## The Woman's Bible

Half a century after the pioneering Women's Rights Convention of 1848, which she helped lead, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and several colleagues wrote *The Woman's Bible*, a set of commentaries on the Bible that prefigure many ideas of contemporary feminists. The introduction stated that:

> From the inauguration of the movement for woman's emancipation the Bible has been used to hold her in the "divinely ordained sphere," prescribed in the Old and New Testaments. The canon and civil law; church and state; priests and legislators; all political parties and religious denominations have alike taught that woman was made after man, of man, and for man, an inferior being, subject to man. Creeds, codes, Scriptures and statutes, are all based on this idea.

However, if we read the Bible without sexist assumptions, Stanton wrote, we can interpret it as saying that the feminine is as important as the masculine, and that God includes both. The following section of *The Woman's Bible* presents the story of the creation of man and woman in Genesis 1:26–28, and uses it to argue that God is female as well as male:

> And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them: and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.
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> Here is the sacred historian's first account of the advent of woman; a simultaneous creation of both sexes, in the image of God. It is evident from the language that there was consultation in the Godhead, and that the masculine and feminine elements were equally represented. Scott in his commentaries says, "this consultation of the Gods is the origin of the doctrine of the trinity." But instead of three male personages, as generally represented, a Heavenly Father, Mother, and Son would seem more rational.
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> The first step in the elevation of woman to her true position, as an equal factor in human progress, is the cultivation of the religious sentiment in regard to her dignity and equality, the recognition by the rising generation of an ideal Heavenly Mother, to whom their prayers should be addressed, as well as to a Father. If language has any meaning, we have in these texts a plain declaration of the existence of the feminine element in the godhead, equal in power and glory with the masculine. The Heavenly Mother and Father! "God created man in his own image, male and female." Thus Scripture, as well as science and philosophy, declares the eternity and equality of sex. (http://www.sacred-texts.com/wmn/wb/)

With Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, she edited *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. Over a long and distinguished career, she has offered a feminist perspective on her own Jewish tradition, the wider monotheistic tradition, and religions in general.

Plaskow's earliest work, *The Coming of Lilith* (1972), rewrites an ancient *midrash* (imaginative story based on the Bible) about Eve and Adam's other wife, Lilith. In the story, Lilith is a rebellious outcast. However, when she meets Eve, they become friends, explore the sexism in the world as God has set it up, and think of ways to transform that world. Plaskow's 1982 article "The Right Question Is Theological" argues that *halakhah*, the laws of Judaism, are part of a patriarchal system, a system ruled by men. Those who want to eliminate sexism from Judaism, she says, should reform Jewish theology rather than waste time trying to reform *halakhah*.

In her masterwork, *Standing Again at Sinai* (1990), Plaskow points out that the story of Moses receiving the law from God – the central event in Judaism – does not involve any women. Indeed, in the preparation for receiving the law, Moses warns the men, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman." (Exodus 19:15) More generally, the Torah and Jewish interpretations of history have been written by men in a way that largely ignores the experiences and needs of women. What is needed is a reinterpretation of Jewish history that takes women seriously and treats them as equal to men. Scholars must reread the traditional sources to reveal the experience and actions of women, and they must rewrite Jewish history to include the history of women.

*Standing Again at Sinai* offers a feminist perspective on the three traditional topics of God, Torah, and Israel. The chapter on God examines the language and images used to represent God. Agreeing with Clifford Geertz that religious language and symbols justify social systems, Plaskow argues that, if God is described as a father, then human fathers thereby become God-like. If God is portrayed as Lord, a dominating male, then male domination becomes acceptable. In her chapter on Torah, she argues that Jewish scripture and history have overlooked much of women's experiences. She is less negative than before about halakhah, seeing law as a necessary part of all human cultures. However, she argues that Jews need to re-think the way that laws are made and interpreted. "Perhaps what distinguishes feminist Judaism from traditional rabbinic Judaism," she says, "is not so much the absence of rules from the former as a conception of rule-making as a shared communal process." (Plaskow 1991, 71) The chapter on Israel sketches the creation of a society in which Jewish women are equal.

*Standing Again at Sinai* also has a chapter on the theology of sexuality. For Plaskow, sexuality is not a minor detail about a person but part of his or her identity. The world that each of us experiences is body mediated, so that our being human is being sexual as well as being rational. Becoming aware of how experience is mediated through a body, she says, will help us to create a holy attitude towards sexuality, to replace traditional male domination. A new sexual ethics will emerge in which sexual relationships are based not on ownership or hierarchy but on empowerment of each other.

## Rosemary Radford Ruether (b. 1936)

Rosemary Radford was educated in philosophy, history, and classics, and she has taught in the theology programs of several seminaries and universities. In her landmark book *Sexism and God-Talk*, she explores how traditional language about God has kept men in control of

**FIGURE 6.20** Rosemary Radford Ruether. Used with permission of Pacific School of Religion.

the Western religious traditions. For thousands of years people have talked about God as "Father," "King," and "Lord of Hosts" (Commander of Armies). These words, Ruether says, create an image of God that valorizes fathers over mothers, kings over ordinary people, and warriors over peaceful people. "The God-image serves as the central reinforcement of patriarchal rule." Just as God rules the universe, men rule the earth. They give the orders; women and children obey. In the home, the father is the ultimate authority. In the church, synagogue, mosque, and temple, men interpret the scriptures, conduct the rituals, and manage the finances.

Complementing God as a militarist king and "men" as made in his image are scripture's passive female role models. Ruether notes that women in the Bible are important only because of their relationship to some man, not for what they are in themselves. She points out that in the Bible God speaks directly only to men. Women's access to God is through their husbands or fathers. In Christian scripture the ultimate female is Mary, the mother of Jesus. She is praised not for what she does or thinks, but for what she lets happen to her – becoming pregnant with Jesus – and for what she does not do – have sex. Her greatness is that she does what God and Jesus tell her to do. Church leaders for centuries have held Mary up as the role model for women, an incentive for women to go along with what men want them to think and do.

However, again, this does not make the Bible wrong or misguided. If we probe beneath the sexist language and ideas in the Bible, Ruether says, we can see that the core message is not at all sexist. Sexist language is geared to the social realities at the time of revelation, but it is not prescriptive. It does not mean that society should always be patriarchal. A basic biblical theme is social justice for everyone, and the liberation of oppressed people. This is the point of God's freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. This is what prophets such as Amos are talking about when they protest the mistreatment of widows and orphans. And liberation was the essential feature of the idea of the Messiah.

Not only is sexism extraneous to the original message of the Bible, Ruether says, but it conflicts with what the New Testament says about Jesus. The Gospels portray a man remarkably free of sexism, who speaks to women as equals, has women as friends, and rejects the militarism and hierarchy in his culture.

In order to return to the original message that was meant to liberate both women and men from oppression, Ruether says, we must understand how religious traditions develop. They start, she says, when a group of people have a revelatory experience – when they see a new dimension of reality, a new meaning in life, or a new way of living. Next they describe their experience, using the words and concepts available in their culture. Within the group,

leaders emerge who claim authority in expressing and interpreting the revelatory experience, and their interpretations become the central message of the group. For example, the leaders of the ancient Israelites captured their revelatory experience in the writings now known as the Bible.

As the religion grows, each generation applies the central message to its lives, and passes it on to the next generation. Sometimes, however, one generation determines that its leaders are corrupt and no longer acting for the best interest of the group. This happened, for example, when Martin Luther accused the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church of being concerned more with their own power and wealth than with the people they were leading. If the challengers make their case well, they can bring about a paradigm shift, a new way of thinking about the group and its message. This is what happened in the Protestant Reformation, Ruether says, and has recently happened in Christianity and other religions as feminists, both women and men, have challenged patriarchy.

The original revelatory experience of the Bible was interpreted and recorded by men. They experienced transcendent reality, or divinity, and described it as the greatest thing they could think of. In their patriarchal culture, the greatest possible being had to be male. Also, landowners and rulers were a higher kind of being than landless peasants. Lords and kings, who gave orders, were obviously superior to the people who followed those orders. So God had to be not just male but Lord and King. Thinking this way, the writers of the Bible described the divine as a male who, as the King of the Universe, controls everything and everybody. He rules by proclaiming laws, rewarding those who obey, and punishing those who disobey.

Today this understanding of divinity seems obsolete to feminists and other reformers. Many people now reject the idea that monarchy is the natural form of government, that males are naturally superior to females and destined to rule over them, and that morality is following orders, rather than, say, acting out of concern for other people.

We must reinterpret the Bible, Ruether says, to create "an image of God beyond patriarchy." If we want to use a parent image to talk about God, certainly "Mother" is as appropriate as "Father." However, we may want to get rid of all parent metaphors because they promote "spiritual infantilism." That is, they make adults treat themselves and other adults as children. And whether we keep the parent metaphors or not, "God(ess) must be seen as beyond maleness and femaleness."

In building a new feminist theology, Ruether says that we should open our minds and consider all kinds of ideas – not just traditional Christian doctrines, but marginalized and heretical theologies, as well as humanistic philosophies. She also wants to avoid "humanocentric" thinking, and consider the values of the animals and plants on this planet. After all, humans are latecomers on Earth, and our galaxy has 1,000,000,000 stars, so it is highly unlikely that everything exists for us. And even if it does, we should probably take care of it, rather than destroy it through wanton consumerism and warfare.

## Amina Wadud (b. 1952)

As in Judaism, theology is not the focus of teachings in Islam. Like Judaism, Islam is a practice-based tradition, so discussion of teachings is generally carried out in the context of legal studies. In the case of teachings about women, this is very appropriate, since the status