's Studies Centre, Chiangmai University

Goonatilake, Hema. 2002.
"The Forgotten Woman of Anuradhapura: 'Her Story' Replaced by 'History' in Ahmed, Durre S. (ed)
Gendering the Spirit: Women, Religion and the Post-Colonial Response
New York: Zed Books

Gross, Rita M. 1992.
Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism
Albany: State University of New York Press

Masatoshi, Ueki. 2001.
Gender Equality in Buddhism
New York: Peter Lang

Paul, Diana Y. 1985.
Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition
Berkeley: University of California Press

Christianity

Chittister, Joan. 2004.
Called to Question: A Spiritual Memoir
Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield

Jule, Allyson and Pedersen, Bettina Tate (eds) 2008.
Being Feminist, Being Christian: Essays from Academia
New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Fabella, Virginia and Park, Sun Ai Lee (eds). 1989.
We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women
Hong Kong: AWRC

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. 2001.
Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation
New York: Orbis Books

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. 1984.
Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation
Boston: Beacon Press

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. 1983.
In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins
New York: SCM Press

Flinders, Carol Lee. 1999.
At the Root of This Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst
San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco



Hunt, Helen LaKelly. 2004.
Faith and Feminism: A Holy Alliance
New York: Atria Books

King, Ursula (ed) 1994.
Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader
New York: SPCK/Orbis Press

Hinduism

Oorjitham, Susan. 1995.
"Gender, Culture and Religion. A Hindu Perspective". In Cecilia Ng and Noraini Othman (eds), *Gender, Culture and Religion*
Bangji: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia

Sugirtharajah, Sharada. 1994.
"Hinduism" in Jean Holm (ed) *Women in Religion*
New York: State University of New York

A.S. Alketar. 1959.
The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization
New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass

Erndl, Kathleen M. 2000. "Is Shakti Empowering for Women? Reflections on Feminism and the Hindu Goddess" in A. Hildebeitel and Kathleen Erndl (eds) *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The Politics of the South Asian Goddess*
New York: New York University Press

Robinson, Sandra. 1985.
"Hindu Paradigms of Women: Images and Values" in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Elison Banks Findly (eds), *Women, Religion and Social Change*
Albany: State University of New York

Islam

Ahmed, Leila. 1992.
Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate
New Haven: Yale University Press

Ali, Kecia. 2006.
Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith and Jurisprudence
Oxford: Oneworld Publications

Badran, Margot. 2009.
Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences
Oxford: Oneworld Publications

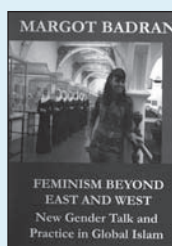
Barlas, Asma. 2002.
Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an
Austin: University of Texas Press

Mernissi, Fatima. 1991.
The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam
Massachusetts: Perseus Books

Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. 1999.
Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran
Princeton: Princeton University Press



Wadud, Amina. 1999.
Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective
Oxford: Oxford University Press



Badran, Margot. 2007.
Feminism Beyond East and West: New Gender Talk and Practice in Global Islam
New Delhi: Global Media Publications

Wadud, Amina. 2006.
Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam
Oxford: Oneworld Publications

Judaism

Adler, Rachel. 1998.
Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics
Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society

Goldstein, Elyse. 1998.
ReVisions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens. Woodstock
Jewish Lights Publishing

Heschel, Susannah, (ed) 1983.
On Being a Jewish Feminist
New York : Schocken Books

Nadell, Pamela. 1998.
Women Who Would Be Rabbis: A History of Women's Ordination, 1889-1985
Boston: Beacon Press

Plaskow, Judith. 1990.
Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective
New York: Harper & Row

Plaskow, Judith. 2005.
The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2000
Boston: Beacon Press