

abolition of slavery, and to other issues of social justice. Elizabeth Cady Stanton led a group that published *The Woman's Bible* in 1895. Susan B. Anthony and others worked tirelessly to get women the right to vote. It took seventy years and an amendment to the Constitution before American women were allowed to vote, but the modern feminist movement had begun.

Today there are many approaches to feminism, making the term difficult to define. We shall use the broadest possible description, provided by essayist and broadcaster David Bouchier: "Any form of opposition to any form of social, personal, or economic discrimination which women suffer because of their sex." (Bouchier 1983, 2) The movement is complex, however. Like Liberation Theology, it has a descriptive side and a prescriptive side: it describes how things are, and it prescribes how things should be. While some contend that the academic study of anything should be limited to describing it, when something involves issues of social justice, it is hard to just describe what has happened without commenting on how things should change. That is obvious in studies of slavery, racism, and anti-Semitism, for example, and it is true of feminist studies as well.

In the 1970s a new wave of feminism gained widespread support from women and men, and led to the creation of Women's Studies programs in colleges and universities. Today there are feminist perspectives within most academic disciplines, including literature, fine art, history, philosophy, and Religious Studies.

Of all the institutions that sustain **sexism** (discrimination in favor of one gender over others, characteristic of patriarchy), religions are among the most prominent. Even today, some Orthodox Jewish men say a traditional prayer thanking God that they were "not born a woman." Jews, Christians, and Muslims all think of God as the King of the Universe and the Creator of "man." In Christianity, God and Jesus are Father and Son. The early leaders of the Church are still called the Fathers. Priests are called "Father," too, and "Pope" is English for "Papa." Discrimination against women in Muslim societies is widely publicized in the West.

While some feminists say that sexism runs too deep to be expunged and therefore abandon their religion, others say that sexism is not part of the core message of their religions and so they try to reform them. Liberation Theology as such is not widely represented in Judaism, mainly because Judaic teaching is worked out in legal commentary rather than in theological discussion. However, in the case of feminist issues, scholars from across the traditions find it necessary to go back to core theological formulations derived from scripture. We shall look at examples from all three of the Western monotheisms.

### Judith Plaskow (b. 1947)

Judith Plaskow received her Ph.D. from Yale Divinity School, writing a dissertation that was later published as *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich*. She has taught at Manhattan College since 1979. In 1972 she became co-chair of the fledgling Women and Religion Group of the American Academy of Religion. In 1981 she helped start the pioneering Jewish feminist group B'not Esh. She was co-founder of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* and served as co-editor from 1983–1994. In 1997–1998 she was President of the American Academy of Religion. With Carol Christ, Plaskow edited the groundbreaking anthology *Womanspirit Rising* (1979).

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